

Psalm 22:1-15

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
³Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
⁴In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
⁵To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
⁶But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
⁷All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
⁸"Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver —
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"
⁹Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
¹⁰On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
¹¹Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
¹²Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
¹³they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
¹⁴I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
¹⁵my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

Why Me?

October 14, 2018

The lectionary readings for October this year have been in the book of Job as well as some of the psalms of lament and when I read them I am immediately drawn to these laments because it seems that we have been going through so much trauma as a people, not only with our national and social discord but with one hurricane after another devastating the lives of so many innocent folks, that a song of lament seems like an honest response right now. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And I'm guessing there are a lot of people who have been feeling forsaken and may perhaps even be angry at God. These are hard things to talk about and while I don't have all, or maybe, any answers to what to do when God seems far away, I invite you into this dialog knowing full well that we will only scratch the surface today.

Suffice it to say I have more questions than answers right now, but that's ok. This sermon may be a lament as well.

Like small children, we ask the 'why' question often don't we? We seem to have a need to know why things happen the way they do and are frustrated when we don't get a convincing and logical answer. That makes the life of faith, which is more mystery than fact, difficult and challenging for us. But I find solace in the readings today simply because they remind me that even Job, David, and Jesus struggled as well. That they clung to hope in the God of their birth and life, even as they endured the same struggles we share.

I remember one morning a few years ago, I was sitting with my mother as we shared coffee and read our daily devotions. My step-father was in the rehab center and life had been topsy-turvy for several months and things were not looking very good for the future. My mother was worried and stressed out. Decisions needed to be made. The costs were adding up. She was feeling very helpless and alone. She turned to me with tears in her eyes and asked, "Why me? I've prayed and prayed to God for help and things just seem worse. Is God even listening? What else am I supposed to do?"

I found myself feeling a little helpless and teary-eyed myself, and then I shared with her Psalm 22 that we read this morning. It is a psalm attributed to King David but is also the psalm that Jesus uttered in the Gospel of Mark as he was dying on the cross. I told her even Jesus felt overwhelmed and helpless at times and he didn't hold back letting God know about it. I believe that God can handle our anger and that we shouldn't try to hide our feelings or pretend that we are 'happy' because that's what Christians do. Faith and Hope are deeper than that. I don't know if that helped at all but I am often comforted that Jesus was so human and honest with his feelings when life had turned to tragedy. And in the story of Job, we get some of the same. He too, let his true feelings be known to God who seems to be silent and far away. And even though Job did everything right according to the customs and practices of his religious beliefs, still he suffers. He wonders where God has gone. He turns to the right and left; he turns forward and backward and...nothing. His heart is faint and terrified and would like to just pull the covers over his head and never get up again. Ever have moments like that?

I know others who wonder the same thing as my mother. We did all the right things. We went to church. We gave our lives to Jesus. We worshiped and served. We gave our tithe. We served on the session and other committees of the church. We loved our neighbors as we were supposed to. So why is my life falling apart? Why is my health failing? Why is my child in trouble with the law? Why is my spouse leaving me? Why did my father have a stroke and die? Why did the bridge collapse and the rain wash those people away? Why are people so hateful to one another? Why did that hurricane hit *my* town? Why? Why? Why? Why? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And why are you so silent?

I read a story of a woman who came to see her pastor on her lunch break. She was nicely dressed, dignified, in her late-thirties, whose face revealed a mixture of indignation and great sadness. There was another woman in her Sunday school class, a teacher, who was always talking about how wonderful it was to walk and talk with Jesus.

She would tell how everything she asked Jesus for she received. She prayed that her blueberry muffins would be perfect and they always were. Jesus, she would say, is wonderful to have around. She told of rushing somewhere to do the Lord's work and she would say, "Lord you know that I am coming down here to do your work and I am running late so I need a parking space and always someone would be pulling out of the space at exactly the right time." Jesus was so good to have around, she would say!

But the woman who had come in on her lunch hour did not know whether to be angry at God or crushed because God never answered her prayers. She admitted she had never pestered God for tasty muffins or parking

spaces, but for ten years she had been praying for just one thing, a baby - she and her husband wanted a baby. She wondered about this strange kind of God who was always there for the silly requests of one person but who was never around for the really serious deeply-felt requests of another.” For what it is worth, I would wonder too.

My neighbor and I were talking about the weather one day and he casually said, “We really dodged a bullet with the rain last week, didn’t we? God is so good.” I looked at him and smiling said, “Yes, but he wasn’t so good to those people in South Carolina, or Wilmington, was he?” We both shook our heads and laughed that that was probably not very good theology. God doesn’t really work that way. God doesn’t send bad weather on those sinners along the coast, all the while thinking, “Hey, those folks up in the mountains have been pretty good so I’ll just give them a few inches of rain.” God doesn’t really manage the weather even if we like to attribute that phenomenon to the divine.

