

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Friday, April 10, 2020
Good Friday

“Refrigerated Trucks Provide New Context for Being ‘Forsaken’”

2020 Community Ecumenical Service for Good Friday

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: Matthew 27:45-49



Last week I watched a haunting video of an African-American man, who pulled-off to the side of a Brooklyn, New York street to record with his phone a forklift loading bodies on to a refrigerated truck.¹ It was a makeshift morgue at the rear of Fort Greene Hospital.



¹ Kevin Duggan, *AM NY*, “Warning: Disturbing Video Shows Brooklyn Hospital Staff Lifting Bodies with Forklift”, April 2, 2020. <https://www.amny.com/coronavirus/warning-disturbing-video-shows-brooklyn-hospital-staff-lifting-bodies-with-forklift/>, accessed on April 9, 2020. Also: brooklynpaper.com

The amateur video also recorded the man's commentary that has been burned into my consciousness. The man's real-time alarm sent chills down my spine more than any reporting I had heard from any newscaster or politician: "This is for real, ya'll. This is for real. Family, you take this thing [the virus] seriously. Please stay inside. This is for real, ya'll. This is for real. Ya'll not taking this thing serious, this may make you want to take it serious, O.K.? This is for real, ya'll."

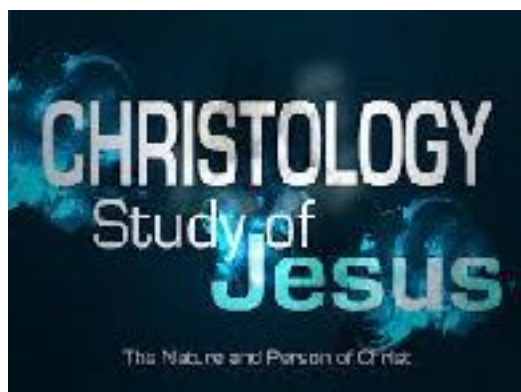


What troubles me about the refrigerated trucks is, one, the tragic lives lost. Yet, what also haunts me is that the nature of this pandemic has caused most of those who die to die alone. I dare say, most people, perhaps many of you listening, fear dying alone even more than death itself. What I find especially cruel about this pandemic is that most of those loaded on to refrigerated trucks are unable to say goodbye to their parents, children, spouses, and friends. The great wound of this pandemic is that so many are dying alone and thus may feel forsaken. 'Forsaken-ness' causes great emotional anguish on both sides of the hospital doors.



As a minister whose favorite vocational responsibility is home and hospital visitations, the prohibitions placed on me from visiting friends and parishioners is agonizing. My 101 year-old neighbour, who until recently I saw almost every day, is quarantined at Pine Heights. Another is at Brattleboro Memorial Hospital; and another is at Dartmouth-Hitchcock's Cheshire Hospital in Keene. I pray they are lucid enough to know that I and others have not forsaken them! I would dearly love to visit them! How much more so if it was my parents, my children, my sister, or my partner, Stephanie, that was ill.

The refrigeration trucks bring to us a new lens to imagine Jesus' sense of 'forsaken-ness' on the cross.

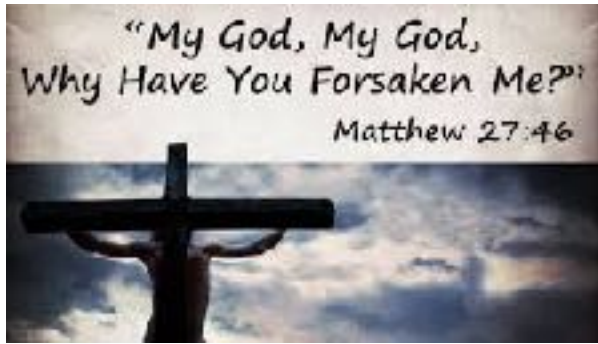


If we have, what is referred to scholars as, a ‘low Christology’, that is, we emphasize Jesus’ humanity, we have little difficulty contemplating Jesus’ *physical* anguish. For example if we acknowledge Jesus’ human-nature, we have little qualms with Jesus crying-out “I thirst”. However if we have what is referred to as a ‘high Christology’, wherein we emphasize Jesus’ divinity, we become very very uneasy with Jesus expressing *spiritual* anguish - that of being forsaken by God.



First of all and most obviously, and despite the concept of the Trinity, Jesus’ abandonment signals that there is one who is forsaken, Jesus, and one who forsakes, God, and thus they are two very different beings. But more subtly and perhaps more importantly, Jesus’ anguish caused by abandonment signals that he sensed a break, a rupture, in his relationship with God. This revelation is deeply troubling for *all* of us - whether we have a low or a high christology!

My task here is not discern and explicate the mysteries of the Trinity and the nature of Jesus the Christ. Rather, I hope to interpret the scriptures through the new hermeneutical lens of COVID-19.



What seems key to me is that when Jesus uttered those immortal words, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46) he had been on the cross from noon to three in the afternoon, three hours! Those of us with a ‘low’ Christology and thus emphasize Jesus’ humanity will rightly point-out that torture, fatigue, dehydration, and blood loss would weaken any human body sufficiently to decrease lucidity. And those of us with a ‘high’ christology and thus emphasize Jesus’ divinity will rightly realize that the body affects the mind and spirit. Thus, it is very reasonable for even the Son of God to have a body sufficiently weakened by the crucifixion to diminish the lucidity of the mind and spirit.



The tragedy of this pandemic is that many of those who are hospitalized may be too old or too sick to rationally understand that

which they would otherwise understand intellectually - that they are *not* forsaken by God, just as Jesus was *not* forsaken by God.



This Good Friday, let us pray that all those whose bodies, minds, and spirits are weakened by the virus may sense that they are not forsaken by us nor by God (Hebrews 13:5). May the Holy Spirit, whose means we do not understand, provide comfort and assurance if people feel forsaken during their illness.



This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.