

“In Our Own Tongue”

“At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, *‘Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?’* which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Even though she was born and raised in Denmark, my grandmother would rarely speak Danish. It was spoken so infrequently in her home that my father and his siblings knew only a few Danish phrases, and my generation knows little of the Danish language or Danish customs. When they immigrated to North America, my grandparents were determined to only speak English among the family, which is why it was always a special occasion when my grandmother spoke in her native tongue. It usually happened only on two occasions: when she was reading a letter from our family in Denmark (which she would translate into English), and when she needed to express something so deeply personal that no words or phrases outside of the Danish language would suffice. When she needed to share something that she felt deeply, the only adequate words my grandmother could use were in the language with which she had been born and raised.

Even if we have learned other languages, there are circumstances in which the only words that can express deeply-felt thoughts or emotions are those that we first learned as children. We acquire these language skills at an early age, when they are embedded into our brains in such a fashion that they become a critical part of our inner being, the language that we not only speak but the one that goes through our thought processes. We may become fluent in other languages, but our native tongue is the one that will always be central in our thoughts and words, and will contain the only words that times can adequately express what we need to communicate from the very center of our being.

In most of our English Bibles, the words of Jesus are presented in translation. It is very rare that we hear our Lord speaking in Aramaic, his native tongue. At times, he addresses God the Father with the familiar *abba*, the equivalent of a child addressing a parent as “daddy.” On one occasion, he raises the daughter of Jairus from the dead with the words *“Talitha cum,”* which means, *‘Little girl, get up!’* (Mark 5:41). But in most of our Bibles, the words of Jesus are presented in our language, in words that we easily hear and understand, as the apostles were given the gift to speak in various languages so that on the day of Pentecost the people gathered in Jerusalem rejoiced that *“in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”* (Acts 2:11).

One other occasion where Jesus is heard speaking in his native language is in Mark’s account of the crucifixion, when *“at three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”* (15:34). This fourth of the Seven Words of Jesus on the Cross is often called the Word of Anguish or the Word of Despair, as Jesus cries out to God in the midst of his suffering. As his life is coming to an agonizing end, Jesus’ words are understandable, calling out to God to come to his rescue at the hour of deepest need. His cry of despair is one of many anguished voices that were undoubtedly heard that day on Golgotha, the “place of the skull” that was the Roman killing grounds, the place where they put their condemned prisoners to death in order to both execute them in the most brutal fashion imaginable and to warn others not to challenge the authority of the Empire, lest they suffer the same fate.

In offering us Jesus’ own words in his native tongue, Mark invites us to stand at the foot of the Cross on that first Good Friday so that we might hear Jesus crying out in words that are so deep, from the very heart of his being, that no other words can fully express his emotions at that moment. But in hearing Jesus crying out in his own language, we may also recognize that these words distinguish our Lord from others whose lives are also being taken from them by their Roman executioners. While he joins with those who cry out in the midst of their unspeakable suffering, the words that issue from his tongue are

not words of hopelessness, but words that both cry out against God's apparent indifference to his plight as well as the hope that even now God has not forsaken Jesus but will vindicate him in the presence of his enemies. The words we hear Jesus speaking in his native tongue are the words of Psalm 22, a psalm of lament, the words the people of God were given to express their deepest emotion, to cry out in suffering and anguish, to bring "everything to God in prayer" – not only their praise and thanksgiving, but also their cries and even complaints. God gives his people words to express what nothing else could adequately communicate:

- "In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever. Yet you have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies. You made us turn back from our foe, and our enemies have gotten spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations." – Psalm 44:8-11.
- "In the LORD I take refuge; how can you say to me, 'Flee like a bird to the mountains; for look, the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted their arrow to the string, to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?'" – Psalm 11:1-3.
- "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my own groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." – Psalm 22:1-2.

In this cry of lament spoken in his native tongue, Jesus is not depicted as a heroic martyr with his eyes firmly focused on heaven (as Stephen is depicted in Acts: *"But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."* – 7:55). Instead, Jesus has identified completely with the suffering righteous of the lament psalms, who cry out against God's apparent indifference to their plight. His cries echo those whose laments were also uttered as they felt their very life draining out of them: *"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death."* (Psalm 22:14-15).

