

Good Friday

And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah'
Matthew 27:48

The crucifixion story is crowded with characters. Pilate and Pilate's wife and Herod. Peter. The soldiers who strip Jesus and spit on him and strike him., Simon, who is compelled to carry the crossbeam. The bandits. The centurion. The women. Joseph. All these are specified. Some of them are named.

And then there are the bystanders. Bystanders. Who are the bystanders?

The crucifixion story includes perpetrators: Pilate and Herod and the soldiers. It includes witnesses: the women; and commentators: the bandits. And it includes comforters, agents of compassion, inadvertent as they may be: Simon and Joseph. And then there are the bystanders. Who are they? And who are we?

Where do we fit into the story when cruelty, evil, and injustice are on full display, out in the open, demanding action or reaction? Where do we fit when oppression and exclusion are more subtle, where we can perhaps avoid, ignore, or deny their presence in our lives?

Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but here was none, ; and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink. (Psalm 69:20)

How do we act, or react, in the face of wrongdoing, when we see another person treated unjustly, harmed, or simply overlooked? What is our response to injustice visible?

Do we freeze, paralyzed with uncertainty? Do we look around to see where we can point the finger at someone else, as Pilate and Herod do? Diffusing responsibility can be a helpful strategy for getting us off the hook.

When we stand by silently, what are we afraid of? If we were to intervene to protest wrongdoing, what would happen? Do we fear loss of respect or status? Loss of ease, loss of companionship? Do we fear the silent disapproval of others, or worse – might we ourselves be ostracized?

None of us will ever, I hope, stand by at a crucifixion. The moments in which our nerve and integrity fail can be trivial events: a sexist joke, a casual racist remark, a mean-spirited bit of back-biting or slander. When stakes the are small, our failures of compassion are all the more indefensible.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

How vulnerable will we make ourselves if we don't simply *bystand*, but *take* a stand? Do we dare to take the risk? Do we dare to move? Can we chance becoming a witness, someone who *stands up for* ?

The crucifixion story is crowded with characters. It was, 2000 years ago. It is today. Where do we stand in it? Are we the perpetrators? The bystanders? The witnesses? What is our role? Silence? And are we stuck in it? Or can our hearts be moved, and can our hearts move us? Can we speak out? Can we protest?

Martin Luther King said, *Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.*

Amen.