

IN THE DUST
Psalm 22
First Mennonite Church
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My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

My God—you are the God of our ancestors. They trusted in you and you delivered them. You did not put them to shame.

So why don't you answer when I cry out in distress? Why do I feel your absence rather than your presence?

My God – you are my God. You know me.

In fact, you knew me before I was born. You brought me forth from my mother's womb. You made sure that I was nourished at my mother's breast. Ever since, you have been my God.

So why do you allow me to be the object of other people's scorn? They mock me for believing in you. Why don't you rescue me from the evil and violence that surround me?

My God—see what has happened to me. My body is afflicted beyond recognition. I am lying in the dust of death and my enemies are already claiming my possessions.

You must come quickly to help me! To save me from death and despair!

This is the essence of the psalmist's lament in Psalm 22. Now add a layer of colorful rhetoric and vivid images. The result is an exaggerated tale of woes, with three categories of complaints.

First, there is mental anguish and insecurity (verses 6-8). As a result of being constantly scorned and despised, self-esteem has been lost. The human feels like a worm. That which has given meaning and purpose, namely faith in God, is being used against the author as a taunt.

Second, there is physical illness with dehydration and starvation (verses 14-18). The skeleton has collapsed. All strength is gone. Every bone is visible. The mouth and tongue do not function; neither do the hands and feet. Such extreme weakness, which forebodes death, attracts the vultures. These evildoers circle round the one who is mortally ill; without waiting for the finality of death, they proceed to divide up the clothes. Adding to the indignity, they make a game of it by casting lots.

Third, bullies threaten the victim with physical harm (verses 12-13, 20-21). These enemies represent the forces of brute violence and are depicted as wild beasts. Strong bulls surround the victim; lions and dogs also threaten. With mouths wide open, the beasts project the terrifying prospect of being devoured. What a fearful scenario--made even more fearful by the possible association of the animals

with demonic forces!¹ Bill Long points out that dogs represent a final humiliation—“the dogs will lap up the blood of a dead person.”²

Taken together, the complaints show us someone *in extremis*. This person has lost the physical and emotional markers of healthy selfhood, is socially isolated, under attack, and fearful.

How can we talk of personal integrity in a situation like this? Why this individual is lying flat out on the ground, practically buried in the dust! Quite the opposite of the upright figure I presented last week as a model of integrity.

Yet, here, too, is integrity worth examining.

The petitioner speaks his protest from the heart. The questions are not contrived or sentimental; they are honest. As Dan Clendenin writes in his essay “The Power of the Dogs:” “His candor is so much more authentic than the pious clichés that we sometimes use to mask our pain.”³ His “why” is what Lewis Smedes calls *a real question*: “You ask a real question when you honestly don’t know the answer and you want badly to know it.”⁴

Such speech honors God and honors the individual. It displays integrity.

Just as the cry for understanding is genuine, so, too, is the acknowledgment of relationship. The psalmist knows the beauty and power of a loving relationship with God, as shown by the choice of words, “My God.” This privileging of a relationship with God signals integrity.

The petitioner yearns for the compassionate face of God to show itself again. The present distress and dangers infuse this yearning with an urgency that breaks through pride and politeness. Throwing himself on God’s mercy, the psalmist waits in hope to be rescued. This is the integrity of utter dependence and trust. This is the integrity of the prostrate petitioner, of the pray-er who kneels and begs for what is not deserved yet can be delivered by God’s grace.

In verses 19-21, the psalm makes a dramatic shift. God is referred to as “my help” and questions are replaced by urgent requests for God to come quickly and provide aid: “Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion!” Then follows immediately a statement of faith, affirming that the petitions have been granted: “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me” (v. 21b). This is the integrity that proclaims the hoped-for result, speaking it into being in a way reminiscent of the declarative power of God’s Word.

Wonderfully, the remainder of the psalm (verses 22-31) narrates the praise that the author will now lift up to God. We encounter more speaking—now with an emotional register of awe and thanksgiving, now before the congregation and in the great assembly. We encounter more bowing and kneeling—now with reverence for God’s power and glory. The litany of praise keeps expanding until it incorporates

¹ J. Clinton McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible IV* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 763.

² Bill Long on Psalm 22; see www.drbillong.com/Lectionary/Ps22.html.

³ Dan Clendenin, “The Power of the Dogs: When Trouble is Near,” posted May 8, 2006 on The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself website, accessed online at www.journeywithjesus.net.

⁴ Lewis Smedes, “When God Goes on Leave of Absence,” message aired on the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, November 3, 1996, accessed online at www.csec.org/csec/smedes_4005.htm

all nations and all peoples, past and future, living and dead. The exaggeration of the lament is thus matched by the exaggeration of the praise that follows. The two segments complement each other and form a whole. What is initially expressed in individual terms evolves into a communal declaration of loyalty and homage. We might say that in this respect the psalm itself demonstrates the integrity of completeness.

