

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, Co-Pastor

March 8, 2009  
*Second Sunday in Lent*  
Psalm 22:22-31

### **A Morning–not Mourning–Prayer**

I received it in a forwarded email—such a cute story that you might expect it to be in the comics—say, “The Family Circus,” or even “Dennis the Menace.” A pastor asks a little boy if he says his prayers every night. “Yes, sir,” the boy replies. “And do you say them in the morning, too?” asks the pastor. “No, sir,” says the little boy. “I ain’t scared in the daytime.”

It’s cute, and we smile because most of us know the feeling. Those prayers which ask, “Help me, help me, help me!” come easily to our childish lips when we are frightened or feeling oppressed. Unless, of course, somewhere along the line we’ve been told not to ask God for too much. But when the morning breaks, the terrors of the night subside, and fears dim, we sometimes forget to praise the same God we had hoped would rescue us just a few hours before.

Writer Anne Lamott says that there are just two prayers any person needs to know. The first is “help me, help me, help me!” and the second is “thank you, thank you, thank you.” You get those two down, and you’re praying.

So how do we learn how to pray? Well, today’s psalm illustrates the two sides of the coin, both halves of Anne Lamott’s formula for prayer. The first 21 verses (which we didn’t read today, but are always read on Good Friday) are “help me, help me, help me!” and then from verse 22 to the end the theme is “thank you, thank you, thank you!” Psalm 22 is an exquisite piece of writing, which plumbs the depths of human experience and soars to the heights of praise to God. It is the psalm which the New Testament writers use to describe the devastating sorrow and suffering of the crucifixion of Jesus, and to a Christian, it also celebrates the sheer joy and exaltation of the resurrection. In biblical terms, it is the epitome of a psalm of lament and praise: “Help me, help me, help me!” and “thank you, thank you, thank you.” The prayers of the dark and terrifying night, and the prayers of the light and glorious day, all in one psalm. Read it aloud when you are alone, and feel its passion and power. It is the quintessential Lenten psalm, for it helps us probe the mysteries of Christ’s passion. Lent is a season for going deeper in our faith, knowing Christ better, and following disciplines to help us live closer to God all year round. So this year we are examining several psalms which are rich in spiritual truth. This one is amazing.

It begins with the most profound and direct lament ever written: “My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?” Did you know that more than 1/3 of the psalms are laments? Never, never, never let anyone tell you that to challenge God is not polite. Never let your own shyness or anything else keep you from being totally honest with God. The ancient Hebrews made a practice of being totally honest with God, and they are still God’s chosen people. Jesus did it too, and he is still God’s beloved child. God can take it, believe me, and if you don’t believe me, believe the biblical witness. To lament is to call on God to be God, to be good, to be gracious and merciful and loving and powerful. To lament is just honest talk before God, not whining, but “communal sorrow about the brokenness of life.” (Keith A. Russell, *The Living Pulpit* 11:4, p. 1)

Do you know what Martin Luther King, Jr.'s favorite song was? It wasn't a song of praise, it was a lament. "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand." The gospel song written by Thomas A. Dorsey, not Tommy Dorsey of big band fame, but Thomas Dorsey the blues and gospel singer and songwriter. In 1932 Dorsey was a young man about to become a father for the first time. He was supposed to sing at a revival when his wife was 8 months pregnant, so he kissed her goodbye in Chicago and went to St. Louis. But while there he received a telegram which read "Your wife just died. Come home." By the time he made it back to Chicago, his infant son had died as well. Dorsey was despondent. But it was in that lowest point of his life that he wrote his greatest song, a song full of grief and hope at the same time. "Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home." Mahalia Jackson sang it at Dr. King's funeral. It is a lament, a faith-filled prayer that God will do what God alone can do and give comfort in the midst of despair.

One of the gifts of the African American Christian tradition is the ability to express deep faith and trust in God when worldly circumstances would indicate no reason for hope. In other words, you might think that suffering, abuse and scorn would yield nothing but bitterness and anger at God. But on the contrary, the experience of slavery and oppression produced a legacy of wise spiritual songs, bold affirmations of God's liberating power, and an ability to lament--and to praise--which the rest of us can learn a great deal from. Henry Mitchell, who has been called the "dean of African-American preachers" observes that "the Spirituals and the Blues are not only great art but also functionally healing. People are encouraged to pour out their troubles to a compassionate God, with the emotional support and the spiritual sensitivity of an entire congregation." The result of knowing how to lament is to know how also to praise, how to be truly joyful. Mitchell concludes that "without the benchmark of lament as a basis for a kind of measurement of one's joy, there is no way to know that it is joy and cause for praise." (*Lament and Praise: A First Look* in *The Living Pulpit* 11:4, p. 6)

So Thomas Dorsey's lament is a gift to all of us, because we all experience great sorrow. No one gets through life without suffering. No one escapes life without wounds. And the song is a gift to all of us because he testifies in its simple lyrics that his precious Lord, our precious Lord Jesus, is strong enough and compassionate enough to walk through those darkest of dark hours with us.

