

Wisdom from the Bench

Based on Psalm 22

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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(Dave sets out a single chair in the view of the congregation.)

Imagine for a moment that someone is sitting in this chair. Imagine that that person is in pain and begins to describe their suffering. They start questioning their faith:

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Then, for the next 18 or so sentences, they pour out their suffering, "I cry by day and by night but God doesn't answer. I feel like a worm. Like I'm not human. I'm scorned, despised, and mocked. It's like danger encircles me with jaws like lions. I feel poured out like water. My heart is like melted wax. My hands and feet are shriveled. I'm lying in the dust of death." Heavy, isn't it? I don't know about you, but I am not comfortable hearing words like these.

But, that's the way Psalm 22 starts. It's like the psalmist is sitting across from God letting the tears and frustrations flow. He or she is in despair. Powerful words, aren't they? We can all identify with that. Who of us hasn't sat in that same chair from time to time? Suffering is part of what it means to be human.

In the account of Jesus' crucifixion in Mark's gospel, Jesus turns to the words of Psalm 22 to express his pain. He doesn't just cry out to a generic God, but he cries the intimate words of the psalm: "My God, My God." It is as though the intimacy of his relationship with God *magnifies* his feeling of being forsaken. It's one thing to feel forsaken by a stranger; it's another thing altogether to feel forsaken by a loved one isn't it? *Who in our world would echo this psalm? Who in your life might sit in this chair?*

We can see those who feel isolated, violated, broken down. People who feel forgotten, or people I bump into on the street who feel that there is a comfortable circle of people that excludes them. We hear cries like this from all sectors of our society every day. Sometimes they are so painful to listen to that we tune them out. We distract ourselves from the news with Hallmark Christmas movies.

(Dave sets another chair alongside the first.)

As hard as it is, *the call of the church* is to sit in the forsakenness. To sit in the pain and the suffering. To show up in the despair. To listen. To act with love. As a denomination, we do that *when we listen deeply to Indigenous peoples*. We sit beside people when we proclaim, "*Black lives matter!*" and, when we encourage everyone who has ears to listen, to pay attention to the needs of those who are relegated to the margins of society.

As a denomination, we transform suffering by joining together and giving to the Mission and Service Fund so that we can make a bigger difference than we ever could on our own. When we show up, listen, and act with love, we serve the same purpose

as expressed in verses 19 to 20 in Psalm 22—the verses that form the transition from despair to hope. Where there is hope that God is not far away. Where there is hope of help and relief from suffering.

In fact, there is *such a shift in mood at verse 19* in Psalm 22 that the last part, the hopeful part, is considered a later addition, an entirely different psalm welded to the first. At verse 19, the conversation begins to turn to hope as the psalmist articulates their needs: “Do not be far away, Lord.” Then the psalm writer remembers what God has done in their life in the past: “You have rescued me before. You’ve heard me cry out before.” The writer then flashes forward to God’s promises: “There will be satisfaction. There will be praise. There will be new life.”

Amen to that!

But there’s another way to consider the psalm in light of justice that I want to share with you today. Here’s the thing about doing the long, slow work of justice.

(Dave stands between the chairs, holding both.)

While we can be the shift, the verse 19 in the struggle for justice, that shift can seem a long way off, and we can find ourselves in the seat of despair—despairing that what we are doing isn’t enough or it is too small in relation to the magnitude of problems. We can despair that we aren’t up to the task at hand or wonder whether the sacrifices and commitment are worth it.

In those grinding moments, the deliverance extolled in verse 31 seems like an impossible dream, foreign words, someone else’s story tacked on. But it is very much our story.

The genius of Psalm 22 is that it invites us to own both the lament and the praise.

(Dave moves the chairs together – bench.)

Think of *lament and praise less as single, isolated chairs than as a bench*. Not as opposites but as a continuum. Part of the ebb and flow of doing the work of justice. It is normal in doing anything worthwhile to slide between despair and hope.

Doing God’s work is not easy. That’s why we need the scripture. And each other. That’s why we are connected to congregations across our country. That’s why we are a “United” church. We are united in our call to join God’s mission, rejoicing together when the going is easy and encouraging each other when the work of justice is difficult.

(Dave sits down on “the bench” – two chairs together.) We are invited to gaze out at the green pastures and the still waters of Psalm 23. God whispers to us that even in the darkest valleys, God is there:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. [God] makes me lie down in green pastures; [God] leads me beside still waters; [God] restores my soul. (Say it with me if you know it...) [God] leads me in paths of righteousness for [God’s] name’s sake. Yea, even though I walk through valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head

with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Sometimes we are the ones called to show up in despair, to listen and act in love. Sometimes in doing so, we can despair that what we are doing isn't enough. That's when God slides alongside us, feeds and anoints us, and drapes an arm over our shoulder and says, "Goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life." And that communion with God is soul restoring enough to get us off the bench and take another step on the path of stewardship and justice for God's name's sake. Amen.