

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

April 9, 2017

“A Cry from the Cross”

Series of Psalms (Lent) – part 6

Psalm 22

Intro

Prayer

Several years ago, my family took a vacation to California to see my brother’s family. While we were there, we visited the Los Angeles Science Center, which included cool exhibits like an earthquake room and an actual space shuttle. It was a huge place. The place was huge, and after a while, I noticed that Jonah wasn’t with me. I thought he was with Katja, Katja thought he was with my mom, and my mom thought he was with me. When we got together, he wasn’t anywhere. Talk about a parent nightmare. My little, four-year-old, white, northern Michigan boy getting lost in a city with 10 million people. Those were some of the scariest ten minutes of my life. Eventually, a staff member found him crying and brought him back to us.

But something strange happened in the following weeks. Occasionally, I would take Jonah to work while Katja was volunteering at the school. I usually would let Jonah watch a movie and take a nap in the lounge across from my office. It was no big deal, until after we came back from LA. Jonah would refuse to let me out of his sight. I once started the movie, went to the bathroom, and three minutes later, I couldn’t find him. I looked all around the church until I found him, red-eyed, playing with toys in the secretary’s office. He thought I had abandoned me, because he couldn’t find me. He thought I had forsaken him.

It's a primal fear, isn't it? Getting left behind, being lost and alone. Have you ever felt that way? Did you have that experience as a child? Or even as an adult? Do you know what it's like to be utterly alone?

We don't like to admit it, but sometimes we feel that God has abandoned us, especially when we've been hurt physically or emotionally. Maybe it's because of an illness or a relationship that ended. And we cry out to God for relief, but that relief doesn't come. Do you know what that feels like? Have you ever cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Today is Passion Sunday, so I want to read to you the source of those famous words. They were Jesus' cry from the cross. This is the scene as described in Matthew 27:45-50. (NIV)

The Death of Jesus

⁴⁵From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

⁴⁸Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

⁵⁰And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

Why did Jesus say these words? What was happening? This is the end of what is commonly called "The Passion of the Christ." In the last twenty-four hours before his death on the cross, Jesus was betrayed, abandoned by his

friends, arrested, imprisoned, falsely accused, beaten, mocked, insulted, spit upon, and finally, forced to carry his own instrument of torture and death – his cross – upon which he was nailed. Why? Two words: for us.

Hebrews 12:2 says this about Jesus: “...For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame...”

Do you know who was crucified in Roman times? Criminals. Political prisoners. The cross showed the power of Rome. It was an example that said, “This is what happens to those who oppose us.” It was the electric chair. It was the most humiliating way to die. The word “excruciating” literally comes from the pain of the nails severing the nerves of the condemned.

And in this moment, while Jesus was experiencing the worst pain and humiliation imaginable, he said, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

The Jewish people thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah. They thought a hero of Israel’s past would come to save Jesus. They missed it.

Jesus was actually quoting Psalm 22. Do you see the similarities? Jesus was surrounded by enemies who mocked him (verses 6-8). The psalmist used figures of speech to convey his fear. The wild animals are attacking him: mad bulls (v.12), roaring lions (v. 13), and wild dogs (v. 16).

This psalm has obvious correlations with the crucifixion. Look at the physical pain the psalmist describes. His bones are out of joint, his heart is failing (v. 14). He is dehydrated from blood loss (v.15). When Jesus was dying on the cross, he was insulted. When he was flogged, his bones were laid bare. It should not surprise us that Psalm 22 is the most frequently quoted psalm in the New

Testament. Every gospel writer refers to it. The early Christians saw psalm 22 as an obvious prophecy of Jesus' death on the cross.

"My God, my God; why have you forsaken me?"

I have a theory. The number one reason people don't believe in God is because they can't see God. They can't touch God. They can't feel God. There is no tangible evidence that God exists, so they don't believe.

But when you say, "God, why have you forsaken me," that is an expression of belief. You can only complain to the God that you believe exists. Why else would you say something like that?

Now, I have never experienced pain like Jesus did. I've had a few nicks and bruises, but nothing severe. So maybe I don't know the pain that would bring this terrible cry of abandonment from the lips of Jesus.

But there is a major difference in our pain and what Jesus went through. It's crucial that you get this. You see, when we are hurt, it is not usually our own choice. Case in point: last week I visited two members of our church who are dying. It was not their choice to be sick. It was not their choice to be in pain. It was not their choice to be at the end of their earthly lives.

But the major difference is, Jesus chose the path to the cross. "For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross." Do you know what that joy was? You. And you. And me. We were that joy. Jesus knew his death would free us from sin and bring us back into a right standing with God. And so Jesus chose the cross. For us.