To throw ourselves on God's mercy implies affirmation of God's sovereignty and justice. To some, this posture may seem like an act of desperation. In fact, it is an act of courage: a choice to renounce violence and fear, including fear of death; a choice to relinquish a false sense of control; a choice to trust in God; a choice to draw strength from suffering. All this is possible because God is indeed present in the midst of affliction and because life ultimately triumphs over death.

Psalm 22 plays an important part in the accounts of Jesus' death. You may remember that on the cross, in the depths of despair, seemingly abandoned, Jesus cries out to God, quoting the first verse of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Both Matthew and Mark include this detail (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). All four Gospels echo verse 18 of Psalm 22, telling how Jesus' clothing is divided up by casting lots. Mark and Matthew also pick up on verses 7-8, adding the description of how Jesus is mocked and goaded to ask God to save him.

The psalm connection underscores for us how deeply Jesus was humiliated by the powers, how terrible his indignity was, how completely he identified with suffering humanity, how alone he felt on the cross, in spite of the deep spiritual connection he faithfully cultivated with his Abba/Father. Yet just as the psalm continues beyond the "why" questions and the picture of unbearable affliction, so, too, the passion story continues beyond the cross. Jesus knew the psalms, as did his disciples. He and they knew that the wrenchingly honest cry of abandonment is transformed by psalm's end.

Indeed, the end is victory, resurrection, praise and honor and glory forever. The mercy of God trumps every ounce of suffering. The love of God fashions an eternal embrace.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:4-5, "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved."

God is the midwife who brings forward new life. Listen again to Psalm 22:9: "it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast." All along the way in life, when we are struggling to be born—born anew from our sin, born as survivors of great suffering and pain, born through death to resurrection—God is present to be our midwife.

Any rebirth can be traumatic. There is much waiting, in what seems like a very dark place. There are risks and uncertainties. Infants are utterly helpless. Like the helpless infant, we rely on the Merciful One to guide us and bring us into the light.

Sue Monk Kidd's memoir *When the Heart Waits* depicts her own journey through brokenness and long waiting to spiritual transformation. Among the several connecting points with today's theme is Sue Monk Kidd's realization that postures—"postures of the spirit"—provide the opening for God to work in the midst of alienation and darkness. She writes: "It's turning oneself upside down so that everything is emptied out and God can flow in. It's curling up in the fogged spaces of the listening heart, sinking into solitude, wrapping the soul around some little flame of hope that God has ignited. It's sitting on the

window sill of the heart, still and watching. Such interior postures are themselves the prayers that transform, heal, and yield the answers in our waiting. They're the shapes and contours that turn us into a cocoon."⁵

A cocoon, as we all know, is the dark, solitary, still, tomb-like environment from which amazing, transformative rebirth into a butterfly takes place. To throw oneself on God's mercy is to be open to this turning inside out and upside down posture, this entombment with all its vulnerability and self-denial.

Sue Monk Kidd also employs the image of the beggar, reminding us that Jesus had "a soft spot" for beggars: "Could it be because beggars know how to open their hands, trusting that the crumbs of grace will fall? Is it because they have faith in something beyond themselves? Beggars are reduced by necessity to the sharp knowledge of their utter dependence. They have no bank accounts to fall back on, no investments or stocks or any of those things we think give us security and in which we place so much of our hope. A beggar must simply trust, moment by moment, that somehow she'll get fed. She lives off hope. She lives not with clenched fists but with palms, open, ready to receive."⁶

Indeed, as McCann points out in his commentary, "Jesus lived, like the psalmist, as one of the afflicted, but in the knowledge that God does not despise the afflicted (Ps 22:24). Rather, God loves the afflicted, and God shares their suffering. So Jesus, like the psalmist, gathered around himself a community of the afflicted, the poor, the outcast. He sat at table with them, and he still invites to his table those who profess to live in humble dependence upon God rather than self."⁷

Since Psalm 22 holds together individual and community perspectives, we can and should read the first-person portrait of suffering as representative, indeed inclusive. The agony depicted can be assigned, as Marshall Johnson notes, to "all who face the extremities of life—prisoners of war, the person on the deathbed, accident victims, the person caught up in debilitating depression, and many others."⁸

The integrity of the afflicted is the integrity to cry out for mercy, on behalf not only of ourselves but of all the afflicted, to merge our pain with their pain, to wait in hope for Christ to be born in us, holy longing that blossoms into holy compassion.

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⁵Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Hearts Waits* (1990; San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 126.

⁶*Ibid.*, 141.

⁷ McCann, 766.

⁸ Marshall D. Johnson, *Psalms through the Year* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2007), 46.