Yet we believe that God does control all the elements of our lives and the shape and course of history don’t we? That understanding is certainly one that was shared in the Old Testament. That God was bringing about the rise and fall of the people and nations. That God leads his people through the course of their lives as a nation and as individuals. That God would rescue and restore, chasten and destroy, break them down and put them back together again.

This is how some people think about God’s movement in the world. I often hear people respond to tragedies in the lives of others by saying things like, “It was God’s will or Jesus was just lonely in heaven and he needed your little daughter.” “They deserved this because of the sins they committed or because their ancestors made a deal with the devil.” “You got cancer so your faith could be tested.” Or the other side which gives God all the credit for their blessings. And I’m not saying we shouldn’t be thankful for all the things in our lives but my theological red flags go up when I hear people suggest that, “God gave them a raise or a parking spot, or I narrowly missed hitting that oncoming car while I was texting, or Thanks be to God, I’ve lost 10 pounds.”

I don’t find these to be helpful responses and I just don’t know if that is the right way to think about God. Because as soon as I think about God as the one who saves me or blesses me, I am faced with so many in the world who feel abandoned or who are facing tragedy. Where was God for them? God loves all his creation so why do some find themselves feeling unloved and unprotected from the ravages of life?

How do I reconcile the tragedies and suffering of life with my need for a loving God? How do I help my brother who lost his young son a few years ago to understand that God didn’t cause that to happen, but that God was somehow present? I honestly struggle with this and I hope you do too. I find no comfort in a theology that makes God the cause of hardship or tragedy in the lives of his children. And yet, I believe that God is present in all these things. That there is always a reason to hold on to hope. That the Holy is always present if you have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Presbyterian minister and writer, Frederick Buechner, whose father committed suicide when he was a child, shared these thoughts about God being present in those moments. He said, “As I understand it, to say that God is mightily present even in such private events as these does not mean that he makes events happen to us which move us in certain directions like chessmen. Instead, events happen under their own steam as random as rain, which means that God is present in them not as their cause, but as the one who even in the hardest and most hair-raising of them offers us the possibility of that new life and healing which I believe is what salvation is.

As I see it, in other words, God acts in history and in your and my brief histories not as the puppeteer who sets the scene and works the strings but rather as the great director who no matter what role fate casts us in conveys to us somehow from the wings, if we have eyes, ears, hearts open and sometimes even if we don’t, how we can

play those roles in a way to enrich and ennoble and hallow the whole vast drama of things including our own small but crucial parts in it.”

God is mightily present is what he said, and for me, that is the rock to which I cling each and every day. That no matter what the circumstances I am assured that God is present in my daily living and that gives me great comfort, hope, and often courage to move forward knowing that everything will be all right. It may not be fun, it may not be all I thought I should get out of this life, it may not be the way the world says it should be, it may not even be entirely safe, but I believe it will be all right. And I believe that because we are not in this alone.

And Paul affirms this when he says in Hebrews chapter 4, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and, find grace to help in time of need.”

And where that grace and help comes from is not only from God, but you and me, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, strangers and friends, moved by the Holy Spirit to hold and care for those who mourn and suffer, as well as rejoice and sing with those who celebrate the goodness of this life. Jesus walked many a lonesome valley, but his promise is that you won’t have to. That we will walk this journey together, hand in hand, just like Jesus walked with those two weary disciples on the road to Emmaus. A story that reminds us that in the most difficult moments of our lives God is with us and resurrection is always possible.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette penned these thoughtful lyrics in response to the many tragic hurricanes we experienced in the last two years and her words, I think, speak to the ways we gather together to be grace to one another in our time of need. I’ll close with this.

O God, We've Prayed in Wind and Rain ST. ANNE 8.6.8.6 ("Our God, Our Help in Ages Past")

*O God, we've prayed in wind and rain
And now we pray once more
For those who felt the hurricane
And heard the waters roar.*

*We pray for those who watched the storm
Destroy the life they knew,
Who wait in shelters, tired and worn,
And wonder what to do.*

*We thank you, God, for acts of love
Not bound by race or creed,
For hands that reach across the flood
To all who are in need.*

*We pray for others far away
Who've seen destruction, too;
We look beyond ourselves, for they
Are also loved by you.*

*Where rains flood cities, homes and towns
May we go out to be
A witness that your love abounds
In each community.*

