

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2020

Gathering

“The Lord is My Shepherd”

Marjie Coleman

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.
God makes me lie down in green pastures.
The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.
God leads me beside still waters.

God restores my soul and heals my heart.
And I will live in God’s love forever.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not fear.
Though darkness is all around me.
The Lord is my shepherd I shall not fear.
My head you anoint with oil.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.
My cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy will forever be mine.
And I will rest in God’s presence forever.

Proclamation

Scripture: Psalm 22: 1-11, 25-31

Sermon: “Under a Silent Sky”

439 “I Love the Lord; He Heard My Cry”
Singing verses 1, 2, and repeating 1

I love the Lord; he heard my cry and pitied every groan.
Long as I live and troubles rise, I’ll hasten to his throne.

I love the Lord; he heard my cry and chased my fear away.
O let my heart no more despair while I have breath to pray.

Dedication

Prayers of the People

Charge

“Benediction”

Michael Card

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you,
And give you peace, and give you peace, and give you peace forever.

The Lord be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face towards you,
And give you peace, and give you peace, and give you peace forever.

Worship Leaders

Guitar/Soloist:	Marjie Coleman
Piano/Soloist/Prayer:	Erin Pacheco
Sound Engineer:	Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister:	Roger Nelson

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Text: Psalm 22: 1-10, 25-31
Title: Under a Silent Sky
Date: 03.22.20
Roger Allen Nelson

Louie Zamperini was training for the 1940 Olympics when the United States entered World War II. In response he joined the Army Air Corps and became a decorated bombardier.

On a May afternoon in 1943, Louie took off on a search mission for a lost plane, but somewhere over the Pacific the engines failed and the plane plummeted into the sea – leaving Louie and two crewmen stranded on a tiny raft.

They drifted for weeks and thousands of miles,
they endured starvation and desperate thirst,
they battled sharks that jumped into the raft to drag them off,
they survived a machine-gun attack from a Japanese plane,
they rode out a typhoon with waves some forty feet high.

After about a month adrift one of the men died, so Louie and the remaining crewmen knelt over the body, said all the good things they could think of to say about their friend, and then:

Louie wanted to give him a religious eulogy but didn't know how, so he recited disjointed passages that he remembered from movies, ending with a few words about committing the body to the sea. And he prayed... vowing that if God would save them, he would serve heaven forever.

Then they slid their friend over the side of the raft and he sank into the vast open arms of the ocean.

You may know the rest of the story. Louie Zamperini is eventually picked up by the Japanese, survives two years as a prisoner of war with a sadistic guard, is freed when the war is over, marries, battles PTSD and alcoholism, gives his life to Jesus at a Billy Graham crusade, and starts camps for kids. Unbroken, the book that tells his story, is a remarkable account of the resilience of the human spirit.

What I can't shake is the image of those men adrift at sea – no hope on any horizon, the sky lost in water as far as they can see.

They wrapped their friend in the tattered scraps of a sun-blistered canvas,
they searched for something to say,
they wanted to bless the dead with something meaningful,
they rummaged about in their memories,
they were able to piece together a few phrases from the movies.
Then under a silent sky they offered a word to God.

What would you dredge up? What would come to mind to honor life and mark death?
What lines or lyrics are just under the surface? What would you say under a silent sky?

When Jesus hung on the cross he called to mind the haunting opening lines of Psalm 22. He cried out:

*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.*

Underneath a silent sky Jesus reached back into the songbook of his people and he breathed out lyrics of despair.

Now. You would think if Jesus was going to quote a psalm it would be the next one, Psalm 23:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...

But, in the Gospel Mark the only word that Jesus speaks is from Psalm 22. The only word that Jesus speaks is of abandonment.

And, what's astonishing to me is that the rest of the psalm serves as a sort of template for the crucifixion. Jesus embodies not just the first line but many of the other images in Psalm 22 are picked up by the gospel writer as he recounts the execution of Jesus. For example:

7 *All who see me make and hurl insults at me, shaking their heads. "He trusts in the Lord," they say, "let the Lord deliver him."*

15 *My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; You lay me in the dust of death.*

16 *They pierce my hands and feet...*

18 *They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.*

The gospel accounts of the crucifixion read as if the writers had Psalm 22 open in front of them – providing a pattern for telling the story. That is not to suggest that Psalm 22 is prophecy, rather the crucifixion is something akin to “performing the psalm.” Using a familiar framework, and images that were part of a familiar tradition, the gospel writers invite us to see the crucifixion through the lens of the psalm. They pull up a song that was already under the surface.

So, what are we to make of this?

