

Gospel Meditation: *Matthew 27:11-26*

Individually or as a group, watch the Lenten devotional video and work through the following meditation.

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!” (v. 24)

REFLECT—*Sink into this passage for the next seven days using the following prompts:*

- Find a comfortable place and empty your mind of its many thoughts.
 - Reflect on the significance of each of the groups represented in this passage. What do they represent in the larger story of redemption and where do you find resonance in your own life?
 - *Pilate*—What do you daily “wash your hands” to avoid guilt?
 - *Jewish Leaders*—Where do you regularly choose being right over the truth?
 - *Barabbas*—Where have you taken control of your life and not sought the wisdom of God?
 - *Crowd*—How does the tide of public opinion steer you?
 - *Jesus*—What is the invitation of Jesus’ love through this passage?

REPENT—*Take next steps to change your mind and behavior through the following prompts:*

- Imagine that you are Pilate in this story.
 - What are you afraid of?
 - What are possible outcomes to this crisis?
 - What factors would shape your decision regarding the fate of Jesus?
- Imagine that you are Jesus in this story.
 - What are you afraid of?
 - What is truth?
 - Would you remain silent amid the jeering? Why or why not?
 - How would you see Pilate? Religious leaders? Barabbas? Crowd? Absent disciples?
- Look into the eyes of Jesus as he sits before Pilate.
 - What expression do his eyes offer you?
 - What is Pilate’s tone? What is Jesus’ tone?
 - What does Jesus’ posture have to teach you today?

PRAY—*Be embraced by the friendship of the crucified God.*

Psalm 22

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

² My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

³ Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.

⁴ In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

⁸ "He trusts in the LORD," they say,
"let the LORD rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."

⁹ Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.

¹⁰ From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.

¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

¹² Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

¹³ Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.

¹⁵ My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.

¹⁷ All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.

¹⁸ They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.

¹⁹ But you, LORD, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

²⁰ Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.

²¹ Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

²² I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.

²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

²⁴ For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;

he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.
²⁵ From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.
²⁶ The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the LORD will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!
²⁷ All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,
²⁸ for dominion belongs to the LORD
and he rules over the nations.
²⁹ All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.
³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.
³¹ They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!

“Grant me, O Lord my God, a mind to know you, a heart to seek you, wisdom to find you, conduct pleasing to you, faithful perseverance in waiting for you, and a hope of finally embracing you.”

-Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

My God, my God

We live in trying times. News of pandemics and epidemics create a frenzy of reactions. Amid the deniers and the hypers, we are all left quarantined and frantically washing our hands. It is amazing that the single act of washing hands has such a dramatic effect. I'm not denying the importance of washing one's hands. We should all be more diligent about this sanitary practice. I watch my kids wash their hands and chuckle as the soap goes on the hand, the hand goes under the water, and the glob of soap goes down the drain. My children are still learning the art of lather which is essential to successfully wash one's hands.

We live in a time when washing hands has become a matter of life and death. Rinse, lather repeat could very well be the slogan of 2020. The act has become symbolic for it now has global significance.

It's important to note that the crucifixion begins with a world leader frantically washing his hands to avoid the chaos of the moment. The washing of hands was his way of avoiding the crisis, to take the path of expediency, and to step off the road of love and truth. Pilate was terrified for his power and for his comfort. Rebellions had occurred under his watch before. Another one would certainly mean his head. So, in a spirit of self-preservation, Pilate washes his hands and turns the son of God over to be crucified. Little did he know that the water that poured over his hands would symbolically be the blood of God poured out.

As we look on Jesus' trial, his being handed over to death, carrying his cross, and now hanging on an instrument of execution, we witness another form of power. The washed hands of worldly power give way to the bloody hands of kingdom power. And there Jesus hangs amid taunts to save himself. "If you are the king of the Jews," they jeer, "then save yourself." Jesus does not answer because most likely he couldn't breathe.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke describe a darkness coming "over the whole land." Mark's Gospel indicates that this darkness lasted from noon to three. Then, piercing the silence and the eeriness of the moment, Jesus shouts out, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!" Many translations say he "cried out." Friends, more than likely he screamed. The agony of pressing off his nail pierced feet to catch enough breath to cry out to his heavenly Father would have caused the words to be nothing short of a shriek.

