Sermon for the 5th Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2024

Psalm 22:25-31

I was feeling poorly the other day. Nothing serious, just allergies. But enough so that it meant I spent a good bit of time curled up under a blanket, catching up on some reading.

I spent some of my time reading a very serious book about repentance and another book about seeing the Bible as a guide to wisdom. But feeling poorly meant I had a shorter attention span, so there was some social media scrolling, too.

One thing I scrolled past suggested that there’s a difference between venting and dumping, two ways that we express our displeasure with how life is going. I didn’t think much about the post, but the seed was planted.

And because my brain works as it does, just before bedtime on Friday, I thought about the Israelites in the wilderness. Were they dumping or were they venting when they complained that life had been better for them as slaves in Egypt?

But then I realized that’s not the right question to ask. In faith terms, we think more about ‘complaint’ and ‘lament’ than ‘dumping’ or ‘venting.’

When the Israelites declare, “For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness,”[[1]](#endnote-1) they were *complaining*, because they were suggesting that God didn’t have their best interests in mind.

When the psalmist says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” at the beginning of Psalm 22, he’s *lamenting*. He’s saying that God does not appear to be acting in a way that is consistent with God’s character as demonstrated in the past.

Something like 2/3 of the Psalms contain a lament. The one in Psalm 22 is probably the most well-known, because Mark and Matthew both tell us that Jesus spoke its opening words while on the cross.

What makes a lament a lament is that it’s rooted in trust that God will act in accordance with God’s nature, and that God’s nature is to actively love what God has created. The lament Psalms move from an expression that something is wrong, to a plea for God to act, to praise that God *has* acted. And sometimes we get a statement from the psalmist about what *they* will do now that God has acted, and the benefits to others for their actions. We see that in our Psalm portion for today.

As I thought about all this, it occurred to me that what Mark and Matthew don’t tell us is whether Jesus spoke the entirety of Psalm 22, or just that first verse.

And while we can’t know the answer to that, I like to think he spoke all of the words. It feels like a very Jesus thing for him to have done to join his voice in solidarity with the suffering of his people. To turn to the words other voices had lifted up as *they* suffered, as they feared that God was not present with them. As they dwelt in the uncertainty of whether God would act, *when* God would act, *how* God would act, but somehow still trusting that God *would* act.

And if he did speak all of those words, then that means he spoke the words we just read together. That even in the midst of pain, he found a way to trust that God would act. That God acting would not just bring an end to his own pain, but the poor would eat and be satisfied. All the ends of the earth would turn to the Lord, all the families of nations would bow before God. Even those who had died, even those who were as yet unborn would worship God.

All the world – past, present, and future – would know that the God of infinite love had acted.

Not too long after he uttered these some or all of these words, he took his last breath.

**And God acted.**

The expansiveness of this portion of the Psalm – the ever-widening circle of people praising God – finds an echo in our Acts text for today, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian.

I think it’s also echoed in the Gospel text. Maybe just not as obviously.

Jesus offers up one of the “I AM” statements that are found throughout John. Where he says he’s the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World. Here, he says he’s the True Vine and we’re the branches. Always, these passages are about Jesus supplying some kind of need for us, that we might know the abundant life he came to bring for all people.

Jesus is telling us here that we thrive, we bear fruit, when we abide in him. The metaphor is about how we’re all interconnected. None of us is the only branch on the vine. We exist together, all of us connected to the Vine. All of us being tended to and cared for by the vine grower.

What I love about this passage being paired with the Psalm is that it reminds us that during the times we fear that God has forsaken us, the times we fear that God is absent, there are others who are confident of God’s presence. And they just might be the branch growing right next to us.

Rachel Held Evans wrote about how there were days when her faith was anything but strong or certain. She’d sit in church on those days, and look all around her. And she learned to trust that the faith of those around her could sustain her, because “God [had] knit together my heart with the hearts of that old lady and that little kid” who were sitting nearby.[[2]](#endnote-2)

What’s so beautiful about the way these texts work together, and especially during this season of Easter, is that they unite to remind us that we are not alone, even when we feel like God is distant. Because we are branches of the vine, our laments are interwoven with the praise of those around us. And our praise is interwoven with the laments of those around us.

Hearing these words *now*, in Easter, reminds us of how God acted in response to Jesus’ lament on the cross. God acted by defeating the powers that seek to separate us from God’s presence. *Nothing* in all creation can separate us from God’s love. God acted in accordance with God’s character, because “God is love.”

Our Gospel text for today reminds us that we are works in progress. All of us require some pruning now and then. God snipping out our hate so love can grow in its place, snipping out our envy so contentment can grow. Maybe shining that grow light on us so that we can see how God is present with us in the darkest times.

None of us is a finished product. It’s God’s pruning throughout our lives, God’s love made known to us in countless ways, that takes us from the despair of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” to the joy of “The Lord has acted!” And from there to the words that just seem to flow naturally, “The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not be in want.” And “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Which is good news indeed.

1. Exodus 14:12 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rachel Held Evans, *Wholehearted Faith*, prologue [↑](#endnote-ref-2)