

The First and Franklin St. Presbyterian Church
 Baltimore, MD
 April 22, 2011

Alison Halsey
 Matthew 27:29-50
 Good Friday

My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me

His story was found in Monday's *Washington Post*. The headline read, "Clay W. Hunt, 28, Iraq Veteran tried to help troops haunted by war experiences." Under the large smiling photo of this young Marine in uniform were two long columns of print which told a very different story.

It told of a soldier who had lost four friends in battle in Iraq and Afghanistan and was now haunted by the memories of them and the trauma he experienced. The article quoted him as saying that when his first bunk mate was killed in action he began sleeping in his bunk to "be closer to him." And then a month later when another one of his patrol mates was shot by a sniper in the throat right before his eyes, he told his family that the image of his body being loaded into a helicopter and flown away came back to haunt him at night when he closed his eyes to sleep.

Upon being discharged this amazing Marine sought to help others. He volunteered to help quake victims in Haiti and Chile, he appeared in a television-public service announcement endorsing and promoting mental health for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, he testified before Congress for veteran's rights, and participated in events which supported a charity for wounded veterans. The paper stated, "He was by many accounts a model for helping other service members overcome the invisible wounds of war."

Only the depth of his own pain was too great. On March 31 in his apartment in Sugar Land, Texas he took his gun and put an end to his own life of suffering. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

If any one of Jesus's last words from the cross stay with us, it is this one. It obviously haunted the writers of the gospels because it is recorded by both Mark and Matthew. We too, have heard and seen and felt the agony of this day. We have seen the whip fly, we have heard the pounding of the nails, we have winced as the crown of thorns was jammed on his head and as the spear pierced his side, and we have quickly cast our eyes downward so as not to see Jesus hung on that cross. Our hearts also know there was more than just the physical pain. There was the betrayal of his closest friends, who took a nap when he needed them, sold him to the authorities, hid in fear, or said "I don't know the man." In addition to the nails in his hands - he felt the nails in his heart. The worst however, was the silence of the one Jesus called "Abba". We long for God to come down and put an end to this, or at least utter a single reassuring word which might have made all the pain at least somewhat bearable or give it some validation. There is no word, no sound but the voice of a man dying in agony shouting his last question into the wind, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

While this cry of dereliction from the mouth of Jesus "causes us to tremble" it also brings us comfort because it resonates with us when our spirits plummet into the depths of despair. Most of us, if not all of us have been there; a close friend or family member dies, a spouse leaves us saying they never loved us anyway, a doctor gives us the prognosis we least wanted to hear, our dream job suddenly dissolves, our bodies turn against us, the world's problems seem overwhelming, or our hope is suddenly lost and we begin to feel our faith start to collapse. Despite what we have been taught in Sunday school or have heard preached in our churches, we hear the words coming up from the inner most depths of our being; "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, who had a first-hand experience of the atrocities of World War II, asked the question again and again, "Where is God?" Out of this he wrote his book, *The Crucified God* in which he explored the question; "Is God the transcendent and untouched stage manager of the theater of this

violent world, or is God in Christ the central engaged figure of the world's tragedy?" He concluded that the central affirmation of the Christian faith is that through Christ, God enters human suffering, experiences human suffering, and weeps and mourns with and by us. By Christ's crucifixion, God even experienced God-forsakenness in Christ's anguished cry and came to know first-hand the searing human emotion of grief at the loss of his beloved only son. It is inadequate to say, he wrote; that Jesus Christ died only for sinners. He also died for all those who suffer or who will suffer - he died for all of us.

The cross upon which he died which we use as a symbol of our faith is not only about human sin and forgiveness but also about the love of God which came down to us, lived among us, struggled and cried, experienced human pain and wondered where God was in the midst of suffering.

Gary Willis tells a story about his young son waking up with a violent nightmare one night. When he asked him what was troubling him, he said that the teacher in his school had told the children that they'd end up in hell if they sinned. He asked me, "Am I going to hell?" "There is not an ounce of heroism in my nature," Willis says, "but I instantly answered what any father would; "All I can say is that if you're going there, I'm going with you." Now if I felt that way about my son, God obviously loves him a whole lot more than me. He concludes, "Perhaps [the cross] is God's way of saying that no matter the horror we face or hells we descend to, he is coming with us."