

“Always Close”  
Psalm 22:23-31

This week we continue on our journey with the Psalms. Today our text is Psalm 22. As we look at the text and how it asserts that God is with us and is ever so close, I find myself thinking of a section of another poem by Dr. Suess, from the book *Oh The Places You'll Go*,

Oh, the places you'll go! There is fun to be done!  
There are points to be scored. There are games to be won.  
And the magical things you can do with that ball  
will make you the winning-est winner of all.  
Fame! You'll be famous as famous can be,  
with the whole wide world watching you win on TV.

Except when they don't.  
Because, sometimes, they won't.

I'm afraid that some times  
you'll play lonely games too.  
Games you can't win  
'cause you'll play against you.

All Alone!  
Whether you like it or not,  
Alone will be something  
you'll be quite a lot.

And when you're alone, there's a very good chance  
you'll meet things that scare you right out of your pants.  
There are some, down the road between hither and yon,  
that can scare you so much you won't want to go on.

This poem expresses very well how we often feel when life is difficult. In times of distress, we find ourselves feeling alone. Orson Welles once said, “We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone.” Even our Lord Jesus Christ himself when he was on the cross in the depth of his agony and pain, quoted the words of this Psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) This Psalm begins with this cry for help, expressing how people often feel throughout their lives. Even as little children, we experience this sense of isolation as it is often expressed by children when they are hurt, “nobody loves me!” Or in the adult version of this, “No one really understands or even cares about how I am feeling!” This Psalm expresses these human feelings powerfully before God. What is interesting about this is that this was a communal prayer. This was not just a private prayer that one person had alone with God. The Psalms, as we know, were the collective prayers of the people of Israel in the Temple in Jerusalem. They were sung by the people of God as an expression of our human experience of feeling abandoned by God. This unfortunately does not happen in our worship experiences any more. We only bring our “best” selves before God. I am not advocating for a doom and gloom type of worship. Yet, I think there is something very powerful and healing for us as a community of faith when we bring our sorrows, doubts, and concerns in honesty before God. Naming our pain and bringing it before God can bring a tremendous amount of healing. This is the wisdom

of the old prayers of the Psalm. Throughout history, people of faith have been able to bring their pain and their sorrow before God. This was certainly the experience of the Black church as they struggled with slavery, segregation and racism. Psalm 22 gave powerful words to Jesus as he was on the cross suffering. The same Psalm is available for us today as we suffer. This Psalm gives us permission to lament the times of brokenness in our world when it feels that we are alone and abandoned. Imagine these ancient words on the lips and hearts of people in our world today:

Psalm 22 for the Stockbrokers: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? How could all our dreams get shattered so quickly? We have worked so hard to build this economy of free trade. We are scared.

Psalm 22 for the Homeless: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? We have no place to call home. We live on the streets waiting for the next handout and the only thing that numbs the pain is a drink or two.

Psalm 22 for those who lost their job: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? How are we going to provide for the basic needs of our families? How are we going to stay in our homes?

Psalm 22 for those who are abused or brutalized: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? How long O Lord before the innocent don't get abused, starved and killed?

Psalm 22 for those who struggle with health issues: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? How long will we feel this way? Why do I have to drag my feet out of bed every day? How long will we have to deal with this feeling of being alone?

The words of Psalm 22 give us the courage to name before God all that oppresses us. This is not just an act of communal griping before God. We are not being invited to have a gripe session on Sunday morning. We are invited instead to bring our whole experiences before God with the trust that God cares about our pain. In his book, *Praying the Psalms*, Walter Brueggemann notes that, "The Psalms, with few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity, gathered over a long period of time; a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks about life the way it really is, for the same issues and possibilities persist in those deeply human dimensions."

Only when we can bring our lives before God are we able to praise and trust God. This is how the Psalm proceeds. It begins with the lament and the cry for help. Then it moves into the verses we read today that are a hymn of praise to God where the intent of the poem is made clear: that God is faithful to work within the ways of the world to heal affliction and transform enmity and create right relationships among people. This is a vision of the fruition of the covenant promise made to Abraham and Sarah. Our trust in God comes from knowing that God has been faithful in the past and that our covenant, our relationship with God cannot be broken. Even though sometimes we may not feel or know that God is with us, through faith we know that God never leaves us alone or abandons us.

On Sunday 23 January 1983, Dr. William Sloane Coffin began his sermon: "A week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander - who to his friends was a real day-brightener, and to his family "fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky" - my 24- year-old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and every race, beat his father to the grave... My consolation lies in knowing... that when the waves closed over Alex's car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break... So I shall seek - so let us all seek - consolation in that love which never dies..."

Suffering and pain are part of our human experience, whether we like it or not, whether we are rich or poor, young or old. Many times when we go through a difficult time, we find ourselves asking, "Why?" Why did this happen? But the deeper questions are, "Am I walking alone on this journey of suffering?" or "Who is walking with me?" "Does anyone even care?" "Does God care?"

Verses 27-30 of this Psalm show that God's care extends from generation to generation and from one people, the Hebrew people, to all the people of the earth. 'All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord' (v. 27). Those long dead (v. 29) as well as generations yet to be (v. 30) will join in this worship and praise, hearing about the deliverance of the Lord. The psalmist will make their belief in the God of deliverance known to all, even to those who in many ways cannot literally communicate. So infectious is the praise of God. It is difficult to imagine a wider expanse of God's dominion than all of the past, present and future generations. The Psalm teaches us that there is no place or time that is outside of God's care! It is certainly valid for us to feel abandoned in those times of pain or depression. Yet, with the knowledge of God's history with us, we have the greater knowledge that God is with us all the time.

In this congregation, the love of the people for each other is often ever so present in times of difficulty in the sharing of God's love and care. Today we commissioned another member of the pastoral care team. These people have responded to the call to be the physical manifestations of God's care for us in those times of stress or pain. This does not take away those experiences of pain, but it does make an incredible difference in our sense of being alone and cut-off from the rest of the world. When you feel all alone, no matter what the reasons might be, I encourage you to reach out for support. Call one of these caregivers, call your pastor, call a friend! Come to worship because there is room for you to be here with all your messy feelings and sorrows.

Last Sunday our mission speaker shared about our Presbyterian sisters and brothers in Iraq and how they are struggling with the effects of the war on their lives. Doug shared that what gave them hope was knowing that their Presbyterian family in the United States cared about them and did not forget about their suffering.

A little boy, down at the dock, looked out at the sea, the clouds, and the sailboats driven along invisibly by the breeze. "What is the wind?" the boy once asked an old sailor standing there. The grizzled old salt pondered the sky for a while and then said: "Son, I can't tell you what the wind is. But I do know how to hoist a sail!" God is always close to us, just like the wind. The question is, "Do you know how to hoist a sail?" Amen.