

# “MY GOD, MY GOD”

*From the sermon series “The Seven Last Words of Christ”*

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## Introduction

We awoke this morning to news of a tragic shooting in the East End that left one dead and 15 injured. While this incident is not being called an act of terrorism, it is no doubt a tragedy, and raises fears about the ongoing scourge of gun violence in our communities. I know that as this story unfolds we will all be prayerful for the victims, the shooter, and all of those touched most closely by these events.

This morning’s sermon may be difficult; today’s events are difficult, and the primary driver behind this sermon is a text that is a difficult one. If we are honest people and honest readers of Scripture, some Sundays at church need to be difficult ones. There is no easy explanation of what happens on the Cross, or how we should feel about it.

I will use a primary illustration this morning with which some of you may connect, and others may not. It is always my prayer that where my ability as an interpreter of the Bible comes up short, God does the real work. And whatever your responses to this morning’s message may be, please know that, as always, I am happy to talk more with you if you would like to respond.

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I write most of my sermons on Monday and Thursday mornings. Not much of this writing happens here at church. When I’m in the building, I like to keep my office door open, and the phone rings, and the email pings, and all of that is important; and so when I need to focus on writing, I’m usually either at home, or in a coffee shop. When writing a sermon on a difficult text, the wrong time and location can make a difference, and this week’s lesson is one of those. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” How could you possibly write about that phrase unless you are in a dark place?

This past Thursday, I didn’t really think about that and I found myself at a cozy little coffee shop, at a table by the front window, sun warming the room, nice hot cup of

coffee in my hand, and I just couldn't come up with anything to say about, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I was way too content.

Then the disconnect between the sermon and my surroundings grew even worse. Two people I know came into the coffee shop, a mother and her precious four-year-old daughter. By the time we noticed each other, they had settled in at the table right across from me. I was happy to see them, a welcome interruption from my writer's block. We chatted for a few minutes, and the little girl told me about the ham and cheese sandwich she was going to order. And then while I tried to go back to work, they ordered lunch, then they colored with crayons on their placemats and read a book together. A mother and a child having lunch together. It made me think of one of my earliest memories—eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at a diner with my mommy, when I was a little boy. Just me and mommy. What could be more perfect than that?

So there I was. With that mother and daughter across the aisle, the sermon page sat blank in front of me, my Bible open to the phrase, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" How could I possibly write a sermon on that, with such a beautiful scene right next to me?

I started thinking about something else. There's a show on TV these days called *This Is US*. It's a drama that follows the complicated story of a family and the relationships between parents and children. This complicated family begins with a young father, addicted to heroin, who leaves his newborn son at a fire station in hopes of giving him a better life. The little boy is adopted by a family, and raised with a brother and a sister. Before the three children are fully grown, the father of that family dies. I'm watching your heads nod—there are plenty of you who are watching this show, because it is gripping to see the powerful story of this family, this very good, loving family; it's incredible to witness the complicated lives of children and parents who have been separated from one another.

I've been watching that show this year, and I thought of it last Thursday morning, as I sat and struggled to write a sermon on the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...?" I thought of it as I watched that mother and her daughter in the coffee shop, coloring, reading together, eating a ham and cheese sandwich. And then it hit me. How absolutely tragic to think that the beauty of that relationship could be lost, that a parent and child could be separated. Yet it happens all the time!

The story of Jesus crying out to God on the Cross is a story about a parent and a child: God and Jesus. Everyday there are parents who lose children, and children who lose their parents. Illness, accidents, estrangement—being in the wrong place at the wrong time, like those at the nightclub last night. Human life is extremely risky stuff—because human beings are free, and sometimes the unthinkable happens, and parents and children lose one another. The Cross is about God and God's Son, Jesus. It is about the

separation of a parent from a child.

The theologians say this is what the Cross is about. God, who could have kept Jesus up in heaven, safe and sound, allows Jesus to be born into the world, this world, complete with all of its beauty and all of its tremendous risk. Jesus came into the world, fully human, vulnerable to pain and suffering, just as we are; and when the world was not ready for the justice, love and peace that Jesus preached, people hung him on a cross to die. And God watched as Jesus died, for God had allowed Jesus to be human. We wonder why this kind of separation ever has to happen. And perhaps Jesus wondered how God, his heavenly parent, his heavenly mother, his heavenly father, could possibly have allowed this to happen. Is this why he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Why did it happen this way? The theologians' answer is that God did this because of a thing we humans call "solidarity." (For more on this, see Placher, *Belief Commentary*.) People who suffer look for other people who understand: alcoholics go to AA meetings, veterans of war hang out at the VFW, people who have lost a loved one go to grief groups. People who suffer look for other people who understand. The rest of us can express our sympathies, but that's not really the same. People need to know that someone else understands. The Cross is God's show of solidarity with our deepest sufferings. *God understands*. God is not untouchable, invincible, up in the heavens. There is no pain you can experience as a human person that God cannot understand.