Jesus' being handed over, his obedience even to the point of death, his cry of abandonment makes no sense if this is not the outworking of the mystery called Trinity. As the Second Council of Constantinople put it, "one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh." The Word that was in the beginning, the Word that was with God, the Word through whom all things came into being, the Word that shines in the darkness, the Word that assumed our flesh, suffering even unto death, is God. The cross, this cry of abandonment, is not God becoming something other than God, it is the very character of God's kenosis—God's complete self-emptying made possible by God's perfect love.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why does Jesus scream out these words? The first possibility is that these words are an expression of abandonment. Jesus is screaming Psalm 22 which begins with the psalmist crying out about God's

perceived abandonment of them. This Psalm, however, was also a source of comfort because even though the first half was a cry of abandonment, the second half is a hymn of thanksgiving in which the psalmist declares, "God did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him." The first part opened up an expectancy for the second. Jesus' words on the cross are short-hand, if you will, for the entire Psalm. Just like when we say, "The Lord is my shepherd," we realize it's a verbal placeholder for the entirety of Psalm 23. The pain of abandonment remained tethered to the hope of deliverance. Israel's fears and anxieties remained tethered to the very character of God. Even when they experienced abandonment, they interpreted their feelings in light of the character of God.

But there is another possibility: Jesus, rather than simply expressing abandonment, actually felt abandoned. It is not unreasonable to believe Jesus felt abandoned. Even though we know that our feelings and reality are often two different things, it does not diminish the reality of our feelings. Our emotional response is not invalid. Often, it needs to be re-tethered to the character of God. Mother Teresa wrote extensively later in her life about feeling abandoned by God. She felt great emptiness in her prayers. When these letters and journals were posthumously published, people lost their mind. How could she feel such emptiness and remain such a committed religious leader and servant? Even to her confessor she wrote, "In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing." Yet Mother Teresa saw this feeling of abandonment as an opportunity to unite herself with Jesus. His abandonment on the cross became the greatest offer of friendship to her in distress.

In agreement, the early church theologian, Cyril of Jerusalem, taught that when Christ uses the phrase "my God" that it is done so in our place. Christ has become the abandonment that our sin produces. We are spared this abandonment because God refuses to have us lost. The theologian Richard John Neuhaus writes that "whether in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, the English word 'dereliction' catches the desperateness of the scene. Like a derelict boat cast up on the shore, like a dog carcass lying by the roadside, here is something no longer of any account; it is forsaken, abandoned, thrown aside." It is derelict.

Long before the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche declared that "God is dead," Christians contemplated what it means that God has died. They imagined the worst. For them, and for us, the worst that could possibly happen has already happened. Far beyond coronavirus or nuclear annihilation, the worst happened on a certain Friday afternoon outside the walls of Jerusalem. "There," Neuhaus reminds us, "we turned on the One who embodied all the light, all the love and all the hope that ever was or ever will be. This is what we did to God. In the unflinching realism of Christian faith, there is nothing to be done about it, there is no undoing of it; there is only the possibility of forgiveness."

This forgiveness, through the pain of abandonment, offers us a true knowledge of ourselves and of our world. This true knowledge is the only thing that will lead to an empathy marked by intercessory prayer. Such prayers can only be offered when we attend to the scream that goes on and on through the centuries, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"

A survivor of the Nazi concentration camp-Dachau, recalled an escape attempt that had been foiled by SS guards. The guards picked out twelve young men to hang as an act of retaliation and as a warning to the others. The whole camp was assembled around the gallows to witness the event, and there was a deathly silence until a voice came from somewhere in the crowd, "Where now is your God?" A pause, and then a voice answered, "There, there on the gallows, there is our God." There on the cross, the

gallows of Jerusalem, is our God. But note that even the apparently absent God is still “my God, my God” in Jesus’ prayer.

