

Christ the King, Year C
Luke 23: 33-43
Nov. 25, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Where is God?

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Today as we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King our attention is drawn to a hill outside Jerusalem. Three crosses stand on the hill and on the crosses Jesus and two criminals. Our memories fill in the gaps in the story. We hear Jesus cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and we ask, with him and those at his side, "Where is God?"

Towards the end of my time at Sandia Prep, the school I worked at before leaving for seminary, a parent I knew well came up to me. We talked about her sons, the way her older son had grown into a responsible but still goofy and delightful kid and the way her younger son had of calming turbulent waters; we laughed about old times, we talked about my leaving for seminary, and then she turned to me and said in the piercing direct way she had, "What I want to know, Susan, is where was God?".... she then went through a series of events each more horrific than the one preceding it each time asking, "Where was God?" Hers was not an accusatory or argumentative question. She was not debating the existence or non-existence of God. She was a woman who had witnessed and experienced a great deal of pain both in her life and in the lives of others. She was a woman with a keen sense of justice, a woman of deep empathy. Hers was a genuine, plaintive question springing from the depth of human pain.

The writer and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel tells of another such question being asked. The way Wiesel tells it, three concentration camp inmates had been caught trying to escape. The SS rounded up all the people in the camp and brought them to the courtyard to watch the three—two older men and a young boy—hang to death. The two older men died quickly. The boy twisted in agony. In the crowd a shout rang out, "Where is God?"ⁱ

"Where is God?" That must have been a question the disciples asked as Jesus was being crucified.

"Where is God?" I wonder if that was the question the first criminal was asking when he said to Jesus, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"(Luke 23:39)

“Where is God?” That’s a question people often ask when they witness the insanity and injustice that sometimes seem to mark our world.

It’s a question many of us ask in the dark times of our own lives. In times of deep despair. In times when even the walls seem to be closing in on us.

“Where is God?” A question asked when folks die out of season.

As the boy writhes in tortured pain, dying slowly, Elie Wiesel tells us the shout rings out again, “Where is God?” Then Wiesel goes on to say, “And I heard a voice in myself answer: ‘Where is God? God is here. God is hanging there on the gallows.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Isn’t that the truth the second criminal knew? Hear what he says as he sputters for air. Hear what he chokes out through his pain: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” That fellow on the cross knew the answer to the question “Where is God?”

God is here hanging from a cross, hands and feet nailed to the wood, gasping for air.

“Where is God?” Walking the road to Golgotha, stumbling under the weight of his own cross.

“Where is God?” Treated with contempt, mocked, scorned, shamed and degraded.

“Where is God?” Where we would least expect God to be.

Hear what Jesus says from that cross. Hear the words he utters. Hear the words gasped out—words that somehow rise above the cries and shouts of mockery and derision. Jesus says to the fellow on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

TODAY. What a bold promise. There on the gallows, on the cross, Jesus promises the fellow hanging next to him that on that day they will be together in paradise.

“Where is God?” “God is here....”

Here in the midst of our suffering. Here in the midst of our pain. Here in the midst of injustice. “God is here.”

Here. Standing at a kitchen counter with a couple facing foreclosure on their home. Here. Giving them the strength to go on.

“Where is God?” Here comforting mothers who have lost their children to violence both in the streets of our cities and in war zones throughout our world. Here. Giving them the courage to face another day.

“Where is God?” Here extending a hand to the addicted, an arm to the unsteady.

“Where is God?” In the streets of Calcutta, in the tents of Dafur, in bombed out houses throughout the middle east.

God is here.

Often it is the ones in deepest pain who give most eloquent witness to the presence of God who suffers with us—the God who is present in the here and now of our suffering.

Today, on this last Sunday before Advent—the day we celebrate as the Feast of Christ the King, we encounter not the triumphant king the hymns so often portray, not a king riding into Jerusalem amidst shouts of “Hosanna”, not a king clad in royal robes sitting on a throne, not a distant king moving troops from place to place, but a man stripped of all he has—clothing, friends, dignity—a man nailed to a cross, a man enduring the most painful and humiliating means of execution the Romans could come up with, a man extending a hand and a promise to a fellow sufferer.

“Where is God?” There at the cross with the thief. There in the stable with Mary and Joseph and the lowly shepherds. Reaching out to us from the Cross and coming to us in the stable.

“Where is God?” Here with us. Here with us in our suffering and in our suffering world. Here with us in our longing for light in our darkness.

ⁱ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, p. 75f. Quoted by Choan-Seng Song in *Third-Eye Theology*, rev. ed. p. 184.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*