



GOOD FRIDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Mark 15:33-41 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 33) When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. (v. 34) At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 35) When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." (v. 36) And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." (v. 37) Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. (v. 38) And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. (v. 39) Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (v. 40) There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. (v. 41) These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Good Friday is a day when Christians throughout the world commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus. African American congregations observe Jesus' death in a variety of ways. Some congregations conduct a "Seven Last Words" service during which seven different preachers preach sermons using one of seven last words Jesus uttered before he died on the cross. For some Seven Last Words services, only women are invited to preach since it was the women who remained with Jesus throughout His crucifixion. Other congregations hold more traditional worship services wherein the primary scriptures for reflection and proclamation are the passion texts of the Gospels. Many congregations hold their Good Friday Services at noon, the time when Jesus died, according to scripture.

While Good Friday commemorates Jesus' death, the tone of many services in African American communities is not a somber one. African Americans remember and reflect upon the death of Jesus in anticipation of Jesus' resurrection. Therefore, celebration, which is such an important component of traditional African American worship, is also part of Good Friday. Though Jesus died, death would not have the last word.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Mark 15:33-41

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As I write this commentary on Mark 15:33-41, the American economy is in turmoil. Several large financial institutions have folded, many are on the brink of failure, and the United States government has rescued some from demise at the expense of taxpayers. Hundreds of thousands of people, including many African Americans, have lost their homes and their jobs (unemployment is at its highest level in many years). For those who have struggled their entire lives to get good jobs, own homes, and maintain financial independence and stability, these dire times may seem like the end of the world as they know it.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

For many people living in the first century, the day of Jesus' crucifixion must have seemed like the end of the world, too. A series of events unfold in this text that indicates the world was undergoing a major paradigm shift. In verse 33, darkness came over the entire earth. People buying and selling in the markets, children playing in school, men and women working in the fields, tending sheep, and preparing meals for their families were suddenly enveloped in darkness. Even those who did not live in Palestine—who lived in different countries and parts of the world—were cloaked in darkness when they should have been enveloped in sunshine.

In verse 34, onlookers heard Jesus ask God in a loud voice why God had forsaken him. Even those who had mocked Jesus by calling him "King of the Jews" may have been surprised to hear him cry out to God with such a sense of betrayal. One of the onlookers gave Jesus a drink of sour wine. In the ancient world, people drank sour wine to cool a fever or quench thirst.¹ The sour wine may have been given to prolong Jesus' life in order to ascertain whether Elijah would come

to rescue him. In the Old Testament, prophets such as Malachi foretold the return of Elijah before God's final judgment of all humanity.² Some of the onlookers may have believed that Jesus was appealing to Elijah with his loud outcry. Therefore, the longer Jesus remained alive, the better the chance that Elijah could come to his rescue.

The splitting of the curtain in the temple was another sign that something was amiss in the world (v. 38). In the temple, there was an inner curtain that separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies where only the high priests could go. There was also a curtain that hung before the golden doors of the sanctuary.³ However, it is not clear to which curtain the writer is referring. If the inner curtain was torn, the event may have symbolized the annihilation of the barrier between God and humanity.⁴

Another occurrence that contributed to the paradigm shift was the epiphany of the centurion. As the centurion witnessed Jesus take his last breath, he stated –“Truly this man was God's Son!” The centurion had authority over one hundred soldiers of the Roman army. This particular centurion may also have been in charge of Jesus' crucifixion.⁵ His realization that Jesus was the Son of God occurs after the curtain in the temple splits. Whether the split curtain is the inner or outer one, the split is indicative of a major shift in the centurion's worldview.

The women who watched Jesus' crucifixion from a distance also must have felt their world undergoing a major shift. First of all, the women were watching the one who changed their lives being killed in a manner typically reserved only for miscreants and criminals. Non-Jews in the Greco-Roman world viewed the practice of crucifixion as an obscenity and victims of crucifixion with contempt.⁶ Jews found crucifixion even more contemptible than non-Jews because they believed victims were cursed by God.⁷ How could Jesus suffer the fate of a common criminal? How could people actually believe Jesus was cursed by God?

Mary Magdalene had followed Jesus since the day he exorcised seven demons from her body.⁸ By removing the demons, Jesus removed the stigma that had once dominated her life and relegated her to the margins of society. Rather than being shunned by society because of demon possession, she had been restored to her community—accepted and embraced by friends, family and community. Salome, the mother of Jesus' two disciples, James and John, had seen her two sons become Jesus' disciples and seen their lives undoubtedly transformed as a result. She also followed Jesus. The Greek verb “to follow” (*akoloutheo*), used by the writer, indicates that these women were disciples. Therefore, when they saw Jesus being crucified in such a heinous way, they too must have felt their world was coming to an end.

This text teaches us to celebrate the power of understanding. Understanding that Jesus was the Son of God would have a profound impact on the lives of the centurion, the women, the bystanders and, ultimately, the entire world. When we truly understand who Jesus is and the power of God at work in His life and witness, we, too, can be transformed. We, too, can be the people God is calling us to be. However, to gain understanding, we must be open to listening for the voice of God, even in the midst of disruption and chaos.

Celebration

We reflect and celebrate Good Friday because, as the world continues to turn upside down, Jesus is still at work transforming lives, transforming governments, and transforming societies.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: Cries of Jesus asking God why God had forsaken him, Jesus breathing his last breath, bystanders contending that Jesus was calling for Elijah, the tearing of the temple curtain, the confession of the centurion;

Sights: Complete darkness until three o'clock in the afternoon, Jesus' torn and battered body stretched wide and hung high on the cross, bleeding profusely; onlookers looking upward to witness Jesus' painful death; and,

Smells: Sour wine and drying blood.

Notes

1. Collins, Adela Yarbro and Harold W. Attridge. Mark: a Commentary, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 757
2. Malachi 4:5-6 communicates the belief of the prophet that God would send Elijah to reconcile children to their parents before final judgment.
3. Collins, Adela Yarbro and Harold W. Attridge. Mark: a Commentary, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. p. 760
4. Ibid.
5. Donahue, John R. and Daniel J. Harrington. The Gospel of Mark. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002. pp. 448-449
6. Green, Donald E. "The Folly of the Cross." The Master's Seminary Journal 15 (Spring 2004): 59-69.
7. Ibid.
8. In Luke 8:2-3 we see that Mary Magdalene was one of three women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities.