

[MAUNDY THURS 1st Luth where is God]

MARCH 29TH, 2018

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MAUNDY THURSDAY

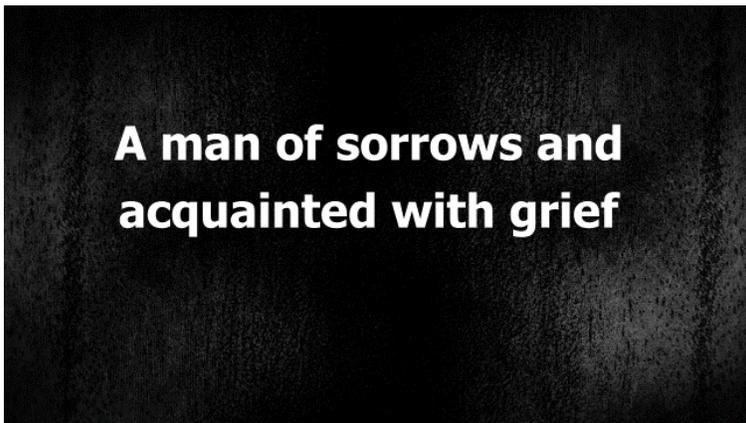
FIRST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL

Isaiah 53:1-12; John 13:1-17, 31-35

Where Is God?

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe, and in believing, we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.



**A man of sorrows and
acquainted with grief**

"A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

We are all acquainted in various ways with brokenness or pain in our lives. From sickness to death, from anguish to fear, from regrets to feelings of rage, we all suffer an assortment of old scars and open wounds. We feel pain for our failures, pain from conflict in our most intimate relationships, pain at the prospect of world problems spinning demonically out of control.

Some of the pains we suffer come from the small things in life, those emotional *paper-cut-or-hangnail-experiences* that sting like crazy but don't last very long. A broken finger or the flu, an audit by the I.R.S. or a careless comment by an acquaintance, these are things that can heal relatively quickly. Other wounds, though, are seemingly mortal, causing pain that threatens to overwhelm us, cuts so deep in our hearts that our very life seems likely to drain away...despair and grief, "sickness unto death."

It's at times like these that we find ourselves crying out in anguish, ***Where is God now?*** and ***Why is this happening to me?***

"A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

Suffering is, quite simply, an unavoidable part of our broken world: always unwanted, sometimes unbelievable, often unexplained. For those who believe in God as a loving, caring Father, it is the question with which we struggle: Why is there suffering in the world, and why has it come to me?? It's a question that never seems to have a good answer.

One man who has seen more suffering than most of us will ever dream about is Elie Wiesel, a Jewish man who was deported, as a boy, along with the rest of his family, to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz.

His book entitled Night is a memoir of those experiences, his account of a struggle with a hideous evil, his search to understand God in the midst of absolute forsakenness and pain.

He writes of one incident in particular that seems to mirror the struggle we have of trying to make sense of Jesus' crucifixion and death, of our own suffering and death, of the suffering and death of our loved ones and friends.



One of his fellow prisoners was accused by the Secret Police of being a leader in a resistance movement within the camp. He wouldn't talk, so he was taken away, never to be heard from again. A boy who worked for the man also was taken away and tortured; and, like his leader, also refused to talk. For his silence, the youth was sentenced to hang with two men.

Wiesel writes,

The German soldiers seemed more pre-occupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him as the victims mounted the stairs.

"Long live liberty!" cried the two adults. But the child was silent. "Where is God...? Where is he" someone behind me asked. The order was given, the three were hung. The whole camp was forced to march past the gallows, each of us to look the prisoners full in the face. As we passed by I heard the same man behind me asking, "Where is God now??"

Then I heard a voice within me answer him, "Where is God...? Here he is...he is hanging here on the gallows."

"A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

Tonight is the evening we call Maundy Thursday, the night in which Jesus was betrayed, the night in which Jesus began his descent into the depths of suffering and death. He gathered his disciples for what he knew would be their last meal together. During supper he talked of pain and suffering, yet he spoke not as one who was defeated, not as one who had given-up or surrendered. Instead, he spoke as one who had a difficult job to do, yet who knew that his work would also be the blessing of many.

He gave to them some bread and some wine, the ordinary food that they had eaten together so many times in the past. Yet he offered it to them this night with a special blessing, an offering of himself, his body and blood: and he said, Do this in remembrance of me.

It's strange, isn't it, that the very place where we encounter Christ is at the deepest point of his suffering, his beaten body and shed blood?

"A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

On that night of agony, he prayed that God would spare his life, yet willingly he submitted to God's will and the crowd's clubs as if he were a dangerous criminal. Thus he set off on that path of persecution, through that gauntlet of people who beat and reviled him, who threw at him their insults and taunts.

The soldiers and leaders were more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To crucify an innocent man in front of so many people was no light matter. Pontius Pilate, the head of the Romans, read the verdict. All eyes were on the man. He was lividly pale, almost calm; beaten and mocked, yet still he was silent.



The rough wooden cross was heavy on his shoulders as he climbed the hill called Golgotha. It threw its shadow over him as the soldiers prepared his body. "You saved others, save yourself!" the rulers mocked. But still the man was silent. Then someone asked, "Where is God? Where is he?" The order was given, the nails were driven home. The whole crowd was forced to see the criminal's tortured bodies. Again someone asked, "Where is your God now?"

We hear that question, Where is God? It's one that we ask when suffering strikes, it's one that we hear when our neighbors and loved ones experience suffering and loss. But even as we ask or hear our question, Where is God? we know that the answer is whispered to us in the still, small voice of God's Spirit, Here he is - he is hanging here on the cross. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

It is both the greatest story of human suffering, and the greatest word of good news that we could ever hope to hear. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he writes to his friends, "When I came to you, I didn't speak of God in lofty words or intricate wisdom. Instead, I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

He goes on to explain that though "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

What a perfect puzzle, a magnificent mystery, a fantastic farce:

the instrument of death that seemed to certify Jesus' life as a failure, is, in fact, the very symbol of God's mighty power, the source of God's unending love, the vehicle for God's absolutely amazing grace! Who could know that what seemed to be weakness, was, in fact, the very essence of strength...that what seemed to be failure, was God's greatest success!

When we find ourselves bound in suffering, for grief, or despair, or sickness or sin, our God does what only a living, loving God will do: he empties himself and comes to us as a man of sorrows who is intimately acquainted with grief. He submits to the cross and the death that it brings, so that we need not die in sin, but that we might die in him, through baptism, and be raised in him, to live in the loving presence of God forever.

That which caused the death of one man, is for us a sign of our God above who brings the promise of life to all people. Because Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, you and I are now people of thanksgiving and acquainted with joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.