

illus: From 1923-1939, Lou Gehrig played professional baseball for the New York Yankees. He was an All-Star seven consecutive times, an American League MVP twice, and a member of six World Series champion teams. His career batting average was .340, he hit 493 home runs, and finished his career with nearly 2000 RBI's. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939 and was the first player in league history to have his number retired. Gehrig was well-known for both his hitting and his durability; his durability earned him a nickname: "**the Iron Horse.**"

But Gehrig is remembered for more than just his career. Two years after retiring from baseball, the "Iron Horse" died of a rare neurological condition called A.L.S; it's sometimes referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease. A.L.S progressively destroys the motor function of the central nervous system, stealing a person's ability to control their own body. In time, the body becomes a prison of sorts; the mind remains sharp to the end, but the body can no longer follow the mind's impulses to move.

A few years ago one of our own congregants was diagnosed with A.L.S; shock and disbelief quickly followed. *How can this be? I'm an avid musician and tennis player; you mean to say I will lose my ability to play?* Shock and disbelief were followed by courage; *I'm going to fight this, I'm going to pray for a miracle.* Near the end, he came to the place of resignation—*this disease has got the better of me; Game, Set, Match.*

During this time, my wife had the privilege of being his nurse and I had the privilege of being his pastor. I would sit with him, listen to him, pray for him. Along the way, he asked a question that all of us ask in the midst of suffering: *"My God, my God, why?"*

A flower doesn't ask "why" it blooms or fades; a tree doesn't question why it's struck by lightning; a gazelle doesn't wonder why it's pursued by the lioness; this "why" question is particular to humanity. *Why this and not that? Why me and not you? Why now and not later?*

We ask "why" for many reasons. At times our asking is purely preventive; in discovering the "why" behind something unpleasant, we seek to avoid it in the future. Often we ask "why" because our situation feels "unfair," or, we are struggling to find meaning and purpose in our pain.

When do you ask why? Perhaps you applied for a job and heard a resounding "no;" maybe you tried out for a school team, band, or choir but didn't make the cut. We want to know *why?*

Some of you work, or have worked, for a large corporation and you've experienced a major down-sizing. Perhaps you've been told that your job has become "redundant." To be redundant is to be unnecessary. And while we may have been told that our job has become unnecessary, what we

hear is that we are unnecessary. *Why is this happening to me?*

Perhaps you had a group of friends that decided to "move on," and their new circle didn't include you. Perhaps your parents are consumed with their work and you feel neglected. Perhaps your spouse told you that they no longer love you. *Why this? Why now? Why me?*

"Why?" is a bottomless pit, a wild-goose-chase. Knowing the answer to our "why" question rarely satisfies; it still leaves us cold, confused, and in pain.

As we remember the death of Jesus, we pause to consider the question "why?" And not simply, "why did Jesus die?" We listen once again to the question Jesus asked from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Let's turn our attention to the crucifixion account in Mark 15, beginning in vs. 22.

22 They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). **23** Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. **24** And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. **25** It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. **26** The written notice of the charge against him read: the king of the jews.

27 They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left...the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! **32** Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."

33 At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. **34** And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?")...**37** With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last."

Have you ever wondered why Jesus asked "why?" Jesus knew what would happen and why. He knew in advance that He would be betrayed by one of His disciples and abandoned by the rest.

Jesus also knew that He would bear the weight of humanity's sin, and, the fullness of God's righteous judgement as a consequence. God is not vindictive or arbitrary; His judgement fell on sin because sin has ravaged this world and all who live in it.

Cognitively, Jesus understood all of this, but affectively, His heart still cried out within Him—the burden of sin and the sense of abandonment was more than He could bear.

The clearest picture of Jesus' relationship with God Father and God the Holy Spirit came at His baptism. We're told that when Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, and Father spoke saying: *This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.*¹

But at the cross, in His humanity, for the first time, Jesus experienced a sense of abandonment. *My God, my God, why?* And the question Jesus asked is a direct quote from a psalm that King David wrote—Psalm 22.

"1 My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?...7 All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. 8 'He trusts in the Lord,' they say, 'let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.'"

"14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. 15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. 16 Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. 17 All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. 18 They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

19 But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me."

What's interesting is that there is no recorded event in David's life that matches many of the specific details of Psalm 22. Yes, David endured hostility and threat, but his hands and feet were never pierced, his bones were never on display; we've no record of a time when people gambled over David's clothes. And yet each of these details describe the experience of Jesus as He hung on the cross.

My God, my God, why? We can read Jesus' "why" as a complaint, or, as an act of faith—maybe it's both? When Jesus felt abandoned, **in an act of radical faith**, He cried out to the One He could no longer see, hear, or perceive. In the moment of darkest terror, Jesus cried out to the One He knew and loved—His Father—to the One who knew and loved Him.