Some people do not buy this argument. Perhaps it just doesn't seem right to think of God as being so vulnerable. Or perhaps it's tempting, knowing the way the story will end on Easter morning, to claim that this story isn't really so painful—because God knows how it will turn out for good in the end.

Those are valid critiques. And still the fact remains that this is far from the only story in the Bible about the fragile bond between parents and children. Over and over again, the Bible tells these stories that seek to show how much God loves us by comparing that love to the story of a family. It starts with Cain and Abel—Adam and Eve are the first family of Creation, and their story includes the loss of a child. Abraham agrees to sacrifice Isaac his son and we ask in amazement, "how could any father possibly allow that to happen?" Ruth and Naomi show that the loyalty of family is not only determined by blood. These two women who have both lost their husbands, this mother-in-law and daughter-in-law make a life together, promising: "where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people will be my people, and your God my God..." (Ruth 1:16-17) King David is perhaps the greatest hero of the Old Testament, the shepherd boy who rose to greatness by slaying Goliath, and he is brought to his knees in tears when he learns that his estranged son was found hanging from a tree in the wilderness: "O Absalom, my son, my son, would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son." (2 Samuel 18:33) What is the most memorable parable told

by Jesus? For many it is the Prodigal Son; the loss of the relationship between a parent and a wayward child, and the hope that it might be redeemed. And as we heard in Jana's sermon last week, when Jesus' life is over, when he is left hanging on the Cross, the disciples, his friends, abandon him, but Mary his mother remains at the foot of the Cross. And Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These are not original words, they are a quotation of Psalm 22, Jesus' acknowledging that someone else has felt this pain before. There is simply no stronger bond than that which exists between families who love each other. God knows this—so to be sure we do not miss that God really does love and understand us, this is what many of the Bible's stories are about—the lives of parents and children, widows, in-laws, orphans and friends alike. *God understands.*

This is a tough sermon, isn't it? It's hard to talk about suffering, but the fact is, people who suffer need someone who understands. Preachers know that it's important to get the point across that God understands; sometimes we forget how hard it is to really understand the pain and suffering of someone else—we think we understand it better than we do. I had a mentor, a preacher named KC Ptomey. KC was in his late 60s, nearing retirement, when his son finally married. "Finally," I say, not because marriage is for everyone, but this son wanted to meet the right person, and it just had never happened for until at age 42 he met her, and they were all overjoyed, including his father, the preacher, and they married, and everyone was so happy, and less than two years later, there was cancer, and as suddenly as she had appeared, she was gone. And that father, that preacher, took six weeks off to be with his son. When he climbed back into the pulpit after those six Sundays away, the first thing he did was apologize to his congregation, to the widows and widowers, men and women who had been divorced, the parents who had lost children and children who had lost parents, he said, "I've spent four decades of my life at bedsides and gravesides with so many of you, believing that I understood something of the depth of your pain, and I'm so sorry, for I had no idea." Some of those who knew KC best said that after four decades as a preacher, he suffered a great tragedy alongside his son, and that's when his best preaching began.

Sometimes we don't understand. The preacher up here may have no idea what you've been through, maybe he's read about it in books. But God understands; we know that because God's Son Jesus is on the Cross. And Jesus knows what it is like to feel loss, for he has said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This is a tough sermon because it begins with a difficult idea. But that difficult reality comes with a beautiful truth—that God understands the difficulty of our lives. And perhaps even more incredible is the fact that, in spite of the riskiness of human life, people still have the courage to live. In the face of the many ways that life can go wrong, people keep living. They go to movies, and athletic events, and nightclubs to dance. People show this same courage in all kinds of ways. They choose to trust again

after someone has betrayed them. They take a stand on an issue in order to help someone else. They take a chance on giving a job to an ex-convict or a person in recovery. They forgive someone who has caused them pain. They offer to help someone else who may not deserve it. Because of courage and faith, people still raise children, color with them, read to them, take them to lunch for a ham sandwich. Life is full of courageous acts that cause the world to keep turning. The truth and the beauty of the Cross is that *God understands*, and that understanding gives us the courage and hope to go on living.

Amen.