

“Why?”

A Good Friday Reflection Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Psalm 22:1-5

- ¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
³Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
⁴In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
⁵To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”

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

These familiar words, uttered by Jesus on the cross, were taken from the beginning of Psalm 22, and are among the most poignant in all of Scripture.

Both Matthew and Mark include this plea in their Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion. Tellingly, they offer the Aramaic phrase in each of their texts. It is as if they both wanted to say, “Please, take notice. This is very important.” And these words are important, indeed crucial, not only to understanding the last moments of Jesus’ eventful life, but to knowing the God he called Father, the God we claim and confess loves us.

At first glance, it appears that Jesus was giving in to despair, that he, in his aching solitude, believed God had abandoned him, and thus made a mockery of his life and his ministry.

Was Jesus’ life rendered meaningless by what happened on the Cross?

Are we fools to place our trust and hope in God?

Will we, too, learn in the end that all is hopeless, that darkness, despair, and death will have the last word?

Only if we don’t listen to Jesus.

Only if we fail to really hear what he said.

Only if we ignore what he did on that long-ago Friday.

Think of the words that Jesus uttered on the cross: words of Hebrew Scripture, words from the Psalms. In this horrible moment, he turned to the words of the Torah, the holy book of his people, to cry out, to ask of God where he was.

He did not curse.

He did not remain silent.

Instead, he wanted to know where God was in his moment of suffering. He did not ask for God to relieve him of this burden, to whisk him away to safety. Rather, he by asking God where he was, he was saying that he wanted to know God was with him. Jesus was showing the depth of their relationship by asking something real of God, of letting him know his pain in that moment, and that he did not want to be alone.

This honesty, this openness, shows the depths of the relationship between the Father and the Son—and it is meant to mark the relationship each of us has with God, too, one that is full, complicated, and mature.

When we are in pain, we can cry out to God.

When we are lost, we can seek direction from God.

When we want answers, we can ask God why they are not forthcoming.

When we are beleaguered, we can ask God to share the burden with us.

Yes, we can ask God to free us from all pain and suffering, but then we are asking God to free us from the patterns and rhythms of human life. We ask God to help us navigate this life, not to escape its demands.

You see, by quoting from the Psalms, Jesus has given us license to be open to God, to say anything to him, to ask anything of the One who created us.

Much has been written over the centuries of the purpose of the crucifixion, much is still debated about its meaning. What I will tell you is this, and it is what I believe: by going to the cross, Jesus, and thus God, knew our pain, shared in our suffering, and experienced the worst that humans can do to one another. We can never say God is aloof, that God is somewhere “out there,” immune to or free from the slings and arrows of life. God knows; believe me, God knows. God has lived our life. When we call to him in distress, when we turn to him in grieving, when we need to rage at him for something that is happening, God hears us and he understands us. To use an old phrase, God has walked in our shoes.

I do not believe that Jesus words were a surrender; far from it—they were a final expression of confidence. Remember that the psalm begins with a lament but then quickly turns to a statement of belief and trust.

In our moment of darkness, in this hour when we wonder why so many suffer, we should not succumb to the false notion that God does not care. Instead, we should remember that God knows how illness ravages us, how financial stress may plague us, how uncertainty about the future may cause us anxiety. And just as God was with Jesus as he was on the cross, and as our faith tells us, through this harrowing in hell, he was with him when he was resurrected, as he will be with us.

Light will overcome darkness.

Hope will displace despair.

And life will triumph over death.

This is what we remember, standing in the shadows at the foot of the cross.