



The Family Times

A Newsletter of Church
of the Savior

Special Edition: Holy Week 2016

The office staff is excited to publish this special Holy Week edition of the newsletter. However, where our newsletters are primarily intended build community and keep COTS folk in the know of recent and upcoming events, this newsletter is a little different. For this edition, we wanted to engage with the spirit of Holy Week, a spirit that wrestles with hard things, a spirit of purposeful struggle; we chose these writings to emulate this spirit. That being said, if you as the reader come across something that you find challenging, know these do not necessarily reflect the theology of Church of the Savior or the way we go about the Lenten season, but are intended to lead us as a church into deeper reflection as we journey to Easter together.

From *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words*

by Stanley Hauerwas

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Matthew 27:46

‘The horror! The horror!’ Kurtz’s words from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* sear our souls. We, that is, the survivors of the century past, believe we know horror. World War I, World War II, Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, Rwanda, Hiroshima, September 11, 2001. Names for death, endless death, that name our history. We believe that if we know horror—the darkness hidden in our determinedly superficial lives, lives calculated to deny the darkness of our death-drenched times.

It is not surprising, therefore, that of all the words of Jesus from the cross, we most identify with ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ We do so because we think we have some idea about what it means to be forsaken. In the face of terror surrounding our lives, God remains silent. Though we are a bit embarrassed by Jesus (whom we thought to have some special relation with God) venting his frustration with being so humiliated, we nonetheless find this cry of dereliction comforting. Maybe God does understand our suffering. Maybe God even suffers with us, which some seem to think is comforting given the fact it is

very clear God is incapable of doing anything about our suffering.

That we can even begin to entertain such thoughts is but an indication of our refusal, indeed our inability, to believe that this One who hangs on this obscure and humiliating cross is God. That this is God means Jesus’s words, ‘My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?’ are not words describing the horror we inflict on ourselves and one another. Jesus’s words are not meant to express the anxiety created by the recognition that when all is said and done we are all going to be dead. Rather, if we are to understand the power of these words, these words drawn from Psalm 22, we must allow them to draw us into the mystery of the inner life of Israel’s Lord.

It is not by accident that the Psalms are for Jews and Christians our prayer book. We pray the Psalms not because they give expression to our religious experience—though they sometimes may do that—but because our lives are given form by praying the Psalms. But in truth only one life, the life of Jesus, has been the perfect prayer the Psalms are meant to form. As those who have been charged to care for Mary, herself a Jew, we cannot be

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Cross-Shattered Christ Cont. by Stanley Hauerwas

shaped by these words from the cross if we forget they are prayed by the One for whom Israel has longed. Only a people like Israel, a God-possessed people, can know what it might mean to be abandoned by God. This is not a cry of general dereliction; it is the cry of the long-expected Messiah, sacrificed in our stead and thus becoming the end of sacrifice.

This cry is but the prismatic exemplification of the love that is God's life. It is the love that was in Christ Jesus, 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.' (Phil 2:6-8)

Jesus's being handed over, Jesus's obedience even to the point of death, Jesus's cry of abandonment makes no sense if this is not the outworking of the mystery called Trinity. This is not God becoming what God was not, but rather here we witness what God has always been. Here, 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, is not an act of divine self-alienation; instead this is the very character of God's kenosis—complete self-emptying made possible by perfect love.

Contrary to those who suggest that only if God is capable of suffering is he capable of love, it is only because God is Trinity—that is, it is only because God is self-giving, perfect self-same delight—that he can suffer as one of us...This is not a dumb show that some abstract idea of god appears to go through to demonstrate that he or she really has our best interest at heart. No, this is the Father's deliberately giving his Christ over to a deadly destiny so that our destiny would not be determined by death.

It is here that we see, as Rowan Williams puts it, 'the sheer, unimaginable differentness—of God.'

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' shatters all our attempts to understand God in human terms. We try, for example, to compliment God by saying God is transcendent, but ironically our very notion of transcendence can make God a creature after our own hearts. Our idea of God, our assumption that God must possess the sovereign power to make everything turn out all right for us, at least in the long run, is revealed by Jesus's cry of abandonment to be the idolatry it is. The god we assume is but a name we use to impose some purpose on what we otherwise think is blind fate comes to ruin in these words from the cross.

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These words from the cross, and 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 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. In truth we stand with Pilate. We do not want to give up our understanding of God. 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. We seek to 'explain' these words of dereliction, to save and protect God from making a fool out of being God, but **our attempts to protect God reveal how frightening we find a God who refuses to save us by violence.**

God is most revealed when he seems to us the most hidden...Here God in Christ refuses to let our relation to sin determine our relation to him. God's love for us means he can hate only that which alienates his creatures from the love manifest in our creation. Cyril of Jerusalem observes that by calling on his Father as 'my God,' Christ does so on our behalf and in our place. Hear these words, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' and know that the Son of God has taken our place, become for us the abandonment our sin produces, so that we may live confident that the world has been redeemed by this cross.

