



“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me”

Scripture – Psalm 22:1-15

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, October 14, 2018

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Are there any words in Scripture more chilling?

What on earth has happened to the one who howls these words? Is it the death of his child or spouse? Has he contracted a life-threatening illness? We do not know, but his words express the anguish that many of us have felt at some torturous moment in our lives.

Did you catch the wild swings of mood in the psalmist? One moment he is pleading, the next he is praising. In one breath he is agonizing over God’s absence, in the next he declares, “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. Our ancestors trusted and you delivered.”

His words seem to capture the life of faith. There are times when we experience God’s presence and life is rich and beautiful; and there are times when God seems light years away or even non-existent.

Together, I would like us to name times when God seems especially *present* in our lives. When are some of the times you experience God?

In nature: When the darkness of the night gives way to those first rays of light and the sun rises over the horizon. (For the scientists present, yes I know that the sun is not literally moving up on the horizon, the earth is rotating on its axis). But, sunrises and sunsets and standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon arouse within many of us a sense of awe about God’s amazing creation.

The birth of a child: For many, the birth of a child brings tears of joy and amazement at God’s gift of life and its precious nature.

The death of a loved one: can also be a very holy moment. Perhaps you have been present at someone’s death when you strongly felt that he/she slipped from this world to the next.

Prayer: Sometimes in prayer, we feel especially close to God. We may feel comforted or strengthened or healed or guided.

When a verse of Scripture goes to our core: Sometimes a snippet of scripture whispers repeatedly in our mind. “In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth.”

Sometimes a passage gives us comfort and hope: “Neither life, nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from God’s love.”

Music: Music can express something when words fall short. Some music is so sublime that it puts a knot in our throat and the tears flow because it feels as if God has touched us.

The sacraments: Sometimes during a baptism or when celebrating the Lord’s Supper, God’s presence becomes palpable.

When, against high odds, the person you need appears in your life: I believe God’s hand was involved in bringing Camilla and me together.

Now, I would like for us to think of a time when we felt more like the psalmist in today’s passage. Can you remember a time when God seemed absent or unresponsive? Can you recall an incident when you felt like saying, “Why have you forsaken me?” If that is too personal, what types of suffering might prompt someone to feel that way?

Death of a loved one before her time: It is especially tragic to have your child die.

When a child is diagnosed with a terminal illness: It is natural to ask why God could not have prevented the death of a child.

Natural Disaster: When an earthquake sets off a tsunami and thousands are killed it is easy to wonder where God was.

Unable to conceive a child: a fairly large number of couples desperately want to have a child, but cannot, while many babies are unplanned and unwanted.

When people are being oppressed by a corrupt government: Some people experience terrible injustice their entire lives and it is so unfair.

When we suffer, there can be a wafer thin layer blanketing our anger. The psalmist reminds us that there are times when our anger punctures the layer and spews out. Our anger might be directed at God. Where are you, Lord? Why don’t you take away my burden, or, at least, lighten it?

If we are hesitant to be so blunt with God, we may vent our anger at a loved one. How often does our anger hit the closest target, even when that person does not deserve it?

I can imagine the psalmist waking up in the middle of the night, his mind refusing to shut down, and unable to go back to sleep. Why must every living being that comes into existence die? Why do good and faithful people suffer while some scoundrels seem to slip by without a scar? Most of us wrestle with such questions and it is difficult to find answers that are completely satisfying.

The reason for suffering that is caused by earthquakes, droughts, hurricanes, and the like is one of the most vexing. Is God still in the process of perfecting the creation and life came into existence before these natural forces have been tamed? Are these types of events simply part of a dynamic universe that is perpetually evolving?

Most suffering is caused by humans and it is easier to understand. In a world where there is freedom to choose and where our decisions have consequences, suffering is inevitable.

If we could simply ask God to fix any problem that creates suffering – be it the loss of a job, a painful divorce, or the death of a loved one – then the decisions everyone makes would lose their significance. You could drink and drive and no one would be injured – either because someone prayed for protection in advance or asked God to reverse the wreck. You could devour as much ice cream as you want and pray for weight reduction. Now, there's a world we would like to see! You could bully others and treat them with disdain because any anguish you cause could be erased by dispatching a few quick prayers.

If we could remit our orders to the divine registry where God would respond before the end of the day, we might imagine that the world would be immensely better than it is. Life would consist of little or no pain.