Lament is the benchmark for true praise, and the second part of Psalm 22 shows us how to do that as well.

"I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." (v. 22)

It is the morning after a nightmarish, persecuted, near-death experience for the psalmist, and where does he go? From the isolation of despair, from the loneliness of being the scapegoat of a mob so determined to destroy him that they resemble vicious animals, to the refuge of God's people, God's faithful community, the safety of those who will join him in praising God. The question which began the psalm now has its answer--God has not forsaken this troubled soul, God has not abandoned him, God was there and is there and will be there, always there, for anyone who is afflicted by the world's evil. So the psalmist fulfills his vows of faithfulness, and praises God in the Temple, not a quiet, personal prayer

but a loud, community prayer of praise. His prayer might resemble the Haggadah, the Jewish prayer recited at the Seder, commemorating the liberation of the slaves from Egypt.

Therefore we are duty-bound to thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, extol, and adore him who performed all these miracles for our (parents) and for us. He has brought us out from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to holiday, from darkness to great light, from bondage to redemption. Let us, then, sing before him a new song. Hallelujah!

*(The Living Pulpit, 11:4, p. 18)*

Now that's praise. That is whole-hearted adoration of our God, who will not let the poor go away hungry, who will comfort those who mourn and rescue those who are in distress. That is the kind of prayer that those who have suffered deeply can say with greatest understanding. Authentic praise is rooted in authentic lament—the highest Easter celebration rises from the lowest Good Friday. And in Psalm 22, the praise of this joyful one begins in the congregation but soon is taken up by all the families of the nations, the whole world, all those who ever lived, all those who will live, all creation, praise the Lord!

When all nations and all creation praise the Lord, truly it is the prayer of the end of time. And we're not there yet. We pray for God's kingdom to come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven, but we're not there yet. All people are not yet praising God. But we who experience the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ can begin to sing God's praises now. We know God's goodness to be true. We can be like Thomas Dorsey, who went on to write dozens more songs, whose career in gospel music spanned decades, and who was known as the "father of gospel music." His lament turned to praise because his precious Lord did lead him from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from mourning to gladness. That is God's purpose, God's desire, God's will for our lives. Not that we might avoid suffering, but that we might live through suffering with the assurance that God is always there with us. And that we might come through on the other side filled with joy.

My friends, this is the pilgrimage of life, imaged in these six weeks the church calls Lent. This is the journey we are on as individuals and as Christ's community. When Jesus first told his disciples that he would undergo suffering and rejection and be killed, they didn't want to hear it. They couldn't imagine what he was talking about when he said he would rise again. They couldn't understand, and it wasn't what they wanted in a teacher, a master, a Lord, a Messiah. But that's what he did, and that's what they lived through also, and that's what they proclaim to us in the scriptures as the gospel truth. That on the far side of the world's evil, God's goodness triumphs. That life is stronger than death, that justice is more powerful than sin, that goodness is stronger than evil, and that love is the most powerful spiritual force of all. So when we take up our cross and follow Jesus we do so in trust that beyond sin lies God's righteousness. Beyond grief there is joy, and beyond poverty there is the wealth of God's eternal glory. Make no mistake, God says to us in Jesus Christ: this is my way in the world which I love. Trust me. Stay with me. For I will stay with you.

There is a dimension to the story of Thursday's explosion downtown that I have not heard on the news or seen in the papers. And that is the remarkable near-absence of casualties. This is not to ignore the grief of the family and friends of the missing woman, for whom we all pray, nor the devastation of losing one's job or business. But I overheard a

one-sided conversation in the library on Friday afternoon on the part of a man who apparently just missed being there at the moment the building blew up. He was agitated as he told his story to the librarian sitting at her desk. I think his job was shoveling the sidewalks on that particular block of Main Street, but at the unexplained instruction of his boss he changed his route that morning—so he was out of harm’s way when the explosion happened. He told the librarian that there were four people who were late to work that morning, four people who otherwise were never late. “It’s not a tragedy,” he shouted, “it’s a bunch of miracles!”

Like I said, I haven’t heard this verified elsewhere. But what I heard him proclaiming, there in the lobby of the library in a loud voice to a librarian who didn’t tell him to pipe down, was his faith that God was there for him, and he was thankful. God was there, watching over him and many others. We bow before the mystery of why some and not all; we lament one loss, but we praise God for many lives spared.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”  
Praise God. Amen.