It is true, as we have heard, that Psalm 22 ends on a note of triumph. It is also true that Mark, who gives the starkest account of the dying, ends with a pagan acknowledging that this was the Son of God. When kingdom power, in its selflessness and sacrifice, is modeled to an unbelieving world, it softens even the hardest heart. Our sacrifices today may very well be the salvation of tomorrow. The light of heaven on the cross is still the only thing to pierce the darkness of hell on Good Friday.

As the theologian, Fleming Rutledge reminds us, “Hell is the absence of hope, the absence of love, the absence of light, the absence of God. On the cross, Jesus experienced the absence of God and, steering toward the pain, descended into that hell experiencing the absolute worst. And on the third day he emerged with the battle flag of victory [as] Christ the conqueror. Light and life return with him. There is nothing that can negate the victory of Christ over Death and Hell.”

It is Jesus’ cry of abandonment, his earthly hell, that we see what the theologian Rowan Williams describes as “the sheer, unimaginable differentness—of God.” These words from the cross—the cross itself—mean that the Father is to be found when all traces of power, at least as we understand power, are absent; that the Spirit’s authoritative witness is most clearly revealed when all forms of human authority are lost; and that our God’s power and authority is to be found exemplified in this captive under the sentence of death. The theologian Stanley Hauerwas affirms, “The silence of Jesus before Pilate can now be understood for what it was—namely, that Jesus refuses to accept the terms of how the world understands power and authority.”

Yet, if we’re honest, we stand with Pilate. We especially stand with him amid the crises of our times. We do not want to give up because we are terrified we will not get back. Therefore, we do not want Jesus to be abandoned because we do not want to acknowledge that the one who abandons and is abandoned is God. So, we rationalize and seek to “explain” these words of dereliction. The way of Jesus does not match our ordinary way of navigating our world. It may have worked for Jesus but his ultimate sacrifice is not what is called for from us. But our attempts to “negotiate” the example of Jesus reveal how frightening we find a God who submits earthly power to the point of abandonment. But remember, Pilate’s gospel was self-preservation. Jesus’ was self-sacrifice. Pilate’s focus was a crown. Jesus’ focus was the cross. Pilate’s cry was “I’m God.” Jesus’ cry was “my God, my God.”

Let me return to that brief quote from Nietzsche. Many of you only know the first part, “God is dead.” Nietzsche, however, continues with these haunting words for our time, “God is dead,” he writes, “And we have killed him.” Yes, friends, we have killed him. And he is the forgiving victim who experiences an abandonment that we will never have to know.

Amid the tenuous times in which we find ourselves, we have before us a tale of two kingdoms. We can be the fearful, anxious ones who wash our hands for self-preservation. Or, we can be the hope-filled ones who when pressed beyond belief ooze love to the world around us. Washing hands will always be necessary but the why behind this daily task is essential for us to reflect upon. Jesus doesn’t overthrow Rome because of Pilate’s edict but goes to the cross, scorning its shame, to model an alternative. We are not saved by Pilate’s washed hands. We are saved because our saving Lord experienced the shedding of his own blood, over his hands, onto all of eternity.

Friends, wash your hands not in the manner of Pilate but in the manner of Jesus' washing his disciples' feet. Submit to the leadership around you not in the way of the Jewish leaders but in the way of Jesus on the cross. Look on the cross not as the jeering crowd but with the gaze of the women and the beloved disciple, John. Allow the cross to shape you not as the unrepentant thief but by the surprise and wonder of the centurion and the penitent thief. Hear Jesus declare again, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" so that you will never have to declare that yourself.

My prayer is that we will hear these words from Romans in that light, and in that power, today: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:35-39). In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.