

The Crucified God

Mark 15: 22-30

Can we believe in a God that is *not* a suffering God? How does Jesus' execution on a Roman cross affect your beliefs about God? Here he was, God's beloved, here he was who called God *Abba*, Poppa, dear Father. And here he was on the cross, crying with the Psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Many Jewish and Christian theologians have asked, Is theology possible after the Holocaust? Is belief in God possible after Auschwitz? What happens to your own personal theology after your own personal holocaust, your own personal Auschwitz?

The title of this sermon, *The Crucified God*, comes from the title of Jürgen Moltmann's book¹, he a German theologian trying to make sense of God after World War II, the Third Reich, the Holocaust. It asks, did God suffer too on the cross? The implications of a crucified God may help us in our own most difficult moments.

The Statement of Faith portion I chose for today comes from the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.:

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world.

These words underline for me several important truths. To begin, he was unjustly condemned, he the supremely innocent one, and so joins his life with the innocent who suffer every day, at every time and place.

The charges were two, one religious, *blasphemy*, and the other political, *sedition*. The religious and political powers-that-be conspired to put him to death. The religious leaders charged him with the blasphemy of claiming to be the Messiah, God's son. The political leaders charged him with sedition, presuming to be the King of the Jews who would lead an insurrection and overthrow the Roman occupiers and the Roman imperium.

It is crucial at this point not to blame the Jewish people for the death of Jesus. Such an accusation has fueled anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism from the first century to ours, sometimes to murderous degree, as in the Holocaust.

On the cross Jesus entered into the depths of human pain and suffering, that we may know that even here, we are not alone. God is with us here.

The last phrase can trip us up: “giving his life for our sins?” What can this mean? For some the words inspire deep devotion, in others a kind of moral revulsion. The word “giving” is crucial to me. His was a life *given*, not required nor demanded, a life given for us, and not just on the cross, but throughout his whole life.

There are some doctrines of the atonement that say God required or demanded the death of his beloved son in order to forgive our sins. This is a belief I now disbelieve. The cross was the revealing of God’s love and God’s forgiveness ever flowing to us. It was not some cosmic transaction: *Jesus did this so God would do this.*

But where was God in the moment of the cross? Which leads me to the Crucified God. And to this: where is God among what assassinated Salvadoran martyr Ignacio Ellacuria called “the crucified peoples of history?”²

II

The early Christian theologians, following the Greek and Roman philosophers of the day, said that God was unchanging, unmoved, untouched by what happens in the world. But this is the God of the philosophers, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus, the God of Sarah, Rachel, Ruth and Mary. The God of the Bible is a suffering God, of pathos and passion and of a divine

empathy who moves and acts in relationship with us and the world. In the Old Testament God is the weeping mother watching her child go astray, the grieving husband whose wife had left him and fallen into a life of prostitution. In the New Testament Jesus, God's son, weeps over Jerusalem. And the of Jesus weeps over Washington, Moscow, Rio and London, Mexico City and Beijing.

A British poet from the trenches of World War I wrote this poem to the suffering God and the crucified Christ:

The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;
 They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
 But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
 And not a god has wounds but thou alone.

(Edward Shillito "Jesus of the Scars")

How do we know our God is a suffering God. Moltmann answers: "Because in the heart of God stands the cross of Christ"³

When William Sloane Coffin was the minister at Riverside Church, New York City, his 20 some year-old son Alex drove his car off of a bridge into Boston Harbor and drowned.

A couple of days later a well-meaning woman came into his apartment carrying an arm-full of quiches. As she passed him, she shook her head sadly and

said, "I just don't understand the will of God." Coffin was up and after her in hot pursuit. "I'll say you don't lady!" he said. "I needed the anger", Coffin said, "and she needed the instruction."

"My own consolation", Coffin said later, "is that it was not God's will that Alex die." And then these words

When the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.⁴

God enters the circle of our sorrow and pain as a suffering God.

III

The image of the Crucified God came from Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel. In his memoir *Night* he tells of his days as a teenager in a concentration camp. He saw his parents led to their deaths. The Jews in the camps had to watch the hangings of other Jews.

One day he saw a gallows set up to hang three Jews. The three chairs were tipped over. Two died quickly, but the third was just a boy. He was so slight that it took him an excruciatingly long time to die. They were made to watch his writhing body, then see him die.

