

Not All Is Lost

A Sermon for Three Voices

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
October 10, 2021
Matt Matthews

Psalm 22:1-4a

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

Hebrews 4:14-16

14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Mark 10:26-27

26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

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MATT: This is a true story; it's from Naomi Shihab Nye, from her book *Honeybee*. The bibliographic info is printed in your bulletin. God is not mentioned by name, but God is there.

A woman is crumpled on the floor at the Albuquerque airport, comfortless, wailing, wailing, wailing. It appears that all is lost, all is lost. Anxiety ripples through the room like electricity, dangerously, as if something might ignite, as if something might explode. Nobody knows what to do, what to say, how to comfort, how to help.

Everything seems lost. Everything seems hopelessly, helplessly lost.

Listen to that woman weep . . .

Listen to the words of Job:

RACHEL: "Today also my complaint is bitter;

JUDI: God's hand is heavy despite my groaning.

(Begin staggered, first loud, ending in whimper, followed by pause.)

M **GROAN!** Groan. *G- r-o-a-n .*
R **GROAN!** Groan. *G- r-o-a-n .*
J **GROAN!** Groan. *G- r-o-a-n .*

R: Oh, that I knew where I might find [God], that I might come even to [God's] dwelling!

J: I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. [Yet] If I go forward, [God] is not there; [if I go] backward, I cannot see God.

R: On the left, God hides, and I cannot behold God; I turn to the right, but I cannot see my hidden God.

M/R/J God's hand is heavy despite my groaning.^[1]

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M: A voice comes over the airport PA. "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately."

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M: Listen to the words of Psalm 22.

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

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

M **GROAN!** Groan. *G- r-o-a-n .*
R **GROAN!** Groan. *G- r-o-a-n .*
J **GROAN!** Groan. *G- r-o-a-n .*

(To be read simultaneously:)

R: My God, I cry by day,
 but you do not answer;

J: My God, I cry by night,
 and I cannot find rest.

* * *

M: Do those words sound familiar to you? "My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus said those words on the cross.

R: These are the words faithful people sometimes say when they feel abandoned, alone, bone tired, worn out. This is what we sometimes say when we suffer.

J: I am a worm, and not human.

R: I am scorned by others.

J: People make fun of me because I can't measure up.

R: The smug people despise me.

J: I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint;

R: my heart is like wax.

M/R/J: *"My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me?"*

M: Disciples have often lifted up lament to God. A loved one is sick. A pandemic changes our world. The bills pile up and up. Of course, disciples cry out to God. They get to the end of their rope, and they cry out, *"My God, my God!"*

* * *

R: (Is anybody headed to gate A-4 at the Albuquerque Airport? This woman has not stopped crying.)

* * *

M: We celebrated the birthday of Chief Joseph last week (October 5, 1877). He was the leader of a band of Nez Perce Indians in the Wallowa Valley in northeastern Oregon. When he surrendered to the US Cavalry, he said, "I am tired of fighting. [...] It is cold, and we have no blankets. [...] I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired. My heart is sick and sad."^[ii]

M/R/J *"My God, my God!"*

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M: Here's a story from Mark's gospel; it's filled with lament. A man approaches Jesus.

R: "The man ran up and knelt before Jesus, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

J: Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"

R: The man said to Jesus, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

J: Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

R: When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

J: Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

R: And the disciples were perplexed at these words.

J: But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

R: They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "**Then who can be saved?**"^[iii]

J: Look it up. That's Mark 10:17-26.

R: This is the word of the Lord.

J: Thanks be to God.

* * *

M: Do you hear it? The wealthy man is asked focus his life on Jesus and sell his goods—and he laments for he is very rich. But the disciples lament, ALSO. Do you hear them? The disciples were amazed at Jesus' words. That attention-grabbing verb in the Greek suggests being astounded, dumb-struck. *I can't believe what you are saying, Jesus. You demand too much from us. You expect too much. We cannot live up to your ideal. We are flabbergasted, Jesus.*

M: Do you hear their exasperation?

J/R: *My God, my God. Are you forsaking me?*

M: *Is this so-called "Good News only good for people who are already perfect?"*

Jesus doesn't sugar coat anything: being his follower requires you to understand that your whole life, every aspect of living, is meant to be lived as a response to God's love. All that you have already belongs to God. Servants always serve. To be a disciple is to understand that you live, move, and have your being in God. This call to discipleship is an exciting journey, and this calling invites complete, total surrender. Being a Jesus-follower isn't just a Sunday gig. We don't follow God's will only some of the time. We don't walk with Jesus only part of the way.

