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Psalm 22; John 1:1-5
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Where Are You God?

I was reminiscing with a friend recently about what it was like to communicate with people via snailmail. Remember those days when you'd actually have to send out paper resumes with cover letters to potential employers? Or college applications? Or letters? And then you'd have to wait weeks or maybe even months until you got a response?

Today, thanks to our modern technology and these things called cell phones, we can communicate with anyone around the world in seconds. One of my best friends from college was traveling with his son through Kenya recently and he sent me some pictures of him while there. Otis and I were penpals during our Navy days...he was stationed in Charleston South Carolina. I was stationed in Yokuska, Japan and we would write to each other every couple of months. Now to get this text was such a gift...to be able to be in the moment with him...on the other side of the world.

But instant communications also has its drawbacks, especially when you anticipate hearing back from someone right away...and then you don't. Minutes of silence can seem like hours. And days like months. In texting terms its called "ghosting." "Ghosting" is when someone has received your text message or email, but chooses not to respond right away. Perhaps they have other plans that don't include you, or there's some bad news that they don't want to give you.

We expect this sort of behavior from imperfect humans and human run institutions. But what do we do when God ghosts us? Goes dark. Doesn't respond to our prayers. Or seems to have left us.

We cry out, with all our might and tell God exactly how we feel. Forgotten. Abandoned. Ghosted.

Jesus certainly felt all of this on the cross as did the Psalmist of Psalm 22 which is the text we are focusing on this morning. Two third of the psalms are laments. Cries of abandonment. Pastor and author Eugene Peterson states, "History is lubricated by tears. Prayer, maybe most prayer, is accompanied by tears. All these tears are gathered up and absorbed in the tears of Jesus."¹

Join me in reading Psalm 22 this morning and we hear some familiar words of Jesus within it.

¹ Eugene Peterson quoted by Pete Greig in *God on Mute, Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer* (Colorado Springs, CO: David Cook Books, 2020), 89.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

3 Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.

4 In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.

5 To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

6 But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

8 “He trusts in the Lord,” they say,
“let the Lord rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him.”

9 Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.

10 From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother’s womb you have been my God.

11 Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

12 Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

13 Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.

14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.

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 Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.

17 All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.

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

19 But you, Lord, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

20 Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.

21 Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

22 I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.

23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

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.

25 From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.

26 The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!

27 All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,

28 for dominion belongs to the Lord
and he rules over the nations.

29 All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.

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

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

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Thanks Greg for choosing such a light and easy topic today! Just kidding. But an important one, no less. And so this morning, I want to touch on the seeming absence of God in the midst of human suffering. We'll ask what have people thought throughout the ages about it? We'll look at how Psalm 22 moves through suffering and how it certainly must have been on Jesus' mind as he suffered. And finally, we'll consider what hope does it provide when God seems to ghost us in our suffering.

Theodicy is a theological term for how humans have tried to justify God's goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil.

In other words, if we say that God is good all the time, all the time God is good, then how can a truly good God allow something like evil to exist in the world? Doesn't that seem contrary?

Theologians have argued over this contradiction for ages.

Some say that when God created the world, he created humans with the freedom to do good or evil. It's called free will. So though God created the world good, and while his intentions for us are to do good, he also left ample room for us to do otherwise.

Some say that human suffering and evil are necessary for us to develop morally and spiritually. Suffering creates the crucible where by we are molded more and more into the image of God. Romans 8:28 says, All things God uses for the good of those who love him.

Some, like John Calvin, say that God ordains everything that happens both good and evil, and uses it all according to his overarching sovereign plan.

Others just say it is a mystery and we will never know how or why both good and evil exist in the world. They just are, like Ying and Yang.

Atheists say the existence of evil proves that a good and benevolent God can't exist.

Author and pastor Pete Greig says that the question we should be asking in our suffering is not how or why is this happening, but where are you God in my suffering?

The truth is that evil produces suffering. And human suffering is real. Just watch the world news nightly!

When sin entered the world, it marred our good world and shattered our relationships within it...with God, with each other, with ourselves, and all of creation.

As long as there is sin the world, we can be certain there will be suffering.

C.S. Lewis once said, “Lay down this book and reflect for five minutes on the fact that all the great religions were first preached and long practiced, in a world without chloroform.”² In other words a world without surgical anesthesia. Talk about pain and suffering.

But whether the suffering is caused by others, by ourselves, or by the world, suffering has always been and always will be part of the human experience.

Jesus himself said, “In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world.”³

The Greek word for trouble is *thlipsis*. It can also mean distress, affliction, or anguish. In other words, suffering. But Jesus also encourages us to take heart, because he removes our suffering? No! Because he has overcome our suffering and redeemed it.