I guess, first, that the experience of lament, loss, loneliness – a silent sky – is not an aberration. It's not the fault of the individual. It's not a test. It's not a failure of faith. Feeling abandoned by God is part of the whole fabric of faith. A heart-breaking gut-wrenching cry is as much a part of faith as hope is a part of faith. As James May puts it:

... in his anguished cry to God, when he begins to recite the psalm, Jesus joins the multitudinous company of the afflicted and becomes one with them in their suffering. In praying as they do, he expounds his total identification with them. He gives all of his followers who are afflicted permission and encouragement to pray for help. He shows that faith includes holding the worst of life up to God.

Some of you know that cry. You've felt adrift ~ lost in anxiety and uncertainty with no sign of hope on the horizon. Or, the black dog of depression was at your door and God was nowhere to be found. Or, you've held the worst of life up to God, but all you heard was silence. This psalm makes space for that reality. It doesn't deny, doubt, or down play it, but it recognizes that despair is part of the human experience.

I've been thinking about what's gained and what's lost in social distancing and "shelter in place" orders. There are wonderful moments of families reading and hiking and making meals together. There is unhurried time to work on projects and play with your new grandson and let your mind wander....

But, there's also the loss of being together. An essential part of being church is laughing together, singing together, weeping together, and being shaped together. And our life together includes being formed by the patterns and practices of liturgy, by remembering and reciting the songs of our faith, by letting scripture seep into our spirits.

We're given Psalm 22, not only as a song that Jesus joins in, but as a template for lament. Scripture gives us both the permission and the pattern to bring our brokenness, worry, dread, and anger before God.

And, Psalm 22 basically follows a familiar structure which typically consists of five major elements:

The invocation ~ crying out to God to listen.

The complaint ~ telling God what's wrong.

The petition ~ telling God what you want God to do.

The remembering ~ calling to mind what God has done in the past.

The praise ~ celebrating the goodness and sovereignty of God.

Psalm 22 is a pattern for a spirituality that is not learned in an afternoon; it takes a lifetime. It takes a community, it takes listening to one another's stories, it takes the slow work of reading, singing, and letting the Psalms shape us....

Lauren Winner is a bookish Jewish girl in cat-eye glasses who made a big splash with her memoir, Girl Meets God. It became the model for hipster spiritual autobiography and it made her a rising star for both evangelicals and the New York Times Book Review. Lauren is now a professor at Duke Divinity School, married, divorced, and still cranking out books. She released a second memoir entitled, Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis.

That book follows a pattern similar to Psalm 22.

There are three movements: "Wall," when God seems wholly absent; "Movement," a period of uncertainty where she plumbs her discontent and receives comfort from friends,

scripture, and other writers; and “Presence,” those times in which God is real though elusive. She’s learning that a biblical spirituality is often a cold and a broken hallelujah.

In her words:

The enthusiasms of my conversion have worn off. For whole stretches since the dream, since the baptism, my belief has faltered, my sense of God’s closeness has grown strained, my efforts at living in accord with what I take to be the call of the gospel have come undone Once upon a time, I thought I had arrived. Now I have arrived at a middle.

“Now I have arrived at a middle.”

I love that line. Psalm 22 is not written in the flush of confidence or the gleam and glitter of claiming victory, Psalm 22 is written in the middle when we don’t have all the answers, when we’re adrift under a silent sky, when sometimes the best we can do is recall what God has done in the past.

As the psalmist puts it:

In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted you and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

So...

Faith gives voice to despair, but it doesn’t stay there.

Faith knows that being dead is part of the journey, but it’s not the end.

Faith cries out to God in the present, but also recites and remembers what God did in the past.

Lewis Smedes puts it this way:

Let me share with you the pit, the bedrock of my faith on these matters, about where God is. This is how I see it.

Long ago, when the best and brightest of all the ages was at the end of his rope and it felt as if God had abandoned him, he asked the same question David asked in his time of trouble: Why? Why? And he got no answer, not in words. Heaven was silent again. No answer. Dead silence. He died without an answer from God.

But then, just three days later, before the fingers of the light had filtered through the mist of the morning, before the citizens of the city had finished their second snooze, the Almighty got into the grave where Jesus’ body lay. And the power of his creative spirit began to move inside that dead corpse. Life began to pulsate again through its dead nerves and flow like energy through its arteries like a rush of warm power. And Jesus came alive.

Jesus asked the most painful question anybody can ever ask of God, and the answer came, not with words, but with an action; not in theory, but in life. In resurrection.

Dear friends, even in these uncharted and unsettling days, may the movement of Psalm 22 shape our life together. May we have the courage to cry out to God. May we remember what God has done in the past. May we call to mind the deliverance of God, the resurrection of God, and in that may we find strength, even joy, to keep moving forward. And may we soon be joined together in a happy reunion – there are psalms for that as well.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.