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Pentecost 21 (Psalm 22.1-15)

Where are you, God?

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Psalm 22.1-15

Psalm 22 is an ancient prayer that invites the godforsaken, and that may be some of us right now, to utter the seemingly unutterable words, that God is gone — to pray those words to God, and then see what happens. The outcome in this psalm is that the psalmist seems to move from isolation to integration, from forsakenness to worship¹, but we don't hear the second half of the psalm today, we hear the psalmist wrestling with despair, and drawing strength from remembering God's past protection and help.²

How do you keep hoping when there seems to be no hope, 'my God my God why have you forsaken me'? 'Where are you, God?' I remember when my mum was diagnosed with bowel cancer I was so angry with God even though I didn't think it was God's fault. I railed and shook my fist and drew in red and black in my journal I let out all my emotion and all my fears until I was spent and God seemed to still be there, distant, silent. It is good, like the psalmist to speak truthfully with the Divine.

So many of us are going through tough times at the moment, difficult diagnosis, difficult economic times, difficult relationships, ageing, just trying to make ends meet and to find a way to live faithfully and openly and honestly. After meditation on Monday morning we had our monthly sharing time on zoom. There was some tough stuff raised, and we listened and held each other in the space, in prayer. A few weeks ago one of our number shared with us at lunch after Tuesday Meditation. She told us that she has put her affairs in order and has decided she is going to live honestly and not pretend. She spoke of dying and getting ready to die. She spoke of living her truth and those of us who were at lunch were very moved and inspired.

When bad things happen to good people the common wisdom is that it's our fault that we've done something wrong and we are being punished. This is not what I believe, and not an image of God that I espouse, I would say stuff just happens and God is with us in the tough times, vulnerable and helpless, with us nonetheless.

Rachel Naomi Remen counsels

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-psalm-2223-31-3>

² *ibid.*,

‘We avoid suffering only at the great cost of distancing ourselves from life.

In order to live fully we may need to look deeply and respectfully at our own suffering and at the suffering of others. In the depths of every wound we have survived is the strength we need to live. The wisdom our wounds can offer us is a place of refuge. Finding this is not for the faint of heart. But then, neither is life.’

Back to our psalm. According to Howard Wallace, Psalm 22 is divided into two major sections, a lament which we heard most of today, and a hymn of praise.

The lament part is divided into two halves, each ending with a plea for God not to be far away. All seems at an end,³ yet how good it is to really lament and to trust.

The psalm begins with the most desperate of cries asking why God has abandoned the psalmist (v. 1). The psalmist still claims a strong relationship with God using the words ‘my God, my God’. It seems God can neither help nor hear the psalmist’s words. God’s honour is at stake when there is no answer to the psalmist’s cry (v. 2). Three times in vv. 4-5 the psalmist refers to the trust placed in God by the ancestors and three times the psalmist recalls that God delivered them.⁴

Then psalmist returns to lament describing himself in the most abject terms. The feeling of abandonment by God is matched by a sense of scorn and isolation within the community, the same community which has provided the psalmist with examples of trust and deliverance in the past. But here there seem to be no words of salvation, only the questioning of the mockers (v. 8). Their taunt is a direct challenge to the psalmist’s earlier words. Trust and deliverance are the subject of this present lament. The mockers’ use of the psalmist’s own words makes the present situation all the more difficult, but on the other hand, it is also a strong reminder that past trust has been vindicated in deliverance and the present struggle is worth pursuing⁵ - on the one hand things have worked out in the past, on the other hand the present situation seems dire and God seems absent.

The psalmist reflects again on the past in vv. 9-10, although this time it is his own past. God is described in terms of both a midwife at the psalmist’s birth and as nurse afterward. Since birth God has continued to be ‘my God’ to the psalmist.

In the second half of the lament (vv. 12-21a) the complaint is more sustained as the psalmist describes their predicament in a series of vivid animal and other metaphors and similes the psalmist alternates between the description of their enemies (‘bulls’, ‘ravening and roaring lion’, dogs’; vv. 12-13 and 16) and their own condition (‘poured out like water’, ‘heart is like wax’, a ‘potsherd’; vv. 14-15 and 17-18).

The animal language conveys that the psalmist is absolutely helpless, the enemies are like powerful beasts and the psalmist cannot resist them. The effect of all this is to emphasise the

³ <https://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/LentC/GoodFridayPsalm.html>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

psalmist's inability to resist the powers, both human and cosmic, that are lined up against them. The talk of death shows the extremity of the situation. The psalmist needs God.⁶ We are left in a dark and desperate place, with only a glimmer of hope.

Physician and Counsellor, Rachel Naomi Remen reflects, in her book *My Grandfather's Blessing*, on how we might respond to someone in the Psalmist's situation:

Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us. Not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing. Silence is God's lap.

Many things grow the silence in us, among them simply growing older. We may then become more a refuge than a rescuer, a witness to the process of life and the wisdom of acceptance.

Remen continues:

A highly skilled HIV/AIDS doctor once told me that she keeps a picture of her grandmother in her home and sits before it for a few minutes every day before she leaves for work. Her grandmother was an Italian-born woman who held her family close. Her wisdom was of the earth. Once when Louisa was very small, her kitten was killed in an accident. It was her first experience of death and she had been devastated. Her parents had encouraged her not to be sad, telling her that the kitten was in heaven now with God. Despite these assurances, she had not been comforted. She had prayed to God, asking God to give her kitten back. But [like with the psalmist today] God did not respond.

In her anguish she had turned to her grandmother and asked, "Why?" Her grandmother had not told her that her kitten was in heaven as so many of the other adults had. Instead, she had simply held her and reminded her of the time when her grandfather had died. She, too, had prayed to God, but God had not brought Grandpa back. She did not know why. Louisa had turned into the soft warmth of her grandmother's shoulder then and sobbed. When finally she was able to look up, she saw that her grandmother was crying as well.

Although her grandmother could not answer her question, a great loneliness had gone and she felt able to go on. All the assurances that Peaches was in heaven had not given her this strength or peace. "My grandmother was a lap, Rachel," she told me, "a place of refuge. I know a great deal about AIDS, but what I really want to be for my patients is a lap. A place from which they can face what they have to face and not be alone." Taking refuge does not mean hiding from life. It means finding a place of strength, the capacity to live the life we have been given with greater courage and sometimes even with gratitude.

We sit in our distress, in our despair, we express our feelings and thoughts to God, we are authentic. We rage, we cry, we remember, we despair we hope, we stand alongside each other. Michael Leunig captures it well:

Dear God,

We struggle, we grow weary, we grow tired.

We are exhausted, we are distressed, we despair.

⁶ <https://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/LentC/GoodFridayPsalm.html>

We give up, we fall down, we let go.
We cry. We are empty, we grow calm, we are ready
We wait quietly.
A small, shy truth arrives.
Arrives from without and within us.
Arrives and is born. Simple, steady, clear.
Like a mirror, like a bell, like a flame, like rain in summer
A precious truth arrives and is born within us. Within our emptiness.
We accept it, we observe it, we absorb it.
We surrender to our bare truth.
We are nourished, we are changed.
We are blessed. We rise up.
For this we give thanks.
Amen⁷

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/MichaelLeunigAppreciationPage/posts/dear-godwe-struggle-we-grow-weary-we-grow-tiredwe-are-exhausted-we-are-distresse/205414816311412/>