Cross-Shattered Christ Cont. by Stanley Hauerwas

So redeemed, any account of the cross that suggests God must somehow satisfy an abstract theory of justice by sacrificing his Son on our behalf is clearly wrong. The Father's sacrifice of the Son and the Son's willing sacrifice is God's justice. Just as there is no God who is not the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so there is no god that must be satisfied that we might be spared. We are the spared because God refuses to have us lost. 'The horror, the horror' is not and cannot ever be the last word about our existence. It cannot be the last word because the Son's obedience even to death means: 'Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' (Phil 2:9-11)

A Word from the Fathers edited by Luke Taylor Gilstrap

Seasons of the church year, like the Lenten season and Holy Week, draw us back into the tradition of the Church, no matter our backgrounds, so I thought it might be helpful to include some reflections from two important Church Fathers, Augustine and Basil the Great. Before reading, it is important to note how intentional the Church Fathers are with their words. Often times today's writers and speakers use many words to get across a more over-arching idea; the Fathers are not this way. Each word is important, each sentence is intended, so try to read slowly and carefully.

First, Augustine, quite possibly the most influential writer in Catholic and Protestant history since the authors of the Bible. Though Augustine has proposed an unfortunate kind of legalism or over-strict-ness, the quote below gets to the heart of why we engage with suffering during Holy Week, why we walk alongside Christ with our own voluntary crosses. Where Lent could become a hyper-legalistic season, Augustine shows us the deeper purpose that lies within our practices:

"Virtually everyone fears the death of the body, so few the death of the soul. Everyone worries about the death of the body, which must happen sooner or later, and does everything possible to avert it...Yet all that one does to avoid death is in vain: at best one can only delay it, but never escape it. If instead one strives to avoid sin, he will not grow weary, and he will live forever. Oh, if we could only succeed in urging others—and ourselves to go together with them—to love eternal life at least as much as they love fleeting life! What will a man not do when faced with the danger of death? How many, under threats hanging over their heads, have preferred to lose everything in order to save their lives! And who would not do so to avoid being struck down? And perhaps, even after having lost everything, some still lost their lives...If a man were told, 'If you do not wish to die, you must sail the seas,' would he even hesitate to do so? If a man were told, 'If you do not wish to die, you must work,' would he let himself be overcome by laziness? God commands us to do less burdensome things to give us eternal life, yet we neglect to obey."

Then there is Basil the Great, one of three famous Cappadocian Fathers who wrote around 350 A.D. who together outlined many of the beliefs Christians still hold today as true and life-giving. In the quote below, Basil attests to the joy that comes with the Lenten fast and how important it is for Christians to engage with joy alongside our suffering, what the Orthodox tradition calls, "a bright sorrow." Thought we at Church of the Savior engage with Lenten "fasting" in many ways beyond the traditional dietary restrictions, Basil's comforting and challenging words still resonate:

"Let us prepare ourselves, as we have been taught, for the feasts that draw nearer: not with sullen expressions, but with the joy that is becoming of saints. The dejected are not crowned; the weeping do not receive the trophy. Do not be sad while you are being cared for. It would be foolish not to rejoice in the health of your soul, instead lamenting about the sacrifice of food and thereby proving that you give more importance to pleasing your belly than to healing your soul. Satiety is a delight for the belly; fasting is a profit for the soul. Be glad that the doctor has given you a medicine capable of canceling sin!"



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Every Riven Thing by Christian Wiman (edited by Luke Taylor Gilstrap)

What is our place in God's suffering? What is God's place in human suffering? Of course, Holy Week isn't all about suffering and anticipation, and praise God for that! The God we grieve on Good Friday is the same God we celebrate on Easter Sunday. Below is one of my favorite poems, one I find fitting for this time of year, fitting for the questions Holy Week asks every year. Lastly, Webster's dictionary defines "riven" as something "split or torn apart violently."

God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
sing his being simply by being
the thing it is:
stone and tree and sky, man who sees and sings and wonders why

God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,
means a storm of peace.

Think of the atoms inside the stone.

Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into the stillness where

God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made
there is given one shade
shaped exactly to the thing itself:
under the tree a darker tree;
under the man the only man to see

God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made
the things that bring him near,
made the mind that makes him go.

A part of what man knows,
apart from what man knows,

God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.

Christian Wiman, from Every Riven Thing (2010).