Jesus hears his disciples. He comforts them, did you hear it? Jesus tells his disciples they can't be perfect disciples, and they don't have to be perfect disciples. "For mortals it is impossible," he comforts, "but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Our lamentation rises the loudest when we forget this. When we forget that God is on our side, this world can break our hearts. When we feel all alone, we feel unable, unreached and unreachable, unloved and unlovable. But we are not alone. God hears—

J: —and answers—

M: our prayers. We are not alone.

Yes, there are times when the valley is low and deep and dark and dangerous, but there is the mountain top. Jesus reminds his disciples that just as they are called to love the world, they were first-loved by God. Jesus reminds his disciples that God blesses us, heals us, encourages us, redeems us. When Jesus was on the cross, in the pit of the valley of the shadow of death, he cried out, "My God, my God . . ."

M/R/J: ". . . why hast thou forsaken me?"

R: But Jesus probably had the rest of Psalm 22 on his mind on that cross. He had good news in mind, and comfort, and victory. And he drew upon that good word, that enduring hope of his ancestors.

Listen:

J: *You, O God, are holy.*

R: *Our ancestors trusted in You. They trusted in You, and You delivered them.*

J: *It was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast.*

R: *All of you who revere the Lord—*

M/R/J: *praise God!*

J: *All of you who are Jacob's descendants—*

M/R/J: *honor God!*

R: *All of you who are Israel's offspring—*

M/R/J: *stand in awe of God!*

R: *God did not despise or detest the suffering of the one who suffered—God didn't hide his face from me. God listened when I cried out for help.*

* * *

J: Jesus and those within earshot of his suffering knew what Psalm 22 affirmed.

M: When we cry out to God,

R: —when we can't take it anymore,

J: —when we feel beyond hopeless,

M: God hears us and we are not alone.

J: There are times when we can't find God. Job sure knew about those times.

R: But God can always find us.

J: We are never alone.

M: We are never beyond God's reach. And God often uses the arms, tears, and comfort of our neighbors to do the reaching. When's the last time God reached out to you through the music of Joe Grant?

J: —through the prayers of our prayer group?

R: —through the visit from the neighbor around the corner?

* * *

M: And what about that woman at the airport? She is coming undone in lamentation, in tears, and tears, and tears at gate A-4 at the Albuquerque Airport? Everything seems lost. The poet Naomi Shihab Nye was there. And Naomi tells this story. These are her words:

R: *Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well — one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.*

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. "Help," said the flight agent. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly.

“Shu-dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?” The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “No, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just later, who is picking you up? Let’s call him.”

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies — little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — from her bag — and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo — we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend — by now we were holding hands — had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate — once the crying of confusion stopped— seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.^[iv]

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By the grace of God, not everything is lost.

Alleluia.

Amen.

Prayer:

I love the Lord, who heard my cry
and pitied ev’ry groan.
Long as I live and troubles rise,
I’ll hasten to God’s throne.

I love the Lord, who heard my cry
and chased my grief a-way.

O let my heart no more despair
while I have breath to pray.

NOTES:

[i] Job 23:1-9, 16-17

[ii] Writers' Almanac, October 5, 2021. **On this date in 1877 Chief Joseph surrendered to the United States Cavalry.** He was the leader of a band of Nez Perce Indians in the Wallowa Valley in northeastern Oregon and they had been ordered by the United States government to move to a small reservation in Idaho. Joseph resisted, and for a time it seemed he'd been successful since the government issued a federal order to remove white settlers from the Nez Perce lands, in support of their original treaty. Four years later the government reversed its decision and backed up the reversal with the threat of a cavalry attack. Joseph wasn't a war chief, and he believed there was no point in resisting in any case; he reluctantly set out with about 700 followers — fewer than 200 of them warriors — for the Idaho reservation. A band of young men retaliated against the orders by attacking a white settlement, killing several people, and Joseph and his band were forced to flee from the pursuing Army. Though the warriors were outnumbered 10 to one by U.S. soldiers, they defended themselves during several battles for three months and over a thousand miles, through Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana. Joseph tried to lead them to Canada but they were finally trapped in the Bears Paw Mountains of Montana, only 40 miles from the border. They fought the Army for five days but eventually Joseph surrendered.

He was known to be an eloquent speaker and an Army lieutenant on the scene reportedly transcribed his surrender address. In it Joseph said:

"I am tired of fighting. [...] It is cold, and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are — perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever."

[iii] Mark 10:17-27

[iv] Naomi Shihab Nye, "Gate A-4" from *Honeybee*. Copyright © 2008 by Naomi Shihab Nye, as found on Poets.Org, 6 October 2021: <https://poets.org/poem/gate-4>