

LENT: A TIME TO FOLLOW JESUS TO THE CROSS

Good Friday
March 21, 2008

Isaiah 52:13—53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
John 18:1—19:42

Forsaken

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
(Matthew 27:46b, NRSV)

Jesus' heart-wrenching cry from the cross reveals to us how intimately he identified with human suffering. Betrayed by one of his own, abandoned by his closest friends, forced to endure the mockery of a trial, flogged, humiliated, and finally nailed to a cross – the Son of God suffered not only physical pain but the mental anguish caused by a sense of being forsaken by his heavenly Father.

For those of us who have been in our own dark valleys of despair, a sense of total abandonment may very well lead us to question, “Where are you, God?” At such times we are confronted with our worst doubts and fears. Yet, in the midst of experiencing what we sense is God's absence, we cry out with the hope that God somehow will hear us. Our desperate cry is a prayer that reveals the hope to which we cling. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews assures us that Jesus is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” because he himself “has been tested” (Hebrews 4:15, *NRSV*).

In quoting the words of Psalm 22:1, Jesus still calls out to his God. He acknowledges his own weakness and his need for the strength and comfort that only God can provide. And he waits with hope, clinging to God's promise while pouring out his life's blood, and then commends his spirit into God's hands (Luke 23:46). Jesus submitted to the will of his Father and “became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8, *NRSV*).

It is Good Friday. Our 40-day Lenten journey has now brought us to the foot of the cross. We have followed Jesus to Jerusalem where he said he would “undergo great suffering ... and be killed” (Matthew 16:21a, *NRSV*). His disciples have scattered and are in hiding, tormented by terror, doubt, and overwhelming sadness.

We know that Jesus' death on a cross is not the end, but for now darkness and gloom engulf us as we experience his absence. We ponder his sacrificial death that has obtained salvation for us. And we wait with hope for that third day when our journey will resume

and bring us to an empty tomb. We wait and cling to Jesus' promise that he will "on the third day be raised" (Matthew 16:21b, *NRSV*) and pass over from death to life. Let us maintain the vigil, keep the faith, and behold the wood of the cross, on which is hung our salvation.

The Reflection for Good Friday was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This day we remember to pray: Lord Jesus, you suffered and endured great pain and know how we feel when our own faith is weak. We remember your sacrificial love for us as you became obedient to the point of death, bearing the burden of our sins so that we might be forgiven and redeemed.

Activity Corner: "Without Jesus"

Supplies needed: Bibles; 7 purple candles; 1 white candle.

Good Friday is a time when one experiences the absence of Jesus. Some churches have "Tenebrae" services, or services of darkness, to commemorate Jesus' suffering and death on the cross.

Begin your devotional time with all 7 purple candles lit. Read Psalm 22 together. Read four verses at a time, pausing to extinguish one purple candle each time and allowing time for silence and reflection. After 28 verses have been read and all 7 candles have been extinguished, pause again for silence and reflection. Then light the one white candle and invite everyone to read together verses 29-31. Conclude by singing "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" or other Holy Week hymn.