Sermon for Tre Ore (Fourth Word), March 30, 2018

Matthew 27:45-47

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In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

From nine until noon, the crowds ridicule Jesus. “He saved others, but he cannot save himself!” “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” “Hail, the King of the Jews!” “All who see [him] mock [him], hurling insults at [him]” (Psalm 22). Aggression and shame define these first hours.

But at high noon, something happens that changes the tone of the whole afternoon. Darkness takes over the whole land. This is not a mere eclipse, mind you; the Passover takes place during a full moon. It is unnatural. It is unsettling. This is the divine darkness of dreariness and condemnation. It’s enough to keep the people from making any more taunts. It causes them to take a second look at what is happening. This is not some mere mortal who falsely claimed God’s favor; God has now shown up in this unnatural darkness. Let’s see what he will do.

All of a sudden, Jesus cries out with a loud voice: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” “Eli, Eli.” It makes sense that some people thought he was calling *Eli*jah—especially since God had promised through the prophet Malachi to send Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord. Would the herald of the Lord finally come? —Of course, those who had followed Jesus from the very beginning know that John the Baptist is Elijah, the herald of the Lord. He had announced the coming of the King, and now here the King hangs.—

There is no one else coming to save Jesus—not Elijah, not the Father. They look up and still see but Jesus only, in the plainness of his humanity. No other day of the Lord will come; it is here and now. “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”

But the judgment of this world means the judgment of the Sinner. The God who created the heavens and the earth is now pierced by his creation as he bears the full weight of all of humanity’s sin. It is far more than any one person can bear, and yet the incarnate God-Man manages somehow. This sin—this disease, this corruption of our very nature, this rebellion against God, this evil now coursing through Jesus’ veins—it rips him apart. This sin tears God from God. The Father turns his back on his Son—on Himself. An unimaginable rift now separates the Godhead as the Father forsakes his Son.

All creation shudders at this divide. The curtain of the temple is torn in two. The earth shakes. The rocks are split. The tombs open their mouths and release their dead. There are no more taunts from the crowd; no more jeers; no more questions. God himself has shown up. He has cast his judgment. But even though all creation trembles in his presence, God is not condemning his creation, but the One by whom and for whom all things exist.

The question is not *how* this mystery took place. That question is rarely satisfied when it comes to spiritual matters. Rather, the question is “why?” Why, O Lord, are you enduring this unnatural torment? Why, O Lord, will you willingly subject yourself to such evil men, to the wrath of God, to separation from yourself, to shame and death? The people will no longer dare ask, but I will: Why, O Lord, will you not come down and save yourself? Why will you shed your holy, innocent blood for us faithless sinners? Why will you *not* forsake *us*?

This is the question upon which we now meditate: Why does God forsake himself rather than forsaking us? My God, my God, why have you *not* forsaken *me*?