Even on the cross, Jesus is our Teacher; when we feel God's absence, in faith we cry out to the One we cannot see, hear, or perceive. But though we can't see Him, He sees us. Though we can't hear Him, He hears us.

"Why?" is the cry of anguish and despair. The good news of Good Friday is that Jesus has taken up this cry and prayed it on our behalf. Jesus knows what it is to be

¹ Matthew 3:17.

misunderstood, betrayed, rejected, and abandoned; there is no suffering that He does not understand.

In Jesus we find the One who is both fully God and fully human. Hebrews 1:3 describes Jesus as the reflection of God's glory, and, the exact representation of His being. Jesus' words, being, and action reflect the words, being, and action of God.

By becoming human, God the Son became the representative human being, a substitute if you like, standing in for us. Jesus didn't live a privileged, pain-free, human life because none of us do; He stepped right into our broken human experience.

The Bible affirms something that we already know from personal experience: **sin builds barriers**. In our non-religious culture, we don't use the language of "sin" anymore; people insist that there is no universal right or wrong. And yet, with or without this language of sin, the wrongs we have done, and the wrong done to us build barriers between us and others; sin also builds barriers between us and God.

Eugene Peterson, reflecting on Romans 3:23, wrote the following:

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Romans 3:23-24.

"Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners...and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ."²

The barrier that sin builds is too high to climb over, too deep to burrow under, too long to go around, and too thick to break through. And so, God did for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. Jesus took our sin and shame upon Himself, that we might have an open door to God.

2 Corinthians 8:9 says that Jesus became poor, that we might become rich. Jesus was rejected that we might be accepted. He entered into our forsakenness, and in so doing, He made a way for us to be forgiven and embraced by God.

Paul Stevenson writes, "The cross represents the culmination of the incarnation—of God with us: on the cross we see divinity fully united with humanity... Therefore nothing that can happen to us—no pain, no humiliation, no journey even into the valley of the shadow of death—can 'separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'. The Incarnation shows us that in Christ, God is with us. The

cross shows that in Christ, God is with us, no matter what. Even when we doubt or disbelieve or think ourselves completely cut off from God, Christ has been there before us.”

The Lord's Supper: This morning we come to the Lord's Table profoundly aware that the world, and our experience of it, falls short of God's purposes. God grieves over what's been broken, He laments what's been lost, He weeps over the pain we experience.

But God has not simply been reduced to tears, as though He is empathetic but unable to help. No! He has acted decisively through Christ to rescue, reconcile, and restore. No pain, no humiliation, no journey even into the valley of the shadow of death—can separate us from the love of God that is for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Isaiah writes, *“Surely He took up our pain and bore our suffering; He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”*³

When we suffer pain, when we feel abandoned by God, we continue to ask *“why?”*, but even in our asking—in faith—we cry out to the One we cannot see, hear, or perceive.

Though we can't see Him, He sees us. Though we can't hear Him, He hears us.

In a few moments, we will partake of the bread and cup together, and even as we partake this morning we pray with David, *“Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me.”*

Worship/Prayer Response: At this time I would like to invite the worship team to come and join me on stage. The team is going to play a song for us, and as they play, I'm going to lead you in a prayer exercise.

I want to invite you to lay before the Father any sense of forsakenness you have been carrying. Perhaps you have felt abandoned by others—friends and family; perhaps you have felt abandoned by God. It might be a recent experience; it might be something that happened a long time ago that you haven't recovered from. I'm going to give you a moment to call to mind any forsakenness you've been experiencing.

Can I ask you to hold it out to the Father?

Ask Jesus to come to you in His strength, in His mercy, with His power to heal.

³ Isaiah 53:4-5.

Do you sense the Spirit saying anything to you? A word of comfort and encouragement? A word of healing? If you are hearing a word of judgement and condemnation, it is not from God; He loves you with an everlasting love.

Is the Spirit asking you to respond in a specific way? Is there something He is asking you to let go of? Is there something He wants you to receive?

The Lord's Supper, the Holy Meal of the Church, allows us the opportunity to commune with the Lord Jesus.

*"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' **25** In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' **26** For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*⁴

The body of Christ was broken for you. The blood of Christ was shed for you. Let us partake together.

Song of Response

Invitation to Prayer Ministry/Benediction

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

In just a moment I will speak a final word of blessing, but first, I want to invite you to join us after the service in our virtual foyer. If you go to our website, nsac.bc.ca, and go to the Events page, you will see a link to the virtual foyer. And if you would like someone to pray with you this morning, when you join the virtual foyer, let the host pastor know and he/she will send you into a private Zoom room. After the 9 am service, David and Daye Kramer will be praying with you; after the 11 am service, Dugald and Linda Jamieson will be praying with you.