

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Psalm 22: 1-11; 22-31
“A Psalm of Resurrection”
5th Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2015

Psalm 22 divides into two distinct sections. The first, verses 1-21a, is a lament forged from an experience of intense suffering. There is a Salvador Dali-esque cast to the images in the first section of the Psalm. The Psalmist's paintbrush strokes surreal hellishness on the canvas of readers' minds in his description of drooling bulls and snarling dogs doing the chicken dance around the sufferer, in his portrayal of a human body poured out like water and a human heart melting as if it were wax.

In the middle of verse 21, the mood of the Psalm makes a striking change. It is as if something happens to the Psalmist in that blank, white space that editors have inserted mid-verse in many Bibles. It is as if the doctor walks in and says, "The results of the tests are back. For all intents and purposes, you are cancer-free," or the judge looks you in the eye and says, "The charges are dismissed," or you catch a glimpse of a sliver of light beaming into the tunnel of whatever darkness it is that has engulfed you for longer than you could say.

Today's Scripture lesson consists of the first 11 verses of Psalm 22, the introduction to the lament section of the Psalm. I will then leave it to you to read on your own the remainder of the lament section with its strong images of suffering. I will conclude the reading beginning at verse 21a, continuing to the end of the Psalm.

Many of us cannot read Psalm 22 without thinking of Jesus. More specifically, many Christians cannot read Psalm 22 without thinking of Jesus's death. When the gospels tell the story of the Passion of Jesus, Psalm 22 is woven into the narrative in five different places, the best-known of these being Jesus's cry from the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani," "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The church, reading Psalm 22 through the ages, has often pointed to it and said, "This is prophecy." Written hundreds of years before Jesus, Psalm 22 predicts that there is going to be a Messiah, his name will be Jesus, and one day, he will die on a cross and utter these very words, say those who read the psalm as prophecy in the strict sense of prediction.

This is the way that some have read Psalm 22.

This is another way to read the Psalm, however, a truer way, I believe, and it is this: When read in its entirety, Psalm 22 is an expression of the most confounding mystery to which people of faith cling—that in the midst of suffering and death, God bestows life. (1) Psalm 22 can be read as a resurrection Psalm. It affirms that Our God, long before Jesus, was a resurrecting God. And as God bestowed new life upon the Psalmist in the midst of suffering, as God raised Jesus from death to life, so God's spirit is at work today, bestowing life. Where there is suffering and death.

As I mentioned earlier, Psalm 22 begins in groaning lament. It begins with the Psalmist crying out in unabashed and painful honesty to God.

It is certainly fitting for our worship today as our hearts are weighed down by the enormity of the suffering that is piling layer upon layer upon the people of Nepal in the wake of the earthquakes there, as we struggle to frame our tumbling thoughts and our articulate stuttered responses to the injustice and the violence which has flamed up in yet another community in our nation so that we are all given to see the deep divide of mistrust that marks not only Baltimore and North Charleston and Ferguson, but all of us, whatever neighborhood, city, or state we call home.

For many of us, as well, there is in Psalm 22 the cry of our own personal forsakenness, those moments, past, present, and the imagined future, when we, because of physical or mental illness, because of public shame heaped upon us or the silent pain of internal shame, weep the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The lament section of Psalm 22 is fitting because it doesn't whitewash the true situation of humanity as it is experienced personally and individually and as it is experienced in the collective experience of God's whole and good creation as it is held captive by sin. As Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Connor has noted, "The psalm reinforces a major biblical theme. God shows special care for the afflicted. God is present with them. God hears their cry. Unless we recognize our afflictions, unless we know our broken humanity and our need for divine grace,

we will not be among those able to offer wholehearted praise. Our praise will always be a veneer, a wishful act, a bandaging over of our true inner life.” (2)

“If we do not recognize the death in which we live, the deaths to which we contribute, and the death that closes our spirits to the suffering of others, then resurrection, the surprise of new life, the hope for God’s [realization of the vision of shalom will] have no prepared space to take root.” (3)

Lament over our individual and collective suffering and death is the soil out of which the experience of resurrection sprouts.

