

August 5, 2018  
Series: Summer in the Psalms

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**Mark 15:25-34**  
**Psalm 22: 1-11**

### **Unforsaken**

*At three o'clock he cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* – Mark 15:34

Have you been following the news story of the orcas off the Washington coast? A 20-year old mother orca and her pod, that's what marine biologists call a family of killer whales, are traveling up the coast toward British Columbia. The 20-year-old gave birth on the journey; the calf died soon after birth. For nearly two weeks, over hundreds of miles, she has been carrying the body of the calf. The sounds coming from the pod, scientists say, are sounds of mourning. Honestly, I've never thought too much about the grief of animals, though I know it's real.

Two days after my father died, I went to the Harrison Funeral Home in Lexington, Virginia to sign the Identification Form. It's the sad duty of every family to certify that the deceased is actually who they think he is. A kind funeral director led me alone to a darkened room where my father's casket lay open. "I'll give you a few minutes," the funeral director said, and closed the door. It was the first time I'd seen my father's body since the night he died. The sight of him there, so still, hit me in the gut and took my breath. I let out a sound, something like the sound of the mourning orcas.

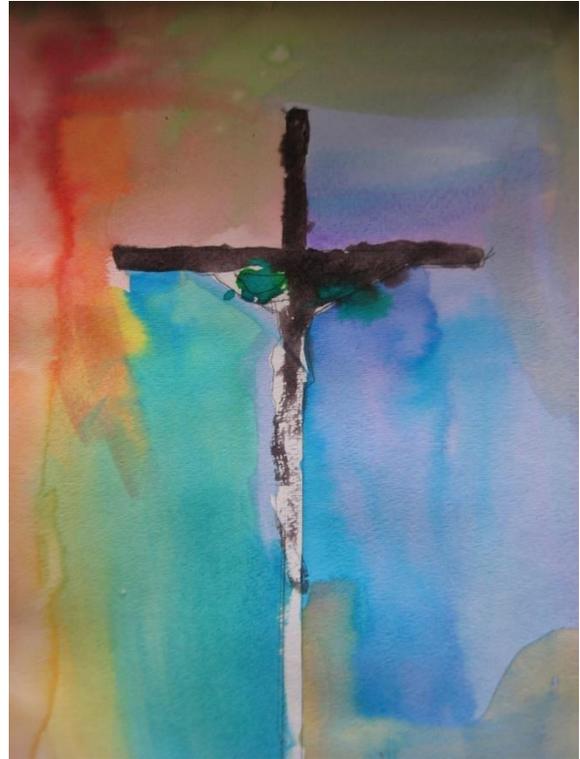
*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Those were the first words that came to my mind. I hadn't cried; I hadn't had time. In that private room, alone, the tears finally came.

Was I abandoned? Forsaken? Of course not! God was never nearer to me than at that moment.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> psalm is our text for today. The song is a lament, a sincere cry from the heart, from the one who is suffering. All four gospels recorded Jesus' last words on the cross. Mark and Matthew remember that in Jesus' agony on the cross, he began to recite this well-known song of sorrow. Listen to the first 11 verses of Psalm 22:

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



*and are so far from my cry and from the words of my distress?  
O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer;  
by night as well, but I find no rest.*

*And yet you are the Holy One,  
enthroned upon the praises of Israel.  
Our ancestors put their trust in you;  
they trusted, and you delivered them.  
They cried out to you and were delivered;  
they trusted in you and were not put to shame.*

*But as for me, I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by all and despised by the people.  
All who see me laugh me to scorn;  
they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,  
“He trusted in the LORD; let the LORD deliver him;  
let God rescue him, if God delights in him.”*

*And yet you are the one who took me out of the womb,  
and kept me safe upon my mother’s breast.  
I have been entrusted to you ever since I was born;  
you were my God when I was still in my mother’s womb.*

*Be not far from me, for trouble is near,  
and there is none to help.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

United Church of Christ minister Marty Copenhaver pointed out that there are more prayers of lament in the Bible than there are prayers of praise. Fully one third of the psalms are laments.<sup>i</sup> I wonder why that is. Probably because there is so much sorrow. Life is hard, and grief is the price of love. When we are most honest with God, we have to admit that we are in pain; our world is in pain. Pain can cause us to doubt God’s presence and love.