But as deeply anguished are the words the Jesus cries out from the Cross, they must not be interpreted as words of hopelessness and futility; even as his life is being destroyed, his faith has not been destroyed. The words of laments that Jesus speaks in his native tongue are words that were spoken in the same language of Jesus' people in times of loss and despair, but they were words that were spoken to the God in whom they placed their trust in life's most dire circumstances:

- "What calls for chief mention here would be the consolation which was given to the men praying, after they had recited their prayer of lament... the 'change of mood' in a number of the psalms of lamentation is to be derived from the comfort which the suppliant received. He had heard the 'fear not,' and then the assurance that Jahweh would not forsake him, but would be with him and be his helper. [These words] thus directed these men to hold fast to Jahweh and hope in him." – Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*.

The psalmist who cries out in the depth of despair trusts that God continues to hear the cries of God's people, and that all God's people may therefore *"hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem."* (Psalm 130:7). Even when *"the thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me,"* God's people have an unfailing source of hope when *"this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."* (Lamentations 3:19-23). The words that Jesus cries out from the Cross are the lamentations of his people who also cried out in the midst of their anguish, but who also trusted that the Lord *"did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."* (Psalm 22:24).

- "The desperate suffering and anguished abandonment of the first half [of the psalm] becomes in the second half a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance and vindication. The two parts combine

to create a psalm of pain and deliverance, of a righteous sufferer crying out and then being vindicated by God.” – Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*.

In hearing his cries of anguish in his native tongue, we witness our Lord who entered fully into human existence and suffered alongside all of those on Golgotha who had been condemned by the forces of the Empire, the “kingdom of this world” that stands in opposition to God and seeks to destroy the one who has come to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. But Jesus does choose these words randomly or out of a moment of understandable feeling of abandonment; he expresses what God’s people have been uttering in their native languages for generations, experiences of suffering and alienation that will be overcome by Jesus through his participation in these same sufferings that will be transformed from methods meant to destroy to a means of salvation and liberation from pain and alienation:

- “Israel’s hardest burden was probably that God had hidden himself so completely from the despairing man who had trusted in his mercy. Yet in the Gospels these utterances of suffering, especially those in Psalm 22, accompany Jesus’ path right up to his death on the cross. In all four Gospels the descriptions of the passion are meant to show that these words of prayer about the abandonment of the righteous only reached fulfillment in the sufferings of Christ. So completely had he stripped himself of his glory that he could enter straight away into these sufferers’ words, so that they expressed his own suffering.” – Gerhard von Rad.

In crying out in his native tongue in the midst of his anguish and abandonment, Jesus expresses what we often feel, emotions that we struggle to find the words to adequately express. There may be circumstances in which we find ourselves suffering physically, mentally, or spiritually; places and events when we are lost or alone; times when God appears to be very far away and unable to hear our cries. In Jesus’ voice, we hear our own voices calling out to the God who we may feel has forsaken us; but we also hear the voice of the one whose death and resurrection are our hope that we are not alone, that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, and that the Cross that was intended to be Jesus’ destruction was transformed into the means through which our Saviour fulfilled God’s will in defeated all the forces that seek our destruction:

- “He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to God, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true.” – *Small Catechism*.

As Jesus speaks in his native tongue, we are given the words to express all of our thoughts and emotions – our joys and sorrows, and thanksgivings and supplications, our shouts of victory and our cries of anguish – through the “native tongue” of all God’s people: God’s holy word. It is not by accident that at Holy Baptism we charge parents and sponsors to bring their children “*to the word of God and the holy supper, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer*”; it is so that as they learn the language that will give them the words to express their innermost thoughts and feelings, they may also have the Word of life that will give them the ability to trust and hope in the Lord as well as the language to bring everything to God in prayer, “*so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.*”

- “The soul can do without anything but the word of God; and apart from the word it has no means of help. When it has the word, however, it has no need of anything else. In short, it possesses food, joy, peace, light, ability, righteousness, truth, wisdom, freedom, and sufficient to overflowing of everything good.” – Martin Luther.

While my grandmother was always able to communicate very well with all of us who never learned Danish, it was the language she learned from her parents that gave her the ability to express thoughts

and emotions when no other words could suffice. As Jesus cries out in his native language on the Cross, our Lord who is the very Word of God that became flesh and lives among us full of grace and truth blesses us with the Word that is the Word of life, the Word that is our source of hope, the Word that assures us that there is light and life even when we are in the midst of darkness and the shadow of death, the Word that will always be *“a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* (Psalm 119:105). As we have been given these words by those who first shared the language of faith with us, may we also share this Word with our children, so that it may become their native tongue that may offer them hope in their lives as it becomes our common language through which we hear God’s deeds of love and is the means through which with one voice we sing *“my great Redeemer’s praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!”* Amen.