It is a great mystery, and yet it is true. In the midst of death, God bestows life.

And when life comes, according to the Psalmist, the whole congregation of God’s people cannot keep from singing.

In the Psalmist’s day, when life rose up out of sorrow, a person would make a beeline for the sanctuary of the temple, provide a sacrificial meal for those who were with him, and sing a song of thanksgiving for his salvation. (4)

The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper which we will celebrate in worship today is a descendant of the sacrificial meal of thanksgiving.

And the song of thanksgiving for our salvation...

In a manner of speaking this is what is happening in our worship today as we celebrate the one-year anniversary of Davidson College Presbyterian Church’s partnership with Blythe Elementary School. In some sense, one might say that our involvement with Blythe grew out of a lament that our community and our nation are not doing all that we can to provide a good education for all God’s children. This is a particularly strong and focused lament of concern for Presbyterians who name ourselves as the descendants of John Calvin who back in 1559 broke with medieval pedagogy that limited education primarily to an aristocratic elite to establish an academy in Geneva which was a pilot for broad-based education for the city.

Who could have imagined back on May 3, 2014 which new life God would bring forth here at Davidson College Presbyterian Church through our partnership with Blythe?

Who could have imagined on May 3, 2014 the song of new life that we would sing one year later on May 3, 2015, a song celebrating

- Hundreds of books that Vacation Bible School children contributed to the library and classrooms at Blythe?
- 140 teachers and staff at Blythe being encouraged by breakfast and lunch and snacks being served to them in appreciation for all that they do day in and day out to nurture the minds and spirits of the children in our community?
- The smiles on the faces of members of our church and the ways that our hearts have been expanded as we have welcomed children to school in the carpool line and spent time reading to them on Dr. Seuss’s birthday?
- 40 members of our church volunteering once a week in a teacher’s classroom?
- The sense of accomplishment of working with Blythe students, parents, and teachers to build raised beds and create a school garden?
- The countless pairs of shoes and socks donated, the bags of groceries hauled to feed children during the summer when school breakfasts and lunches aren’t available to them, the thousands of books leveled, the many hours logged in volunteering at the school’s book fairs, the several thousand dollars above and beyond our church budget which have made it all possible.

(If you have done any of the above, please stand and let’s put our hands together as our song of thanksgiving and praise giving God all the glory for accomplishing what we human beings could never have imagined. I remember Catherine Bragg saying something at the beginning of this partnership along the lines of “what is so exciting about this partnership is that there is something that EVERY SINGLE PERSON at DCPC can do to participate in this partnership!” My conservative estimate is that between 400-500 people have done precisely this during the past year...and if you haven’t there are more opportunities to come as Principal Leora Itzhaki speaks to us at the close of the sermon.)

As the Psalmist neared the end of his song which began in lament and death and concluded with praise and new life, he said, “I shall live for God.”

With those words, I am reminded of that great story told about the author Robert Louis Stevenson. When he was a young boy in Edinburgh in the 19th century, he was fascinated by the work of the old lamplighters who went about town with a ladder and a torch, setting the street lights on fire for the night. One evening, young Robert stood watching and his parents asked him, "Robert, what in the world are you looking at out there?" With great excitement, he exclaimed, "Look at the man! He's punching holes in the darkness!"

Friends, wherever we live, in Nepal, in Baltimore, in the Lake Norman region of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, United States of America, there is a lot of darkness.

But the good news is that there is always a God who is hard at work punching holes in the darkness.

And the even better news for us personally there is always a God granting us the grace to join in this good work.

Thanks be to our God who is always giving us a psalm of resurrection to sing.

Thanks be to our God, forever and ever.

1. Kathleen O'Connor, "Carpets of Flowers, Sorrows Untold, and Psalm 22," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2003, 20. Kathleen's scholarly fingerprints are all over this sermon, and I am deeply grateful.
2. *Ibid.*, 24.
3. *Ibid.*, 22.
4. James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 111.