But let’s be clear: lament is not the same thing as doubt. It is not whining. A lament is a cry for help, a cry that is grounded in God’s power and ability to save. As the great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson used to say, “Anybody singing the blues is in a deep pit yelling for help.”<sup>ii</sup> That’s lament.

Psalm 22 is a lament, like the dozens of others in the Bible. Like all the others, Psalm 22 is predicated on knowledge that God’s presence and help are real. In the agony of his crucifixion Jesus quoted Psalm 22. Of course he did. No one suffers this kind of anguish without feeling alone and abandoned.

In Bible study this week I said that, while some disagree,<sup>iii</sup> it is my studied opinion that God never abandoned Jesus on the cross, though his human nature surely understood it that way. But

in fact, God was never more present with Jesus, and in the world, than at the cross. My co-leader, the Reverend Marie Shelton, pointed out that Jesus could not have been forsaken. Had he been truly abandoned, he would never have been able to cry out,

*Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.*<sup>iv</sup>

In life and in death we belong to God. Jesus was in God and God was in Jesus, suffering the worst results of human sin. And it is the same for you and me. There are times when we feel desperately helpless and alone, but we are never forsaken, because there is no place, no person, no situation in which God is absent. Creation is never Godforsaken. God has not left the building.

Jesus' cry from the cross;

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

Is an anguished plea for help to the present God, the One who is able to save.

I love what Maryland author Brian McLaren said about Psalm 22. He wrote:

"In uttering that question *why*, Jesus validated that pain... doubt and despair are indeed part of the human condition, and they are even part of a life well lived. But they are not the last word. Jesus thus comes out in solidarity not only with faithful people, but also with doubters, questioners, and skeptics. ... He sustained both *my God* and *why God* ... faith and ... honesty."<sup>v</sup>

McLaren is able say that because of the scripture Jesus quoted on the cross. He didn't have to recite the whole psalm; all the Jews present knew it by heart. It would be like me saying, "The Lord is my Shepherd." You would immediately reply, "I shall not want/He makes me to lie down in green pastures/ He leads me beside still waters/He restores my soul." In that moment Jesus' strength and breath were limited.

When those present heard him say, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," they immediately thought: "Why are you so far from helping me...And yet, you are holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel...in you our ancestors trusted..." They would have responded that way because those are the lines of the song. It has a "finely-wrought compositional design,"<sup>vi</sup> a rhythm that constantly moves back and forth between lament and praise.

Verse 6: *I am a worm...all who see me mock me,*

Verse 9: *And yet, it was you who took me from my mother's womb; you kept me safe.*

Verse 14: *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint,*

Verse 19: *And yet, you, O Lord, are not far away.*

Suffering...and yet... fear...and yet...doubt... and yet...

Verse 27: *All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord.*

If you have never felt hopeless, if you have never had your world fall apart around you, if you have never been in unbearable pain, I am glad for you. But for Jesus – and so many others, it has been that way. In the moment of his greatest anguish Jesus clung to this psalm, a song that could be titled, “And yet ...”

The sorrow of a marine mammal whose calf has died has captured the heart of the world, and it should. The species is endangered and it is a serious problem. But the suffering pales in comparison to the agony of 68 million migrants and refugees who are right now displaced because of famine, war, and natural disaster. The problem is not new, but the scale of it is staggering, and I am grateful to you, Woods Church, that recently and historically we have worked to ease the pain of refugees.

There’s a true story that Tony Campolo tells of his grandparents’ arrival in this country. Some of you remember Tony. He spoke here in 2014. Tony and his wife, Peggy are great friends of Dan and Laurel Raymond of our church. In fact, Tony married them 37 years ago. Dan said, “Tony ties a tight knot!” Amen!

