

**Where Was God?**  
**Matthew 27:45-50**  
**Sermon by Dan Schrock**  
**April 9, 2017**  
**Palm/Passion Sunday**

*<sup>45</sup>From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>46</sup>And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>47</sup>When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." <sup>48</sup>At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. <sup>49</sup>But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." <sup>50</sup>Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. (NRSV)*

I

We whites would like to forget about it. We would like to pretend it never happened. Nevertheless, one of the terrible truths about American history is that from approximately 1880 through 1960, white Americans lynched around 5,000 blacks in this country.<sup>1</sup> Most of the lynched people were men, but about 2% were women.<sup>2</sup> Usually lynching took place in the south—the state of Mississippi had more lynchings than any other state—but whites lynched blacks in almost every state, including New York, Minnesota, California, and our own state of Indiana.<sup>3</sup>

“Lynching” is a word that means killing someone without a legal trial. Lynching happens when a group of powerful people, in this case whites, decide to kill someone who has less power, in this case blacks. Lynching includes a wide range of awful acts such as stabbing, shooting, hanging, burning, whipping, and cutting off fingers, toes, or other body parts. For example, on August 7, 1930, whites in Marion, Indiana, lynched two black teenagers, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. The two teenagers were charged with killing a white man, but before a trial

---

<sup>1</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Cone, 122.

<sup>3</sup> Cone, 8-9.

could take place, a white mob broke into the jail, removed Shipp and Smith, and hanged them.<sup>4</sup>

White people could be remarkably callous about these lynchings. One news report described how whites acted at the lynching of Thomas Brooks in Fayette County, Tennessee, in 1915. Whites regarded the lynching as a kind of holiday:

Hundred of kodaks [cameras] clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of a rope. . . . Picture cards photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling the postcard showing a photograph of the lynched Negro. [White] women and children were there by the score. At a number of country schools the day's routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man.<sup>5</sup>

When we hear stories like this we wonder: where was God when all this happened? While whites were lynching blacks, where was God? When white sheriffs and white judges refused to prosecute the people doing the lynching, where was God? When the wives and children and brothers and sisters of lynched black men wept gallons of tears at the horror of what happened, where was God?

## II

Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the Roman province of Judaea, lynched Jesus. This particular lynching took the form of flogging, mocking, and spitting on Jesus, then finally crucifying him. Moments before he finally died in extreme physical agony, Jesus cried in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have

---

<sup>4</sup> "Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynching\\_of\\_Thomas\\_Shipp\\_and\\_Abram\\_Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynching_of_Thomas_Shipp_and_Abram_Smith), accessed April 5, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Cone, 1.

you forsaken me?” When we take this crucifixion of Jesus deep into ourselves, when we let it affect our minds and hearts and spirits, we might ask: where was God? In Jesus’ intense bodily pain, where was God? In Jesus’ spiritual turmoil of feeling abandoned, where was God?

### III

So far as I know, no one in this congregation has ever been lynched. But some of us have been through periods of great suffering sometime in our life. Or if we ourselves haven’t suffered very much, we might know of other people who’ve experienced intense suffering. In addition to working as a part-time pastor, I also work as a part-time spiritual director. Once in a great while in spiritual direction, I’ve met with a woman who was sexually abused or even raped by men in her own family. From these women I hear the same heart-rending question: where was God when this happened to me?

In other situations we ask this same question. When the plant closed down and I lost my job, where was God? When agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement raided my house and deported my wife, where was God? When Michael Sharp, a 2001 graduate of Bethany Christian Schools, was kidnapped in the Democratic Republic of Congo 4 weeks ago today, where was God?

### IV

One of the biggest questions in Christian faith is asking where God was during experiences of suffering and tragedy. To this big question we can reply with a simple yet profound answer: God was right there in the middle of those awful experiences, sharing the wounds and the pains of those who suffer. Instead of

imagining God as a giant dictator who controls everyone and everything, we can affirm that God is “carrying and bearing everything.”<sup>6</sup>

A number of passages in the Bible speak about God’s ministry of carrying us and holding us. In Exodus 19:4, God says to Israel, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Isaiah 40:11 says that like a shepherd, God will feed the flock of Israel, gathering them in the divine arms and carrying them in the divine bosom. In a burst of praise, Psalm 68:19 cries out, “Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up.” Psalm 28:9 prays that God will carry the people of Israel “forever.”

For God, this is deeply emotional work. God carries us and holds us with a great deal of pathos, with a great deal of emotion. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish scholar of what we call the Old Testament, pointed this out many years ago in his study of the Hebrew prophets. God, said Heschel, is emotionally affected by what happens to us. What we human beings do moves God, affects God, grieves God, or alternatively, makes God glad or pleased. God’s relationship with us is not distant, but deeply personal. God is not far away, but is as near to us as our beating hearts, and when we suffer, God feels enormous compassion for us.<sup>7</sup> God is like a highly sensitive person who notices the most subtle and smallest of details about us—and who empathizes with our struggles.

## V

So back to our question. Where was God when Jesus was crucified? Right there with him on the cross. Where was God in 1955 when Emmett Till, a 14-year-

---

<sup>6</sup> “Rethinking Omnipotence with Jürgen Moltmann,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQvwxOqOk08>, accessed March 24, 2017. See also Moltmann’s *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Fortress, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Pathos and Prophecy,” *Clarion: A Journal of Spirituality and Justice*, July 1, 2008, [http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion\\_journal\\_of\\_spirit/2008/07/pathos-and-prop.html](http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2008/07/pathos-and-prop.html), accessed March 24, 2017. See also Heschel’s *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial, 2001).

old black teenager, was abducted, beaten beyond recognition, shot in the head, and tossed into the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi? God was right there with Emmett, suffering with him but also carrying him with deep tenderness. Where was God when Michael Sharp was killed last month in the Democratic Republic of Congo? Right there beside him and around him and within him.

The story is told about a group of women who survived sexual abuse. One evening these women were meeting in a church basement to share their stories and to support each other in the wake of their trauma. Some of them were Christian and some of them were not. But at that meeting, a few women in the group decided they would attend the church's Passion play. After seeing the Passion play, one of the women said, "This cross story . . . it's the only part of this Christian thing I like. I get it. And it's like [God] gets me. He knows."<sup>8</sup> For this woman on the margin of the church, the thing about Christianity that appealed to her the most was the crucifixion of Jesus.

The good news of the cross is that God carries us no matter what happens to us. God tenderly embraces us with enormous compassion, because God in Jesus knows what it's like to suffer trauma.

---

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Guenther Loewen, "Can the Cross Be 'Good News' for Women? Mennonite Peace Theology and the Suffering of Women," *Anabaptist Witness* 3:2 (December 2016), [http://www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal\\_entry/can-the-cross-be-good-news-for-women/](http://www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal_entry/can-the-cross-be-good-news-for-women/), accessed March 24, 2017.