

The tragedy of the crucifixion can unsettle us because of its increasing layers of horror. The first layer is the power of Jesus' enemies. They humiliated him, tortured him, and brutally killed him. Human nature at its worst we know all too well from the daily news; hatred, vengeance, and murder seem commonplace, so common they can take root in our relationships. We all know the horror of enemies at play.

The second layer of horror runs deeper. The friends of Jesus add to the tragedy. When Jesus was arrested, they fled; when people discovered them, they denied him; when he died on the cross, they hid. Enemies will act like enemies, but we expect more from friends. Still, we can understand it, because we've been there, done that too.

But the third layer of horror is so awful that looking at it repulses us. Not just his enemies, not just his friends, but even God abandons Jesus. The passion offers two different images of God: the God who's in control and the God who's nowhere to be found. The God in control had all this planned; it simply fulfills the Scriptures of long ago. But on the cross a terror-stricken Jesus questions a God who's nowhere to be found. Why if God planned this is there so much evil? Why if God planned this does he not comfort the one who cries, "My God, why have you abandoned me?"

Jesus had physical suffering, but he also had spiritual suffering. He knew how frustrated we get with God, what it's like to face a crisis and wonder "OK, God, where are you?" Of course the story isn't over. You have to come back next Sunday to hear the happy ending. But Palm Sunday itself affords little comfort. It assures us that Jesus suffered as we do in every way, but it does not sugarcoat. There are painful times when we don't know the reason why. We are trapped between our faith in the God who has a plan and our experience of a God who's nowhere to be found. The best we can do is hope that this God still has a few tricks up the sleeve.