It seems that Tony’s grandparents came to the U.S. as immigrants from Italy. They settled in Philadelphia. Not long after they arrived, Tony’s grandfather suddenly died, leaving his grandmother alone in a strange land with no English and no way to provide for herself and her children.

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

Desperate, one day, Tony’s grandmother gave her 9-year-old daughter Mary, Tony’s mother, a note, and asked her to wait an hour, then take the note to the police station two blocks away. The note told the police where to find the orphaned children. She was going to take her own life. She reasoned that then, at least her children would have food to eat and loving care at the local orphanage.

Tony’s mother remembers huddling with her siblings, in the cold, basement room that was their apartment, waiting out that hour, watching out the tiny window as their mother staggered off toward the Delaware River, tears running down her face. On the way she caught the attention of a young seminary student named Everett Griffith. He had a gift for languages. He’d been working out of a street mission, similar to the Broadstreet Ministry where our Middle School youth served this summer. He’d learned Italian to better communicate with the huge population of immigrants and refugees living there.

Griffith intercepted Tony’s grandmother and calmed her down. They gathered up the children and went to the Baptist mission where Griffith worked. He helped them find a better place to live and even secured a job for 9-year-old Mary. After school she cleaned jewelry for the stores on Philadelphia’s Jewelers’ Row. Needless to say, the family became active in that mission church, worshipping there each Sunday.

Tony's father had refugeeed from Sicily when he was 15 after an earthquake that killed most of his family.

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

He lied about his age and joined the Canadian army, figuring at least there he would have food and a place to sleep. On the Western Front he took a heavy dose of Mustard Gas and was sent back to Montreal to recover. When he was well enough to travel, he made his way to Philadelphia. Jobs were scarce and Tony, Sr. ended up homeless. That was when he met the same seminary student that was so important in rescuing Mary and her family. Everett Griffith found him a job cleaning windows at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel. Tony, Sr. also became a regular at that same Baptist mission, and where he met Mary.

Decades later, Mary and Tony's son, Tony, Jr. was a senior at Eastern University and chair of the campus Christian fellowship. The university would bring in speakers to inspire the students to make life commitments to Christ. That year the speaker was the noted Hebrew scholar named Dr. Everett Griffith. Neither Tony nor Dr. Griffith was aware of the connection between them. As they sat on the platform waiting for the event to begin, Dr. Griffith turned to Tony and asked his name. When Tony told him, Griffith exclaimed, "I knew a Tony Campolo when I worked in the Baptist mission in south Philadelphia." Without hesitation Tony replied, "That's my father."

"Well, then, said the Hebrew scholar, "if that's your father, then I married your parents." Then he looked young Tony in the eye and asked, "What are you planning to do with your life?" Tony told him that he had committed to the Christian ministry. Everett Griffith started to cry. Tony said it took him several minutes to compose himself well enough to begin his speech.<sup>vii</sup>

I wonder if Everett Griffith lived long enough to see the young man on the podium with him become one the best known preacher, teachers, evangelists of his generation, after Billy Graham? A counselor to presidents? Author of 38 books? I expect he never knew. All he knew was that many years earlier he had met some desperate people, people who felt hopeless, abandoned by God, forsaken. By learning their language and showing them simple kindness, Everett Griffith became the Campolo family's "And yet..." People of God, go be somebody's "and yet."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>i</sup> Martin Copenhaver, "The Psalmist Gets the Blues," *Day1*, July 2, 2016

<sup>ii</sup> Mahalia Jackson by Copenhaver

<sup>iii</sup> The question, "Did God abandon Jesus on the cross?" has vexed biblical scholars and theologians for centuries. There are excellent arguments on either side of the question. One of the best treatments of this question I know is Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus*, Eerdmans, 2017. Note especially the extended footnote on page 98.

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 23:47 KJV

<sup>v</sup> Brian McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, HarperOne, 2012, 183.

<sup>vi</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, 108.

<sup>vii</sup> Tony Campolo, *Stories That Feed Your Soul*, Baker, 2010, 107-109