

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Sunday, March 18, 2012
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings: Mark 15:29-36a

Psalm 22: A PRAYER OF DISTRESS AND ASSURANCE Psalm 22: 1-31

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

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

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

People: Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

Leader: In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

People: To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Leader: But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.

People: All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

Leader: Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!

People: Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me me safe on my mother's breast.

Leader: On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

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

Leader: Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

People: they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

Leader: I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast;

People: my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks

to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

Leader: For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;

People: I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me;

Leader: they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.

People: But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!

Leader: Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!

People: Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

All Sing

Ellacombe

**Amid the thronging worshipers the living Lord I bless;
Before my people, gathered here, God's name will I confess.
Come sing with all who fear the Lord, You children of God's grace;
With reverence sound all glory forth and bow before God's face.**

**The burden of the sorrowful the Lord will not despise;
God has not turned from those who mourn but listens to their cries.
Such goodness makes me join the throng where saints this praise
proclaim,
And there will I fulfill my vows with those who fear God's name.**

**You feed with good the humble ones and satisfy the meek,
And they shall live and praise you, Lord, who for your mercy seek.
The ends of all the earth take thought, the nations seek you, Lord.
They worship you, the Sovereign One, in earth and heaven adored.**

**Before you, Lord the proud shall bow, the haughty with their trust.
They cannot keep themselves alive; they too return to dust.
But you, Lord, dwell beyond all time, deliverance to proclaim
To generations yet unborn who shall confess your name.**

(The concluding sung portion of Psalm 22 is taken from a paraphrase of the psalm by Fred R. Anderson in his book, Singing Psalms of Joy and Praise, copyright 1986, and used by permission.)

Sermon Title: “The Glory of God in the Words of Jesus from the Cross: “My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

Sermon Text: Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

A woman who was facing major surgery for cancer came to her pastor on one occasion and asked him to recommend a book she could read that would bring her some guidance, comfort and assurance as she faced her surgery. If she had come to you with such a request what book would you have recommended to her? We have only to walk through any bookstore, especially Christian bookstores or to check Amazon or some other online stores to find any number of books that would seem to fit this bill. Many of you may have such books on your own bookshelves.

I do not know how many of you would have made the same recommendation that her pastor made. I also do not know whether the same recommendation may have been made to you at some time in your own lives. His recommendation to her was that she read the Book of Psalms. He suggested that she read the whole thing in one or two sittings in order to have an immersion experience in the soul of the writer.

At some point in your life some of you may have done exactly what her pastor suggested. I am not sure that I would be able to claim to have read the whole Book of Psalms in one or two sessions.

When her pastor went back to talk with this woman and asked her how it had gone she said, “I had no idea that the psalmist knew me so well, knew who I am, my precise condition, and what I needed and when. When he rejoiced, so did I, and when he howled and cried out, I did as well.”

I do not know whether you have had such a reaction from reading the Book of Psalms. Such a reaction, though, is not strange. As we read though the whole Book of Psalms and do not keep reading or referring to just a few favorites we find ourselves confronted by the whole gamut of human experience. It is for this reason, of course, that as this woman found the psalms to be such a source of comfort, strength, inspiration and insight to her, so they have been to so many men and women over the centuries.

From the way in which he quotes the psalms at various times in his teachings it is very clear that Jesus was familiar with the Book of Psalms. This book has often been called the “songbook of the people of Israel,” so Jesus may well have known what it was not just to read the psalms as we so frequently do today but also knew what it was to sing them. Part of the reason for the way in which we concluded the reading of Psalm 22 this morning by the singing a paraphrase was to give us part of the feeling of those who used the psalms as hymns and as songs to be sung.

This morning I invited us to read and then sing part of Psalm 22 together in order that we may get a feel of the whole of this rather long psalm. There is, of course, no absolute way in which we can say that when Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” he was quoting the opening verse of Psalm 22. But the fact that the words are quoted verbatim has prompted many to speculate what it would mean if in what is so often called his cry of dereliction from the cross Jesus was in fact praying Psalm 22, and that the only words which were heard by the crowd were these opening words. Since Psalm 22 is not probably on the top 10 of the most familiar of the psalms for most of us today, hearing Jesus cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” may not prompt us to do what it has been suggested many in that crowd around the cross would have done. It has been suggested that when this crowd heard these

words they would have taken them not as an isolated cry but would have heard them in the context of the whole psalm. Adam Hamilton has suggested that as the crowd heard this cry of Jesus it would be like someone crying out, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,” among a group of Christians; most would immediately think to themselves, “that saved a wretch like me.” (*Final Words by Adam Hamilton, page 79, 2011 Abingdon Press*) Today, another even closer analogy to the experience of those who heard Jesus cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” as the opening words of Psalm 22 would be for someone to cry out, “The Lord is My Shepherd.” Hearing those words would prompt many of us, I am sure, to go on to quote or to at least think about the rest of the psalm that follows Psalm 22, namely the far more familiar one for us, Psalm 23.