However, it is the very fact that our decisions have consequences that gives life meaning. How we live matters. It impacts our life and the lives of others. If how we live made no difference, life would be drained of meaning and that would be pure hell.

We would never need to empathize with others because everyone would simply ask God to whisk away the anguish and all would be well. Further, if God swept away every problem we create, we would not need others. If we did not depend on others, then we would never trust others, never give ourselves to others, and thus never truly love others.

We would never derive the deep satisfaction that stems from surviving difficult times with another. Love would never gain much depth. However, the way we live – kindly or cruelly – matters. And because our way of being in the world makes a difference, life has meaning. We can edge the world closer to God's dream or we can slam things in reverse. God gives us the choice and urges us to make the right one.

While today's passage leaves us with someone feeling abandoned by God, the psalm does not end that way. There is a turning point when the psalmist believes that God has come near and he is confident that he will survive his ordeal. The psalm does not tell us what made the difference or how long it took; only that he did not feel abandoned forever.

And it is vital for us to remember where this psalm falls in the Book of Psalms. What comes after Psalm 22? The 23rd Psalm with its confidence that God is with us through both the peaceful times in life – beside still waters – and God is with us when we must walk through the darkest valley.

Sarah Condon grew up in Mississippi, in the thick of the Bible belt surrounded by fundamentalists. Her family was among a small minority who attended an Episcopal Church. There was no family Bible on the coffee table, her parents did not quote scripture to induce her to behave properly and they had no crosses hanging on their walls. By contrast, the mothers of her friends talked about being saved and the "virtue of growing into Godly womanhood." According to her friends, the reasons you went to church was to learn not to sleep around, use drugs, or talk back to your parents.

Sarah was taken to church every Sunday morning at her quiet Episcopal church, but neither her parents nor her priest talked that way. So, one day Sarah asked her mother why she had to go to church every Sunday. Her mother replied, "Because we want you to have something to fall back on when life gets hard."

That did not make a lot of sense to her when she was a teenager and she wondered why her mom thought she would have to face darkness someday. However, as an adult who has been forced to tread that desolate wilderness, Sarah is grateful that she learned 1) that she is loved, 2) that God is with her in difficult times, and 3) that God will see her through.

Anne Lamott, who grew up in a dysfunctional family and overcame her addiction to alcohol and drugs has written, “Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work; you don’t give up.”

Faith can be hard and sometimes it feels as if God’s light will never penetrate our darkness. I pray that we will remember that God never gives up on us in this life or the next, and that will be enough – enough for us not to surrender to despair, but to live in hope.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

Lord, you are our strength — a very present help in trouble. From generation to generation, you have shepherded your people. So — like our ancestors in the faith— we trust you to guide us, to comfort us, to sustain us on our journeys.

Sometimes we are sure of your presence; you are as close to us as our breath, as constant as our beating hearts, as encompassing as a loved one’s arms.

But other times our trust wavers, our confidence wanes. Like the Psalmist, we fear that our cries fall on deaf ears, and that you have left us alone to grapple in the dark. In these seasons of doubt — when hearts only dare to hope — our souls echo the ancient plea: Lord, you are our strength; hasten to help us.

Holy One — We remember all whose lives are shrouded in darkness — those imprisoned by illness or addiction; those weighed down by loneliness or grief; those who know the pangs of hunger or who dwell in lands torn apart by violence. We pray for neighbors around the world whose homes and hopes have been swept away. Be with those from Indonesia to Florida who survey the damage wrought by wind and wave, who search the rubble for precious remnants, who lament the loss of livelihood and life. Your people are suffering, O God. Your creation is groaning for redemption. And so we cry: Lord, you are our strength; hasten to help us.

You are our faithful companion, even as we traverse life’s shadowed valleys. We cling to this promise, Shepherding God. When forces of destruction and death threaten to overtake us, draw near to us and comfort us with your peace. When despair and doubt threaten to consume us, take us by the hand and assure us of your presence ... And when we rest beside quiet streams and find our own souls refreshed, give us the grace to uphold others. May your presence embolden us, so that we can point others to your tender care. When we see suffering, stir our hearts toward compassion. When we see injustice, make us thirst for righteousness. When we become complacent with the way things are, prod us toward right paths that lead to peace. With the confidence of children, we shout: Lord, you are our strength; hasten to help us.

We pray rejoicing in your abiding presence, which has sustained us through all generations. So we join our voices with the faithful of every time and place to offer the prayer that binds us together:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.