

The Crucified God (Mark 15:16-20)

The Christian God is a “crucified God” who fully enters human suffering

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St. Mary’s congregation gathered on Friday evening for their annual Good Friday worship service. After several lay Scripture readings on the passion of Christ, the guest speaker walked to the pulpit. The preacher, a visiting monk, looked at the congregation but said nothing. After a lengthy moment of silence, he picked up a large candle and then walked to a statue depicting Jesus hanging on the cross. The statue, placed in a dark corner of the church, could barely be seen in the evening light. The monk lifted the candle to Christ’s head, illuminating the crown of thorns. He then placed the candle near the outstretched arms of Christ, shedding light on one nail-scarred hand and then the other. Next he placed the candle near the side of Christ, exposing the wound from the soldier’s spear. Finally, he placed the candle at the bottom of the statue so the congregation could see the stake pound into Christ’s feet. With that he blew out the candle, and dismissed the service.

At the center of Christianity hangs a crucified God. The New Testament devotes more space to Jesus’ passion and death than any other aspect of his life. Clearly Jesus’ suffering is central to Christian faith. Although the cross of Jesus is an ugly scene of brokenness, pain, and death, it is also a picture of God. Not a God of glory and majesty but a God of suffering who, in physical and spiritual agony, cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Many of you have heard of Elie Wiesel. Wiesel, a Jew, is a survivor of the holocaust. During his teenage years he and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz, the infamous Nazi concentration camp. Other than himself, everyone in Elie Wiesel’s family perished in that horrible camp. In one of his books, Wiesel tells a powerful story from his experience at Auschwitz. The story involves a hanging that he and all the prisoners were forced to witness. Three men were hung by the Nazis, one of them just a teenage boy. They had been accused of blowing up a power station. In order to warn the other inmates of the high cost of resistance, all the inmates were forced to walk by and see the execution at close range. It was a grisly scene—a scene of death, evil, and suffering. By the time Wiesel marched by, the two adults were dead. But the youth was still alive,

hanging on the gallows, struggling between life and death. Behind him Wiesel heard a man ask: “Where is God now? Where is He?”

That’s the question isn’t it? Where is God? Where is God in my illness? Where is God as I face the reality of death? Where is God as I face a deteriorating marriage, financial problems, doubt, and depression? Where is God in the midst of war, terrorism, earthquakes, fear, and hatred?

The execution continued. The lad lingered on. Once again Elie heard the man ask, “Where is God?” Elie Wiesel said, “I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is God? He is there, hanging on the gallows.”

The cross of Jesus tells us that God is a God of the gallows, a crucified God. It’s profoundly important for people of faith to remember that we serve a suffering God. The older I get, the more important that becomes to me. Through the years I’ve prayed with hundreds of cancer patients, preached a lot of hard funerals, counseled with large numbers of broken families, and responded to more tragedies than I care to remember. Like you, I’ve seen plenty of darkness and suffering in the world. But the cross of Jesus Christ tells us that God is present in the midst of suffering. Good Friday affirms that God enters human suffering, works to relieve suffering, and will ultimately redeem suffering. The cross of Jesus Christ tells us that even in suffering—*especially* in suffering—God is present.

Several years ago I received a phone call from a young couple in our congregation. They called from the neonatal intensive care unit at Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital, where I had already made two visits. After three days of valiant effort to save their premature son, the doctors told them he was not going to make it. After making the painful decision to remove life-support systems, the parents asked me to come and baptize their child before he died. When I arrived at the neonatal ICU room, the child’s parents, grandmother, nurse, and social worker were waiting for me. In thirty years of ministry, I cannot remember a sadder occasion. And yet, even in that awful setting, God’s presence was palpable. We experienced God’s presence as we listened to the words of Jesus, “Let the little children come to me” (Matt 19:14, NIV), and as we recited the promise of Psalm 23, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me” (v. 4, KJV). We knew God was with us as we prayed, “Our Father, who art in heaven....”

We felt the presence of Jesus among us as we blessed the water, baptized the child, anointed him with oil, and commended his spirit to God. Even in overwhelming grief and pain, God's presence permeated the room. As we held one another and cried, we knew that the crucified God held us in loving arms and cried with us. We were not alone.

The cross of Jesus tells us that God is a God of the gallows, a crucified God. Although God does not take away our suffering, God enters into our pain and shares it with us. The Bible tells us that Jesus is "a man of sorrows acquainted with grief." The cross tells us that when we suffer, God suffers with us.

That was true for a man named David. Twelve years ago David's fourteen-year-old son Rob died in a tragic accident. Several days after the funeral, David, in agonizing grief, drove to a Roman Catholic bookstore. There he purchased a wooden crucifix, depicting Jesus suffering on the cross. David drove home, opened his toolbox, and grabbed a hammer and nail. He then walked to the kitchen and hammered the crucifix to the wall, right above his son's empty chair at the dinner table. Every evening, when he stared at Rob's empty chair, David lifted his eyes to the crucifix and remembered that God, like him, had suffered great grief. The crucifix did not explain his son's death. Nor did it take away the pain of that death. But knowing that God suffered *with* him allowed David to survive that horrible time of pain and grief. Twelve years later that crucifix still hangs on David's wall. It reminds him that the God of the cross is always with him, even in his deepest suffering.