

Sermon for Trinity Palm Sunday, 2024

At noon the sky became extremely dark. The darkness lasted three hours. At three o'clock, Jesus groaned out of the depths, crying loudly, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

... Jesus, with a loud cry, gave his last breath. At that moment the Temple curtain ripped right down the middle. When the Roman captain standing guard in front of him saw that he had quit breathing, he said, "This has to be the Son of God!"

Eugene Petersen, The Message

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" I remember hearing those words as a child. Even then, because I had no biblical or church reference, I found the words terrifying. Later, I had heard some preachers and teachers graphically portray the horrors of the cross, the nails, the blood, the withering sun. The effect was not what I suspect the teachers wanted me to feel, a profound gratitude that Christ would suffer for me. That kind of gratitude was beyond my innocent ken. But I surely knew the terrifying feeling of abandonment that every child experiences at one time or another. And since I understood abandonment on human terms, how much more terrifying was the cry that someone could be abandoned by God?

For years, I paid attention to what teachers and preachers had to say about the cry of Jesus, hoping for some bit of comfort from them. Some of those who wished to "scare me into heaven" for my own sake explained how crucifixion was the worst death anyone could experience. But in the ensuing years, I learned that when humans turn to torture and death, they can be appallingly inventive. Still others emphasized the terrible loneliness of the cross but even that was ameliorated by reading about the "good thief" in the Gospel of Luke. All those expressions of desertion felt at least partially true, but they did nothing to explain to me how God, in the form of Jesus Christ, could feel abandoned.

Some years later as an adult, preparing for a sermon, I found the cry Jesus cried word for word in Psalm 22. There the words were to be read and be heard by anyone:

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

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

So, these were not just the words of Jesus crying out in abandonment, these were the words of the ancient Psalmist too! Moreover, these were the first words of a longer Psalm 22, a cry meant to invite the reader into the Psalm.

About this time, I learned that the Psalms were the hymnal of both the Israelites and the early Christians. And just like today when we know the words of some songs so well, we can put down the hymnal and sing from memory, so too the people of the time of Jesus. Two weeks ago, I heard the congregation sing "Amazing Grace," mainly from memory. You knew the opening words, declaring your brokenness but so too the last words, that you had been lost but now "I'm found."

Many of the people who heard the cry of the abandonment of Jesus knew Psalm 22 by heart in the same way. Just as many of you knew the words of Amazing Grace, many in the crowd around Jesus knew the conclusion of the Psalm. Here's a paraphrase by Eugene Petersen: "GOD has taken charge; from now on he has the last word. All the power-mongers are before him—worshiping! All the poor and powerless, too--worshiping! Along with those who never got it together—worshiping! Our children and their children will get in on this. As the word is

passed along from parent to child. Babies not yet conceived will hear the good news—that God does what he says.”

Do you hear that? Much like the triumph at the end of *Amazing Grace*, by crying Psalm 22 from the cross, Jesus Christ has recognized the terrible suffering of pain and abandonment that we often experience. But in the next breath, Jesus is calling out the victory that God has already won for us by promise. God does what he says.

Do we feel abandoned sometimes? Yes. Do we suffer terrible pain at times both in mind and body? Most certainly. Every human being does in one way or another. But as the 22nd Psalm concludes, none of this, the loneliness, the pain, the loss, the abandonment, none of those most human of feelings are beyond the reach of God. Jesus Christ means many things to us but among them this one for sure, Christ is with us, Emmanuel. Amen.