

Suttons Bay Congregational Church      TC Ecumenical Good Friday Service--April 14, 2006  
My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me      The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? We don't say it quite the same way, but surely we express the thought. Where are you? Why me? This can't be happening! Not again. And with these questions our protestations. But I prayed. But I went to church. But I worked hard. But I was a good girl. But sometimes, regardless of what we say or do, our pleas seem to fall on the ears of a deaf God at best and at worst a punishing, vindictive, and cruel God.

But how can that be? In Sunday School and church, at least in any kind of a church most of us want to attend, we learn that God is benevolent, loving, and compassionate. But what kind of a benevolent, loving, and compassionate parent allows her or his own child to suffer and die a painful and humiliating death? Surely none of us here would sit back and let that happen. Shoot, today's parents are all over our kids with anti-bacterial hand wash, Kleenex, and vitamin C supplements flavored like grape soda at the first signs of the hint of a cold. We don't even want our children to suffer the common cold, let alone anything more serious. And so why, if God is really God and could have stopped the suffering, why then did Jesus suffer so severely on the cross that the very child of God felt forsaken by God? And why, if we believe in and praise and love this compassionate and merciful God, do we suffer too?

On this Good Friday I do not seek to solve the mystery of, or define the meaning inherent in, suffering. I seek only to reflect on a personal experience of suffering during which Jesus' words on the cross echoed often in my mind.

Statistics tell us that nearly 25% of Americans live with, have lived with, or will live with clinical depression. Those of you who have been there or are living with it even now, know the challenges and struggles that come with the disease. I became all too familiar with the struggle a couple of years ago. At the time, life was moving at a hurried pace—we had just moved to the area from New England. I became pregnant, my husband and I were working to plant a new United Church of Christ in Traverse City, we were settling into our new home, we were trying to meet people and make friends. In the midst of all of that, my beloved grandfather died. Not long after, I began having panic attacks. I lived in a constant state of heightened anxiety. I couldn't sleep. I didn't want to eat. I went to my doctor—she prescribed a mild sedative and sleeping pills but told me to only take them under the most dire of circumstances because I was pregnant. This of course added to the stress. I went to see a therapist who encouraged me to try and unravel my past in hopes of discovering the source of the mental pain—I tried, I really tried. I would have minor epiphanies about childhood, but nothing to explain the extent of my pain and the panic continued. Though I didn't feel like eating, I changed my diet and took supplements with the vain hope that it was all some kind of nutritional deficiency. All that did was send our food bills through the roof. The sleepless nights spent pacing up and down our driveway became my own personal living hell. I began living in a constant state of panic. I didn't want to be around people and yet I didn't want to be alone. After two weeks of this—the longest 14 days of my life—I didn't feel like I even wanted to be alive anymore. I had visions of just falling out of our bedroom window onto the deck below. I just wanted the suffering to end and the only way that it seemed like it could was if my life were to end along with it.

Even now it sounds so bizarre—I'm a great lover of life. I enjoy the smell of rain hitting the dusty earth, the taste of a rich, gooey brownie from The Silver Tree Deli, the feel of a puppy's furry forehead against my cheek, the sound of the really loud parts of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, the site of the brilliant pinks and purples and golds of a sunset in Leelanau County. And yet in my anxious and depressed state, I took notice of none of these things. Nothing brought me joy, not even the very gift of life itself.

And thank God for my husband who knew that what I was becoming was not who I really am. He took me to Munson's emergency room where, for the first time in weeks, I felt just a little hope, like maybe this hell would end after all. I spent five difficult days in Centre One—that's code language for the psych ward at Munson, and then I spent an additional week in the Partial Hospitalization Program learning how to cope with depression and anxiety. Now I can talk about it like that—Oh yes, remember the week I spent in the psych ward, honey? But at the time, it was unbelievable. If ever in my life I have felt completely forsaken by God—it was the second night of my stay there—sitting on my bed with hospital issue white sheet and blanket wrapped around my shoulders—crying out from the depths of my soul to a God who—in that moment—I was sure did not exist. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

All of this from a person who had just become overwhelmed by too much situational stress. But what of the mother who loses a child? Or the young soldier who daily witnesses horrors beyond our imaginings? Or an entire community washed away by a mudslide? What of this kind of suffering? Most depression can be treated with good therapy and medication. But what of the life struggles that can't be altered or changed or treated? What about the headlines that prompt us to respond, my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken them? These are the Good Friday messages of this world—messages of death, destruction, and unimaginable suffering.

I don't begin to think my suffering comparable to any of these, and yet I learned the message of Easter Sunday—that there is hope and new life in the most desperate of situations—I learned this truth in profound ways in the process of recovering from depression, in the process of surviving suffering. I didn't survive the suffering in spite of God's absence, but rather I survived the suffering because of God's presence. I know now what I couldn't know then, that as I sat on that cold hospital bed crying rivers of grief like my soul had never known, the tears of The Divine mingled with my own. To touch my tears was to touch God for surely God suffered with me and I was wrapped in God's presence just as surely as I was wrapped in that white sheet with Munson Medical Center printed in blue ink in the corner.

None of us could know this profound sense of God's presence in the moment of intense suffering, not even Jesus. There seems to be something about the way a human being is wired that suffering becomes consuming and overloads our systems. It is only in retrospect and often with the help of other folks who are Christ to us, that we learn that the moments in which we thought we were most God forsaken were the moments in which we would later realize God was most present to us, suffering with us—not because God has too, but because God wants to; refusing, in divine love and mercy, to ever truly forsake us.