

*A Painful Prayer*

From “Hosanna” to “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthami.”

In this morning’s readings we find ourselves condensing this day and the days ahead. We move through the Passion Week, perhaps holding our breath for one last day before we get to the difficult part – instead find ourselves catapulted forward because of the way the lectionary “clear the way,” so to speak for the full glory of next Sunday, Easter Sunday.

We will be having services and observations throughout the week, to slow down the process and deepen the moment starting on Maundy Thursday and continuing on Good Friday and Saturday for our Easter Vigil.

You are invited to join us and be with us, for this is a time of community, like no other. The full enactment and remembrance of Passion is about community, discipleship, being together – and being saved.

I understand the weight of that word, “saved.” And it is directly connected to us as community and to Jesus and his intersection between us and salvation – as much as the intersection of the beams of the cross are between this world and the other at hand.

If this were not so, the story would have ended like so many: began with great promise:

Hosanna, Hosanna and then the promise was tragically smashed, leaving us once more deeper in hopelessness, less likely to hope again for fear of being hurt and disappointed again.

If this were so, it would have ended with the lament, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani” – My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Such a painful prayer.

It was perhaps at that moment, exactly at that instant, that Jesus’ felt the empty and lowest point of human being – the greatest of fears of being abandoned by God. At that point he and God both cried out in excruciating pain for one another.

At that point Jesus was fully who we are in our saddest, worst, and most lonely moments. He was who we are when we pray the painful prayers of questioning, frustration, anger, despair, disappointment, and fear.

But the story does not end.

That plummeting moment in which Jesus embraced all of humility and its pain – he broke its hold on us forever. He did not erase it. Instead he embraced it all, and in spite of the suffering of pain and sin and death – separation from God, he lifted the parts of us that held us separate – he lifted those parts and celebrated the joy of no longer being bound by anything that could keep us from God – for in so doing, he raised the joy and the sinfulness to God – confirming what later some have written to mean that not even sin can keep us from the presence of God.

The mystery here is unmistakable. The logic – inadequate. The words – immature.

The truth irrefutable.

As a result of the life of Jesus Christ none of us are ever outside the embrace of Jesus, God, or the Holy Spirit.

The author Henri Nouwen says this in “Can You Drink the Cup”

“Jesus knew deep in himself that he had to drink the cup to accomplish the work his Abba had given him. He knew that drinking the cup would bring him freedom, glory, and wholeness. He knew that drinking the cup would lead him beyond the entrapment of this world to complete liberation, beyond the agony of death to the splendor of resurrection. This knowledge had little to do with undersatiation or comprehending. It was a knowledge of heart shaped in the garden of eternal love.”

And, for that moment in his most agonizing moments of humanity – he questioned it all. And in spite of his humanity, in spite of ours, neither he nor us was or is abandoned.

The painful prayer...is still a prayer.

Nouwen, once again,

Community is a fellowship of people who do not hide their joys and sorrows but make them visible to each other in a gesture of hope. In community we say: “Life is full of gains and losses, joys and sorrows, up and downs – but we do not have to live it alone. We want to drink our cup together and thus celebrate the truth that the wounds of our individual

lives, which seem intolerable when lived alone, become sources of healing, when we live them as part of a fellowship of mutual care.”

We can live this and more, because indeed we are community in the living God among us – even in the midst of the most painful of prayers.