

Streetsville United Church
Friday, April 10, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"HE WAS FORSAKEN FOR US"

Mark 15:34

As he died, Jesus uttered seven distinct phrases or words from the cross. But the earliest gospel, Mark, includes only one of them. Mark tells us that Jesus was crucified at 9 A.M. At 12 Noon, a strange and foreboding darkness settled over the land. Then at 3 P.M. just as the darkness began to lift, Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?", that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" By recording the words in Jesus' own Aramaic language Mark is stressing the absolute authenticity of these words. He's telling us that beyond doubt they came from the lips of Jesus on the Cross. Now the fact that Mark records only these words tells us that in the early Christian church these words were considered the most important. "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It's deep and mysterious, but essentially Jesus was forsaken for our sake. Jesus was briefly forsaken by God so that we never will forsaken by God.

Now we can certainly say that this cry came out of Jesus' deep humanity. Remember that by this point, all his friends and family had forsaken him. After his arrest in the Garden we read in Mark 14:50 "They all forsook him and fled." And though Peter followed Jesus to the courtyard of the high priest, he denied knowing Jesus three times. It's understandable. Jesus' friends hadn't expected it to end like this, with their Lord on a Cross, even though he'd clearly told them that it would happen. Furthermore, they feared for their own skin. Crucifixion not only punished a criminal but was a warning to potential wrong-doers. So don't be too hard Jesus' followers for abandoning him. We would have done it, too. Jesus was pretty much forsaken by others as he died on the cross. Only some of the faithful women who had followed him watched from a distance. "He died alone for you and me."

We too know what it is to be forsaken. We have sometimes been abandoned by others, left to stand all alone. Abandonment on the human level goes on all the time. Friends forsake one another. Family members become estranged from one another. Parents sometimes abandon their children, children their parents. In the marriage vows, we promise to forsake all others and to be faithful to our spouse alone. But many people forsake their marriage partner and turn to another. Somehow, somewhere, we are forsaken and we forsake one another. It is part of the broken human condition. We sometimes feel forsaken by God in

our deepest time of need. So we can understand Jesus' cry from a human point of view. He was entering into that very real human experience of being forsaken and sharing it with us.

Of course, Jesus is different than us, too. For we have all forsaken someone at some time. We've all turned from someone who needed us. And even more seriously we've forsaken God; we've turned away from God and his ways to embrace other gods and other ways. We've sometimes turned from the church and from God's people and from those who needed our help. And if we sometimes feel abandoned or forsaken by God, maybe it's not God who has moved, but us. But Jesus never forsook God nor humans. Even from the cross he did not forsake his dear mother but arranged for her to be cared for by the disciple John. He didn't even forsake his enemies but prayed for their forgiveness. Jesus did not forsake people, but went out of his way to care for those who needed him. And he always sought to do the Father's will, right up to and even unto death on a cross. It was his very meat and drink to do his Father's will. Jesus was the only one who never turned away from God, never went into the far country and wasted his Father's inheritance.

And this deepens the mystery of Jesus' cry from the Cross, ""My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You see, Jesus didn't cry out, "My God, my God why have people forsaken me?" He was saying to his Father, "Why did **you** forsake me?" How could God turn from the One whom he loved, the Son who loved and obeyed him without fail?

Well, the short answer is that God did it in love for us. Now there is no question that Jesus must have **felt** forsaken by God as he died on the Cross. But for a short time he was really and truly forsaken by God. His abandonment was real. Just for a few minutes perhaps, but for what must have seemed like an eternity, the Father's help and comfort was completely withdrawn from Jesus.

Now God wasn't far from Jesus, for sure. And he could have sent ten thousand angels to set him free. But he didn't. He turned away and let his Son die. Can you imagine how hard that must have been for God to do? Can you imagine any parent not rushing into a fire to save their child even at the risk of their own lives? Wasn't there a case of that not too long ago, where a parent ran back into a burning house in order to save a child, but got lost in the smoke so that both perished? But at the Cross God restrained himself from rushing into the fire to rescue his Son. As Jesus died, the Father suffered just as much as Jesus did. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The deepest reason is this. Jesus was briefly forsaken by God so that we will

never be forsaken by God. You see, our Holy God cannot look upon sin, and on that Cross "Jesus became sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God," as Paul puts it. As all our sin was transferred onto Jesus on the Cross, God had to turn away and let him die. For a brief time Jesus suffered the separation from God that our sins deserve. He suffered what the Bible calls the wrath of God, which we know not as violent anger, but separation from God, abandonment to the outer darkness, where God is completely absent.

But now that our sin has been paid for by Jesus' sacrificial and atoning death, God does not have to turn away from us. And that is our comfort in life and in death - even though we are sinners who sometimes forsake God and forsake one another, God will never forsake us who believe in His Son. God looks upon us as forgiven of sin, justified in His sight. And even though we sometimes may feel forsaken by God, we are, in fact, never forsaken by God. There is real difference between fact and feeling. Just when God seems furthest away, he may well be nearer than we think. Many of us know well the "Footprints in the Sand" poem and have found it's truth to be a great comfort.

"One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one set of footprints. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints. So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, were you not there for me?" The Lord replied, "My child, I love you and I would never forsake you. The times when you see only one set of footprints in the sand are the times I carried you."

No matter what we go through, no matter how far we wander, no matter if we feel forsaken, God does not and will not forsake us. Even when we forsake God, God keeps us in sight and actually pursues us and keeps pursuing us until we turn to him again. "I will never fail you or forsake you," he promises. God can keep that promise because on the Cross he briefly turned away from his Son and let him die for us. Jesus was briefly forsaken by God so that we will never be forsaken by God. And thankfully, Jesus' cry of forsakeness was not his last word from the Cross. As the darkness lifted Jesus discovered that the Father had turned to him again, and Jesus was able to say, "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit."

There are two things we can do in response to what God did for us on Good Friday. The first is wherever possible to seek reconciliation with those from whom we're estranged. Considering the gap God covered to save us, any leap

we have to make to reach those we've forsaken, or those who have forsaken us is small indeed. Yes, we've been forsaken by others, and we forsake others. But that does not have to be the final word. Make that phone call, send that email, write that letter, make that trip. Don't let the opportunity pass you by. Life is too short. After the resurrection Jesus told the women to find Peter and tell them the good news. Peter had forsaken Jesus but Jesus did not forsake Peter. Instead, the Risen One covered the gap by his grace and called Peter into his friendship and service again.

Here's the second thing we can do. Because of what happened at Calvary the Lord says to you and to me, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." So we can come before the Cross and say to the Lord, "Thank you for what you have done for me. I will never fail you nor forsake you." You can say those words to Jesus. Oh, you may not keep that promise perfectly, but don't you think the Lord's heart leaps when he hears you say those words with a willing and faithful heart.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus was briefly forsaken by God so that we will never be forsaken by God. And it is only fitting on this day for us to come before the Cross and say to Jesus, "Lord, I am your faithful follower. Help me to never fail you nor forsake you."