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Good Friday, Noon
Mark 15:21-39
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He Saved Others; He Cannot Save Himself

I find it appropriate that after this reading we did not hear a solo human voice first, but rather music, the interpretation of Mark's gospel set on the lips of a choir, sung in a foreign tongue few of us fully understand used to communicate a story which is often misunderstood. We are left to listen to beautiful voices, longing voices, mournful voices, singing, "My God, My God, Why Have you Forsaken Me?" It is the darkest moment in all of scripture and makes it difficult to imagine what could be Good about this Friday. Mark is the story-teller today, but even Mark's usually detailed style is short, clipped, given all the ground he covers in less than half a chapter. Perhaps sensing that the full details of the story would be too much for us to take in, Mark narrates the drama in the style of a reporter, fact by fact. They crucified Jesus, the Son of God, between two bandits at 9:00 in the morning. Mark tells us who was there and what they said. Hanging on the cross Jesus is mocked by the crowd of priests, scribes, Roman soldiers, and passers-by. Even the bandits, dying their own grizzly deaths to his left and right, taunted him with what breath they had left.

"He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." In the cruelty of their voices, the taunting crowd articulates what the disciples in the upper room were unable to fully comprehend the night before. In their efforts to humiliate Jesus they proclaim the truth of the Gospel. "He saved others but he cannot save himself." The one hanging from the cross is the Messiah, the king of Israel, the Lord of the Universe, whose power is displayed in weakness and salvation granted through suffering love.

In America, our motto is, "God helps those who help themselves." That's not the case with Jesus on the cross. "He saved others; he cannot save himself." The cross of Jesus Christ is not the cross of self-help. Even as the crowd screams at him, Jesus does not help himself the slightest bit. "He saved others, he cannot save himself." What must be going through Jesus' mind as he listens to the chants and looks down at the crowd from his gruesome perch? Perhaps he is thinking about all the people he has cleansed, healed, saved in the last three years, the lepers, the ones with the unclean spirits, the teeming crowds desperate for wholeness, the crippled, the blind, the bleeding, the poor, the rich, the broken-hearted, his own disciples. Even the dead, Jesus raised the dead, and now he is within hours of his own death. Where among the writhing mass on Calvary's hill are those he saved? Except for a few faithful women off in the distance, the others have fled in fear of their own lives. They have gone to save themselves of course. "He saved others; he cannot save himself."

The scene takes us back to the beginning of Lent. Immediately following his baptism, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. Ravaged by a lack of food and water, he is tempted by Satan to save himself, to turn stones into bread and call upon angels to carry him to safety. Jesus did not save himself then, nor

does he ease the pain and agony of crucifixion now. He willingly endures it. The cross of Jesus Christ is not the cross of self-help. Today when the Roman soldiers nail Jesus to the cross, they crucify once and for all the myth that the gospel is a roadmap to wealth, health, and the fulfillment of the American dream. When the scribes and priests mock the dying Nazarene, they laugh in the face of any false gospel bent towards happiness, success, and self-help manuals.

On this bloody Friday, God makes his home with all who cannot help themselves, the mourning lover in the depths of grief who cannot bear the loneliness for another day, the addict desperate to break free from the bottle's grip, the student pinned to his bed by the darkness of depression, the immigrant risking her life crossing an arid desert. On the cross God makes his home with all of helpless humanity, all of us defenseless in the face of the grave.

Mercifully, Mark spares us the detailed agony of crucifixion; the brutal way the Roman state exerted its power and terrified its populace. Mark doesn't tell us about the whips, the torn flesh, the profuse amounts of blood, the punctured side, the broken legs, the sweat, and the weeping. He leaves the blood and gore to Mel Gibson's Hollywood. Just the facts from reporter Mark today. Jesus was crucified at 9:00 in the morning.

At noon came the darkness and the darkness lasted three hours, and then the air, heavy with impending death, was split by Jesus' final words. After all he had been through in the previous days – the triumphant ride into Jerusalem, the final meal with his closest friends, the loneliness and betrayal in the garden, the mock trial in Pilate's court, and now the exhaustion, the excruciating physical pain of the nails amplified by the murderous torment of the crowds, and the onset of slow, suffocating death – finally Jesus cries out, his first words since the early morning trial eight hours ago. All that had taken place in the last eight hours, all without a word from the cross; up until now, all was silence in the heart of God.

When Jesus opens his mouth, he speaks only one sentence taken directly from Psalm 22, "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?" It is the cry of one who has nothing else to give and nowhere else to turn, who has done all that has been asked of him in the face of loneliness and betrayal. It is the cry of utter abandonment and anguish. It is the deepest cry of God's heart, God's heart now splintered by the nails of suffering love.

This desperate, anguished, gut-level cry, it is the cry of the parents who receive the phone call of their nightmares. It is the cry of the patient diagnosed with stage five cancer. It is the cry of a child, orphaned by a road-side bomb. It is the cry of all humanity, longing for a day when tears and crying and death will be no more. In these last words of Jesus from the cross, God in Christ goes to the very depths of humanity's sadness, abandonment, sin and death. In that moment Jesus gathers up all of humanity's cries in his own breath and nails them to the cross in his own body. And this is why the church insists on calling this Friday, Good. It is the moment when the story turns forever. This cry is sin's last gasp effort to maintain control over the world. It is death in the throws of death, one final fruitless attempt to claim victory over life.

In Flannery O'Connor's short story, *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*, she sketches the character of an escaped convict known as 'The Misfit.' The Misfit is on a crime spree. He accosts a family that is out for a drive and one by one The Misfit takes each of them out into the woods and shoots them. First he kills the father and son, then the little

girl, the mother and the baby. Finally, only the grandmother is left. The grandmother does everything she can to save her life. She first calls upon his sense of Southern chivalry, 'You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?' 'I would hate to have to,' The Misfit replies. She then appeals to what she thinks must be The Misfit's humanity, 'I just know you're a good man,' she tells him. 'No ma'm,' he says, 'I ain't a good man.' Finally, grasping at straws she encourages him to pray to Jesus for help. This makes The Misfit pause for a moment . . . 'Jesus was the only One that ever raise the dead,' says the Misfit, 'and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing to do but throw everything away and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing to do, but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning his house down...no pleasure but meanness,' he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.' 'I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't,' the Misfit said. 'If I had of been there I would have known and I wouldn't be like I am now.'

The story concludes when the grandmother offers him a moment of kindness, she reaches out to him, sensing that he could have been one of her children, and touches him gently on the shoulder. The Misfit recoils like a snake and kills her in response. The Misfit is full of confusion, anger and hatred. The Misfit is the cruel Roman soldiers, the mocking scribes and priests, the deriding passers-by, the fleeing disciples. The Misfit is all of us, all of us who would choose to save ourselves. Yet The Misfit understands what we do not. 'Jesus has thrown everything off balance,' he says. The world is no longer the same. 'If He did what He said, then it's nothing to do but throw everything away and follow Him.'

On Good Friday the Church says boldly and loudly, Jesus was who he said he was and did what he said he did. Jesus Christ, crucified on the cross, God's triumphant victory of sin and death. The salvation for all of us who cannot save ourselves.

Amen.