It is one thing to say, "God, why am I dying of cancer? Why is my marriage failing? God, why are these things happening to me? I did not choose them!" But have you ever intentionally hurt yourself and said, "God, why is this

happening?” No! That’s ridiculous. When you do something to intentionally hurt yourself, you don’t say, “God, why is this happening?” Instead you have a much different cry – “God, please help me to stop doing this. God, please show me your love and grace so I can get out of this problem. God, please redeem me.”

That wasn’t Jesus’ cry. Jesus’ cry was, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” So I don’t believe that Jesus thought that God had left him. Jesus was really saying, “God, I need to know that you are still here with me, that you and I will see this plan of redemption to the very end. I need to know that you are going to rescue me in the same way that the writer of this psalm knew.

We need to see the whole psalm, not just the first verse. The psalmist reminded God, “Hey, you saved Israel in the past. You didn’t put them to shame, even though it seems that I am being shamed. God, you created me in my mother’s womb. You have been responsible for me from the beginning.” (*my paraphrase*)

This isn’t just a lament. There is hope in this psalm. Something amazing happens at verse 22. The psalmist says, “I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.” The psalmist goes from suffering and lamenting to praising God in the congregation, in front of witnesses. To telling people to fear God, worship and adore God. Why? The answer is in verse 24.

“For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.”

What happened? God listened. God saved. And because of God’s actions, not only is the current generation saved, so is the generation to come. Look at the very end of the psalm, verses 30-31

“Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.

³¹They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!”

What happened after Jesus died on the cross? He was raised to life! He saved all of us. And now we proclaim this great story to the whole world, 2,000 years later!

Why did Jesus say those words as he was dying? Because he was quoting this psalm and thinking not of abandonment, but of salvation. Had he enough strength left in him, I’m sure Jesus would have said all 31 verses. But he could only muster enough strength to get as far as the first verse. “My God...”

In light of Jesus’ cry, I want to talk to two different kinds of people: those who are hurting, and those who aren’t. The example Jesus left us on the cross has important ramifications for both kinds.

First, to those who are hurting: The truth is, we are fragile. We are human. Suffering is an inevitable part of our world. So the question is, when we experience pain and loss, does our suffering cause us to run away from God or towards God?

When Jesus cried out in pain from the cross, it was his deepest statement of belief that God would rescue him according to the plan of salvation. What about you? How do you use your pain? To drive you towards God, or away?

C.S. Lewis famously quoted, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” This psalm is a testimony against moralistic therapeutic religion, the kind of cheap talk that says, “Everything is going to be OK.” No, it’s not! Not in the

present. But God holds the future, and real faith says, "I'm in pain, yet I will still trust God's plan."

Jesus' pain drove him closer to God. Where does your pain lead you?

Second, to those who are not currently in any serious pain or suffering right now: This is the place where I am currently. I don't know deep pain or loss. I don't have an excruciating moment. Probably the majority of us are like that. My question for you is: Are we too comfortable? A friend of my parents used to say, "The job of a pastor is afflict the comforted and comfort the afflicted." Are you risking yourself for the sake of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of heaven? If you have, you know pain and loss. If you haven't, maybe that's a sign that you are too comfortable.

People don't come to church looking for comfort. If they did, we'd take out the pews and put in recliners. They are looking for a community that wants to make a difference, a community that shows radical hospitality. Let me apply a little bit of affliction here and mess with you a little. Do you sit in the same pew every Sunday? Why? It's comfortable, right. Let me ask you another question: is our church friendly? Really? Is it friendly to implicitly ask a guest to sit up front, where the pastor is spitting distance from them? To ask them to step over someone's toes to get to the empty seat in the middle of the pew?

Here is a simple risk that every one of us could take: Move forward, and leave the back rows for the traveler who is so weary with burdens that getting to the last pew is the only thing she can do. Take a risk by going out, finding someone, and inviting them to hear the gospel.

Jesus took a great risk for us. He didn't consider his status and comfort level. Instead, Philippians 2:7-8 tells us:

“he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!”

The cry from the cross is, Jesus risked himself to save us, and it was a terrible, but temporary, moment of pain. Are we risking for the sake of Christ? If we do, we might even come to the point when we say, “God, where are you? This hurts. You got me into this mess. So, make a way out. After all, it’s your reputation at stake, God.”

The cry from the cross is a rallying cry for us to take a risk, and ask God for help. The lesson from the cross is, when you ask God to show up, He will. So don’t waste your pain. Let it drive you toward God, not away. And if you feel too comfortable right now, it’s time to become vulnerable and take a risk, so that we can truly show the world the meaning of salvation through a relationship with Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Redeemer, our Savior, and our Sacrifice.

Memory verse

Reflection questions