

WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

Bob Stillerman

Good Friday Homily, 4-10-2020

Selections from Psalm 22



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Selected verses are at the end of the document.

In both Mark and Matthew's accounts of that Friday long ago, the authors relay some of Jesus' final words on the cross. Perhaps the most famous of these phrases is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

To me, this phrase, perhaps more than any in our scriptures, best reveals the nature and character of Jesus, and also of God. It's here, on the cross, that Jesus is most vulnerable, is most finite, is most human. Jesus expresses a sentiment of abandonment to the very source who loves him most, protects him most, and has come through for him the most.

Human beings, in our most cherished relationships, be they with spouse or partner, parent or child, sibling, friend, mentor, the list goes on, express this very sentiment. I could spend all day telling you about the love I have for my wife, for my parents, for my siblings, for my children, for my church family, about the number of ways they support me, come through for me, allow me to be the person I am. I have a community of divine love. Thanks be to God!!! But I am also a human being. And when I feel most vulnerable, there are times when I ask these beloved people, "Where were you? I needed you today. I was counting on you. Help, I'm begging you, please!!!"

You see, it's not they've let me down. It's not that they've abandoned me. It's quite the opposite. In this raw, vulnerable, exposed state, I can be raw, and vulnerable, and exposed, because in fact, these are the very people who have, and are, and will always love, protect, and support me, even when the day becomes night. My loved ones let me lament out loud. They let me shout. They let me get it out my system. On the cross, Jesus reminds us that he had a daddy, too, a mama, too, friends, too, brothers and sisters, too! And that just like everyone else, Jesus needed them, too! On this Friday, it's important to remember the nature and character of our God: God is a parent, and a friend, and an advocate, and a listener, and somebody, or something that holds our hands, hugs us tight, lets us cry, when we've got to let it all out, especially on a dark Friday.

There's a second thing about this phrase that makes it so powerful. When Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he's speaking the first line of a lament psalm that faithful listeners will recognize. Perhaps it's one final lesson. You see, while this psalm expresses the lament of feeling abandoned, it also expresses the confidence and assurance of a God who is present in every generation, a God whose justice and transformation remain steadfast in every generation. Our ancestors cried to the same God, trusted in the same God, found salvation – that is the space and the grace to live full lives – found salvation in the same God.

Even better, this psalm is a congregational lament. We express our anxiety, historically, as well as in the present and future. But our cries of abandonment and anxiety turn to trust and

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assurance. Collectively, we hear soothing words, “The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord...[For remember,] future generations will be told about the Lord,

and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

(Psalm 22:26a; 30b-31).

Good Friday is hard. Perhaps Hard Friday would be a better a descriptor? We don’t want to linger here in death, especially when we live in a post-resurrection world. This year, of all years, can’t we just hurry up and abandon the isolation, and the desperation, and the loneliness of Friday, and exchange it for the promise of Sunday?!?

Well, that’s the tricky thing about resurrection, and transformation, and new life. It’s hard to fully experience such newness, if resurrection is simply a restoration of that which we expect, especially goodness, and is without any sense of loss, or any sense of our own finite nature?

Friday is hard, because we have to reckon with finite things. We have to reckon with the fact that Jesus chose an authentic, difficult path, instead of an easy one. And with that choice comes a cloud of grief, but not a thin one. Its vapors will not just vanish with the morning sun, they’ll linger a little longer.

And maybe this is an improper redaction to our gospels, but I close my eyes, and when the deed is done, I imagine all those Maries, Jesus’ mama and Magdalene among them, and other faithful women, too, and the disciples, hiding and scattered about the city, and all of us, distanced, tucked away and out-of-sight, and on this bright and sunny day, that feels so much darker than the sun lets on, we offer our own muted but collective cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken us, too?”

But in our grief, historical, and present, and future, too, I hear the voices and memories, of a million saints, past, present , and future, too, chanting the rest of this faithful lament. These words are persistent, and slowly but surely, they are making their way to the psalm’s triumphant resolution: “God has done it!”

Friends, it’s Friday. As we remain huddled away on a long Sabbath Saturday, may we hold tight to the promise of what God’s gonna do.

May it be so. And may it soon! Amen.

Psalm 22

Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy,

enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ In you our ancestors trusted;

they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;

in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;

scorned by others, and despised by the people.

⁷ All 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!"

⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;

you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,

and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

¹¹ Do not be far from me,

for trouble is near

and there is no one to help.

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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^[a] is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;^[b]
¹⁷I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
¹⁸they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

¹⁹But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
²⁰Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life^[c] from the power of the dog!
²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued^[d] me.

²²I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;^[e]
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

²³You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,^[f]
but heard when I^[g] cried to him.

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²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

²⁶ The poor^[b] shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.^[c]

²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ To him,^[d] indeed, shall all who sleep in^[k] the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.^[e]

³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,

³¹ and^[m] proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.