Behind Wiesel a man cried out, “For God’s sake, where is God?” And then from within Wiesel he heard a voice answer: “Where he is? This is where, hanging here from this gallows.”⁵

What can these words wrenched from his heart mean? That God died at Auschwitz? That our believing in God died there? In the concentration camps people prayed the *Shema*, people prayed the Our Father. Some how we still do, but our theologies, our beliefs change when we have been met by tragedy and horror.

Moltmann says that God suffered too there on the cross, not as Jesus suffered, and then died, but as a grieving Father watching His son die. “When the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.” God is with us, a heart-broken God, in the breaking of our hearts.

Holy week is also called “Passion Week.” The Greek word used for Jesus’ passion means “to be acted upon.” On the cross Jesus was acted upon by the full cruelty and ignorance of the world. *God was too*. And now this God is with us as we suffer the onslaughts of life.

IV

But where does believing in a suffering God lead us in the living of our lives as Christians? I start here. To live our lives with such a God means to be willing to

enter into the lives of “the crucified peoples” of the world and of our community, to stand with them and for them, sometimes with our bodies, beside them.

One of my teachers at Union Seminary was the black theologian James Cone. One of the chapters in my doctoral dissertation was on his black theology of liberation. This Lenten season I decided to read the last book he wrote before he died as a Lenten exercise. Its title, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.⁷ He says in order for American Christians to get their theology right and understand the expanse of white supremacy in American Christianity we need to place alongside the cross of Christ the lynching tree. “The lynching tree is a metaphor”, he writes, for white America’s crucifixion of black people.”⁸

In the “lynching era” in America, 1880-1940, over 5,000 black persons were lynched—and those are just the ones we’ve been able to identify. Lynchings were one part carnival and another part revival service. Sometimes thousands came to watch the spectacle of hate. They sang hymns like “The Old Rugged Cross.” Parents brought their children with them. Photographers took pictures and sold photos as souvenirs. Then they made them into post cards so people could send them to friends. In many Southern towns the lynching tree stood in a prominent place to warn the underclass to stay in their place. Confederate monuments have served the same purpose.

The book of Hebrews writes” “They are again crucifying the Son of God and are holding him in contempt”. (Hebrews 6:6). The killing of innocent people is a recrucifying of Christ. Whether Armaud Arbury shot down while jogging on a Georgia road, or Matthew Shepherd, the young gay man strapped to a fence post, tortured and killed. Later the writer of Hebrews writes:

Remember those who are in prison as though you were there in prison with them, those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured. (Hebrews 13:3)⁹

Here together we see the passion of the Christ and the passion of the world, the cross and every lynching tree.

As a young German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to see early the dangers of Hitler and the Third Reich. On the night called *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, the Nazi persecution of Jews became official and public as Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues were ransacked and holy books destroyed. That night Bonhoeffer opened his Bible to Psalms and read Psalm 74. It spoke of the enemy destroying holy places and putting their emblems there. “How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?”, the Psalmist cries. Bonhoeffer wrote in the margins of his Bible: “How long, O God, shall I be a bystander?”

To take up the cross of Christ is to decide to no longer to be a bystander.

When he was in prison awaiting his execution he wrote letters which a friend smuggled out of the prison. In one he wrote of the future of the church as one of “religionless Christianity”, a phrase that has caused much discussion. And in another letter, he wrote; “*The church is church only when it is there for others.*”⁶

How will the Church and our church come out of the pandemic? Are we taking a new look at what the church is and can be? Perhaps to re-vision a church that goes beyond its doctrines and stained glass windows and buildings to be the church that is the church *existing for others*.

Is God *only* a suffering God? No. God in majesty and mercy is leading the world toward its redemption. But God is not *other* than a crucified God.

1. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Classics, 2000).

2. Cited in James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (N.Y.: Maryknoll, 2011)p. xiv.

3. Jurgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2008),p.196.

4. William Sloane Coffin, *The Courage to Love*, p.95.

5. Eli Wiesel, *Night* (N.Y.: Hill and Wang,1972), p. 65.

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), p.503.
7. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. op. cit.
8. Ibid, p.166
9. The Hebrews texts as quoted in Cone, p. 152.