



# ST BART'S

A Meditation by  
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## **"My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?"**

*Meditation preached at the Three Hour Service 12 noon to 3 o'clock, April 18, 2014*

*Good Friday, Based on Mark 15:33-37*

In the *New York Times* magazine last Sunday there was a short article about the trouble modern politicians are having in spinning their candidacies, given their often rather posh personal narratives. Bill Clinton, now almost unbelievably viewed as an aging statesman, is the quintessential Horatio Alger. In novel perfection, President Clinton even comes from a place called Hope; but now, we are told, his type may be a fading reality. According to this article, young aspiring politicians often have to reach back a generation or two to find a compelling family story of strength over adversity, of rags to riches, or of pulling themselves up by the bootstraps. There is even a phrase for their dilemma: they are known as "narrative challenged."

Jesus was not narrative challenged. Every aspect of his life, including the drama of his death which we recall this afternoon, is narrative intensive. While I speak only for myself, I expect that each of us preaching actually puts little store in these being the literal or only last words of Jesus; but beyond that truth and infinitely more important than it, I am confident that each of us would stake his/her life on the spirit of these haunting words, utterances from the cross that still intrigue, challenge, comfort, and confound us.

This year I chose as the phrase upon which I would reflect these words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." I did so frankly because they speak to me in a singular way of humanness, incarnation, and realness, opening a space for me on the cross that some of the others simply do not allow. Jesus, schooled in the tradition of his forebears and one whose love of scripture imbued his whole life, in the most despairing moment of his narrative, recalled these words drawn from the ancient psalmist, a cultic lamentation of degradation and anguish, well-known to God's people, whose tortured narrative had had so many ups and downs. As naturally as breathing in and out, these words, of course, came to his lips.

It is often hardly possible to get into my own mind, let alone the mind of Jesus; but in my heart I believe Jesus truly meant these words, felt them deeply, not simply as prelude or postlude to the more high-minded words, but from the soul of one who knew the depths of forsakenness. This moment of his narrative-intensive life may be for us the hook, the spot where we at our most desperate moments can connect, can feel the divine resonance with Christ that this journey of ours, all of it, not just its glorious moments—but all of it—is held somehow in legitimacy and holiness.

In our own narratives we have these feelings of being forsaken. Far from being unknown to us, we have found ourselves in the crucible of despondency not on a literal cross but in moments of rawness and pain that we experienced as nearly unbearable. At moments of great tragedy we sometimes literally say, "Why would God do this to me" or the slightly more evolved, "Why would God let this happen to me?" Those of us saddled and blessed with the challenge of being asked such questions as part of our vocation struggle with words to comfort, usually quite non-grandly, simply hoping not to make the feeling of being forsaken worse by some ill-advised comment, sprung from our discomfort or need to speak when no words probably would be better. Theologically we can argue for the randomness of adversity over any particularity of intent, argue for its commonness to our human condition. But in the end and for sure at that moment, the one undergoing the great loss feels desolate, utterly forsaken. Nothing about our experience as Christians protects us or immunizes us from such moments. In

fact, it is a great and dangerous lie to suggest that because we believe, because we immerse ourselves in the practice and observance of our faith, we will somehow live our lives without need of these words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," ever to rest on our lips. Such claims do not prepare us for life; in fact, in the end they are more likely to render us apostate than faithful. These real words, spoken by Jesus in this hour, grant us the freedom before God to be more fully human.

I vacillate between concluding that the only God I truly know—never the right word in speaking of my posture toward God—is the One who is always distant, forever transcendent, mysterious, beyond the boundary of any select choice of treasured words and the One, on the other hand, who is near to me, the One with skin, not so much the skin of Jesus, but of those in my world, precious, some so precious as to mean all the world to me, and others too, not so precious, but who also bear Christ to me—real people, in whom I either recognize or miss the presence of God. Of course, God is both. Somehow, though, this image of Jesus, broken, near death on the cross, speaking words of doubt and mistrust—how else can we hear this phrase: "Where are you, God, and why aren't you here?"—makes all the other images of God somehow more accessible. I can imagine hearing, "Father, forgive them," from a man who moments later can say, "Where in this hell are you?"

And so for me, though the rich narrative continues toward an ending which I, as do we all, cherish—the brightness, vitality and hope of Easter—I linger here for a moment, for more than a moment really, treasuring these words, not willing to move on to the next, not quite yet. Does that mean that I am inclined to depression, that I have the proclivity for despondence? Maybe. I accept that possibility for myself and for many others who may be similarly inclined. Isn't it odd, though, that in these sad words, Jesus, in the throes of doubt and agony, makes room at the cross for all of us—for us who do not have it figured out, who struggle, who ponder and fret, indeed for us all?

Our narrative-intensive lives continue. In so many ways, certainly in all ways that ultimately are important, we **are** our stories, and no true story proceeds without moments on the cross. Is God there in such moments? Intellectually and officially, my answer is "of course." From time to time, and sometimes more often than that, when I am afraid or anxious in the dark of the night, I sometimes wonder. Should I keep that to myself? Should that be my secret with God? Again, maybe. But Jesus' willingness to speak his anguished cry from the cross makes these most private moans more acceptable and somehow more holy. For that, in my deepest place, I am filled with gratitude.

In the name of God: AMEN.

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