The Greek word for overcome is *nikio*. It can also mean to conquer, prevail, or gain victory over.

But how does Jesus gain victory over our suffering? By sharing in it. Being with us. Because He is a God who also experienced suffering.

Psalm 22 and the Gospel of Matthew confirm that. Notice how Jesus repeated the first line of Psalm 22 on the cross. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Those are the words of a suffering man.

The Hebrew word for forsaken comes from the root word *azab*. It can also mean to leave, abandon, or let go. In essence, Jesus cried out, “My God, how can YOU leave me here, alone?”

If you have ever uttered those words before, you know what Jesus felt. Likewise, Jesus knows what you felt.

Ghosted by God. Demanding, where are you God?

But why would God go silent even as his own Son was suffering?

Maybe God had something better in store than running to Jesus’ rescue. Something better for us.

² C.S. Lewis quoted in Pete Greig, *God on Mute*, 132.

³ John 16:33

Perhaps by forcing Jesus to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, like the rest of us, we can confidently follow him through it to the other side, when it is our time.

Pete Greig wrote in his book, *God on Mute*, “Martin Luther argued that God withdraws and falls silent in order to draw us into deeper relationship with Him that is only possible when we move beyond merely outward experiences and purely rational understanding. If Luther is right, then the silence and unknowing of Holy Saturday [the day before Easter] are essential to growing deeper in our relationship with God. The silence of God is intentional.”⁴

Theologian P.T. Forsythe, said, “The outer need kindles the inner, and we find that the complete answer to prayer is the Answerer.”⁵ God himself.

Notice how the Psalmist in Psalm 22 experiences God only after crying out in God’s alleged absence.

He fluctuates between feeling abandoned by God and praising of God.

In one moment, he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And then in the next, exults God. “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One, you are the praise of Israel.”

And then falls to self loathing, “I am but a worm and not a man.” Then rises to acknowledge God’s creation, “Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust you.”

And then he experiences paranoia and doom, “Many bulls and dogs surround me, Roaring lions want to consume me.” Then rises to cry out for help, “But you, O Lord, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me.”

Have you ever been on an emotional and spiritual roller coaster like this before? Up one moment, then down the next?

It is just part of being human. It’s easy to feel this way, especially when we suffer in isolation, apart from a loving community of faith who can pray for us and walk alongside us in our pain. I pity the person who suffers alone.

Notice in the Psalm how being in community eventually liberates the psalmist from his negative head talk and paranoia. He is reminded once again that he is indeed not alone.

“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters, in the congregation I will praise you.”

One of the many gifts of being part of a congregation like Cascades is that we get to walk along side people through many seasons of life. Both good and bad. The more I walk with other people in their suffering and see how God has been

⁴ Greig, *God on Mute*, 213.

⁵ P.T. Forsythe quoted in Greig, *God on Mute*, 155.

with them through it, the more I gain the confidence that when, not if, but when I experience suffering, that I will make it through it as well.

Pete Greig writes, “Perhaps we should accept what older people and poorer people and many of those with disabilities already know: things are probably going to be very difficult today and just as hard tomorrow too. Maybe by adjusting our expectations we can reduce the sense of disappointment, isolation, and unfairness riding on the back of unanswered prayer.”⁶ [When God ghosts us.]

When God is silent, we must remember what God said to Israelites, “Never will I leave you or forsake you.”⁷ And what Jesus said to his disciples just before ascending into heaven, “Surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”⁸

I love how the Psalmist ends Psalm 22 by painting a word picture of the kingdom of heaven that has broken through his suffering.

Where vows are fulfilled.

Where the rich and hungry eat together and are satisfied.

Where no one forgets the Lord.

Where families worship the Lord together.

Where the dead come alive again.

And where future generations turn their hearts toward God.

Desolation to consolation. Abandonment to praise. Individualism to community. Hopelessness to the kingdom of heaven breaking into their midst.

Notice how the very last words of the psalm “For he has done it” echo Jesus very last words on the cross. “It is finished.”

So may we pour our honest laments to God in our suffering. May we know that Jesus joins us as we suffering. May we trust that God is at work even when God remains silent. And may we know that at some point our suffering will end as Psalm 30:5 says, “Weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.”

So hold on tight. God has not forgotten you when He goes silent. He might just be at work doing something that has yet to be seen.

⁶ Greig, *God on Mute*, 133.

⁷ Hebrews 13:5, Deuteronomy 31:6

⁸ Matthew 28:20

Prayer for Trust in Jesus by Ignatius of Loyola

O Christ Jesus,
when all is darkness
and we feel our weakness and helplessness,
give us the sense of Your presence,
Your love, and Your strength.
Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry us,
for, living close to You,
we shall see Your hand,
Your purpose, Your will through all things.