As we have read Psalm 22 together this morning I am sure that we noted many interesting parallels to what we know of the familiar story of the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. “All who see me mock me; ‘Commit your cause to the Lord, let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights’” (verses 7-8). As we remember his cry, “I thirst,” we think of the words, “My mouth is dried up like potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws’ you lay me in the dust of death.” (verse 10) “A company of evildoers encircles me.” (verse 16) “They stare and gloat over me.” (verse 17) “They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” (verse 18) The parallels are so close that the whole experience may well have prompted Jesus to remember this psalm and, therefore, to start to sing it and to pray it as he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

Part of the reason I wanted us to read and sing this psalm together this morning was that I am sure that for most of us simply to say that in crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” Jesus was singing and praying

Psalm 22 would not prompt us to recognize what he was saying and praying because this is not such a familiar psalm to many of us. As I had read this psalm again this week I was reminded of the tremendous contrast that we see in this and in so many of the psalms. Even most psalms that we might classify as psalms of distress, despair and of anguish have about them words of assurance. Though the psalmist may feel God has abandoned him at that moment he can still cry out, “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you delivered them; to you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.” (verses 3-6) Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.” (verse 10) In these verses we hear a note of confident trust that though he may feel abandoned by God at that moment he trusted that the God who has been faithful to him, and to his ancestors, in the past will not abandon him to the company of evildoers at the present time. We do not know exactly what might have happened in his life between the last words that we read and then the words that we started to sing. Very obviously, though, his mood changes. The words we sang together are ones of confidence and assurance and thanksgiving for all that God has done for him. He is so grateful that he wants others to join him in giving praise and thanks to God. Despite how he may have felt as he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he is confident that God will not abandon him or other people so that even generations yet unborn will rise up with him to bring praise and glory to God.

Maybe it was hearing Jesus cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” and remembering the rest of the psalm and its confidence in God’s deliverance that prompted someone to want to try to prolong his life by giving him a drink so they could see whether God would send Elijah to take him down.

Though we may not be absolutely certain that Jesus was actually praying Psalm 22 when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” his

experience on the cross and afterwards remind us of the truth affirmed by that psalm. Although for Matthew and Mark this is the only saying of Jesus from the cross as we shall see over the next two weeks Luke and John affirm that this cry of dereliction and despair was not the final word of Jesus from the cross. He dies with the greater confidence of the end of Psalm 22 rather than with the despair of its opening words.

Whether or not Jesus was praying this psalm from the cross the conclusion of confidence in the God who does not abandon us is very evident in the fact that for Jesus the cross was not the end of the story. Today, we are part of those future generations then unborn to the psalmist and to Jesus on the cross who now confess God's name.

Whether or not Jesus was praying Psalm 22, his cry of dereliction from the cross is our reminder that even when the circumstances of our lives make us feel that God has abandoned us and that we are surrounded by evildoers the final word lies with the God who did not abandon the psalmist, who did not abandon the people of Israel, who did not abandon Jesus in death, and who has not abandoned the church and God's people down through the centuries and will not abandon us today. This is the confidence that we affirmed in our opening hymn. This is confidence that that pastor hoped that woman would experience as she read the Book of Psalms. It is this assurance that has come to me in so many different circumstances and at different times in my ministry. Without such an experience of the presence and guidance of God even in those times when I felt God had forsaken me or the situations by which I was faced I would never have been able to continue for almost forty years of ministry.

As we remember that the cry of despair, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," was not the final experience for Jesus we are enabled to see the cross in a new light. Now we see it not as a place of God forsakenness and a clear

sign of God's abandonment of this world and human beings in their sin and evil but as a place where we can glory in the peace and joy God offers even in the midst of both pain and pleasure.

It is because the cry of despair, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," was not the final experience for Jesus on the cross that we can come to see the cross as the place where we are assured that the love and grace and mercy of the God who abides with us is to be found. It is this confidence that prompts us to pray with Henry Francis Lyte even as like him we might face the eventide of life,

"Hold Thou my cross before my closing eyes.

Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.

Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee;

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Whether or not Jesus was praying Psalm 22 when he cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," his experience only helps to affirm the earlier experience of the psalmist. His words, affirmed by the experience of Jesus, prompted that pastor to encourage that woman facing cancer to read the Book of Psalms. Through his words, affirmed by the experience of Jesus, we have that assurance that even in the midst of all the problems of life which may cause us to feel that God has abandoned us and forsaken us, we are not alone. Let us affirm that assurance again using the words of affirmation as they come to us from the Creed of the United Church of Canada as they are found in the back inside cover of our Presbyterian Hymnal.

UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA CREED

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating,
who has come in the true Man, Jesus, to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by his Spirit. We trust him.

He calls us to be his church:
to celebrate his presence,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.

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Abide with Me

Henry Francis Lyte, 1847

EVENTIDE 10.10.10.10

William Henry Monk, 1861

1. A - bide with me: fast falls the e - ven - tide;
 2. Swift to its close ebbs out life's lit - tle day;
 3. I need Thy pres - ence ev - ery pass - ing hour;
 4. I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless:

The dark - ness deep - ens; Lord, with me a - bide!
 Earth's joys grow dim, its glo - ries pass a - way;
 What but Thy grace can foil the tempt - er's power?
 Ills have no weight, and tears no bit - ter - ness.

When oth - er help - ers fail and com - forts flee,
 Change and de - cay in all a - round I see.
 Who, like Thy - self, my guide and stay can be?
 Where is death's sting? Where, grave, Thy vic - to - ry?

Help of the help - less, O a - bide with me.
 O Thou who chang - est not, a - bide with me.
 Through cloud and sun - shine, Lord, a - bide with me.
 I tri - umph still, if Thou a - bide with me.

5. Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
 Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies:
 Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
 In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.