

### “Godforsaken God”

My mother died nearly thirty-six years ago; and the truth of it is that many of my memories of her are indistinct. But vivid among my earliest recollections are times when she helped me memorize the twenty-third psalm. Of course it was in the King James Version: that was the only Bible we knew in 1954, when I was in kindergarten. The goal was for me to recite the psalm from memory for a women’s meeting at the Pleasant Hills Community Church in Pittsburgh. As best I can recall, the recitation went fine. And the twenty-third psalm, King James Version, is still in here [head]... and here [heart].

For many years the psalm lived quietly within me and meant little or nothing. But my, how it sang when my best friend read it at my mother’s funeral. “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” When I hear that first line, I hear the rest: my heart takes it from there.

Scripture has long been a source of strength, comfort and meaning for God’s people, and never more so than in times of desperation. During the Babylonian exile the scriptures became for the Israelites what Walter Brueggemann calls “cadences of home” when they had no home.

Scripture was essential to the lives of Jesus and his contemporaries. So if we can evoke an entire psalm simply by intoning the first line, “the LORD is my shepherd,” it is more than likely that they knew many of the psalms, including the psalm that precedes the twenty-third, Psalm 22, which begins, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

We read the psalm antiphonally to underscore its dialogical character. It is as though there are two very different voices arguing back and forth: one a voice of lament and desolation, the other a voice of affirmation and praise. The psalmist’s life collides in contradiction with the proclaimed faith of Israel; and the two careen back and forth like an out of control bobsled crashing its way down a steep and perilous run; or like a painfully dissonant symphony that will not resolve.

The suffering of the psalmist is extreme, and only heightened by God’s apparent indifference: “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” There is intense physical suffering: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast... my hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones.”

But equally painful, especially in that culture, is the deep sense of shame issuing from the injustice and ridicule the psalmist endures: “All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads.” And the psalmist’s adversaries are even mocking God, ridiculing the psalmist as one who is godforsaken. They cry, “Commit your cause to the LORD; let God deliver—let God rescue the favored one!” And what is the divine response to this blasphemy? Silence... nothing.

Alternating with these anguished cries of lament are affirmations of the faith of God’s people: “In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them... in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.”

Back and forth the psalm rages until it reaches this final, stunning conclusion: “You who fear the LORD, praise God... For God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; God did not turn away from me, but heard when I cried.”

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...”

To make doubly clear the relationship between this psalm and Jesus’ devotion, Mark uses the psalm as a template for telling the story of Jesus’ death on the cross. One by one, details from the psalm are enacted as soldiers cast lots for his clothing and Jesus is mocked and tortured. And as the story progresses, Jesus is more and more and more... alone.

The Romans soldiers taunt Jesus with their wildly ironic title, “King of the Jews,” affixed to the cross to serve as warning: this is what happens to would-be messiahs! The soldiers have already dressed Jesus in the purple robe of royalty and paid him mock homage; but all along what they are saying of him is actually true: he is the king of David’s line.

Two so-called bandits are crucified on either side of him—on his right side and on his left, as it were, the places the sons of Zebedee, James and John, had asked be reserved for them.(Mark 10:35-45) But now they are nowhere in sight. The Greek word translated “bandits” is often associated with those guilty of political crimes, rather than with common thieves.<sup>1</sup> So here is another irony: these two are actually guilty of treason against the state, the crime for which Jesus is dying. Yet they, too, deride Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, one of them repents; Mark doesn’t even suggest it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> So Donald Juel in *Mark*. Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1990, page 220.

<sup>2</sup> We have to turn to Luke for the tender exchange in which one of those dying with Jesus declares him innocent. Mark intimates no such thing. See Luke 23:39-43.

The religious authorities revile Jesus, as well. Making fun of his name, “Jeshua,” which means, “God saves,” they laugh, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” But they have already seen plenty and believed nothing. And it is precisely by refusing to save himself that Jesus will save others.

Even passersby get their licks in, shaking their heads just as the psalm describes and repeating the discredited charge that Jesus would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days.<sup>3</sup> The authorities couldn’t make this stick at Jesus’ impromptu “trial”; but the court of public opinion has even lower standards, if such a thing is possible.

With Mel Gibson leading the way, we sometimes fixate on Jesus’ physical suffering; to be sure, it is severe. Our word “excruciating” means literally, “from the cross.” But Mark does not linger in gruesome description. Jesus is on the cross for six hours, from 9:00 in the morning to 3:00 in the afternoon—not a terribly long time as crucifixions go. He rejects first wine mixed with myrrh and then a sponge soaked in vinegar. He is alert throughout. He will not fall asleep at the crucial hour as his followers have done.

When at last he cries out from the cross in Aramaic, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” there is one final misunderstanding. Bystanders think he is crying for Elijah, and fail to understand that he is quoting scripture. He dies utterly forsaken; or so it would appear.

Mark, as we have seen, is terse and mysterious. We have to get our signs of hope where we can, and several are faintly visible, even here.

The first is the deliberate employment of Psalm 22 over and over and over again to provide a framework of understanding for what is happening, and to point through it to a final resolution. Citing the psalm raises the question: *has* Jesus been forsaken by God? At this point even just the hint of a question will stand for a sign of hope.

And at the moment of Jesus’ death there are glimmers from two unlikely sources. The first is a Roman centurion who says, “Truly this man was God’s Son.” This translation preserves some ambiguity in the original. We want it to say, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” But it can equally mean, “This man was a son of God.” Either way it’s more than you’d expect from the Romans; and so some hear it as sarcastic, while others find it emblematic of the reception the new faith will receive among Gentiles.

The other sign of hope is cosmic. At the instant of Jesus’ death “the curtain of the temple” is torn in half, from top to bottom. This could mean either the innermost curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple,

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<sup>3</sup> See Mark 14:57-59.

suggesting that God is now accessible to the whole world; or it could mean the outermost curtain, which was adorned with figures of the zodiac, a representation of the heavens that were torn open when Jesus was baptized and proclaimed Son of God.

Either way, this last word affirms that Jesus was everything that those who ridiculed him denied. He was innocent. He was the Messiah, the King of Israel. He was God's Son, the Beloved. But he was completely alone, the godforsaken God... or nearly so.

One final sign points us to hope. Mark, who wastes no words, chooses this moment to introduce us at last to some of the women who have been following Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. They have kept the vigil. Jesus has not been alone. They will be the ones who, at the first opportunity following the Sabbath, will seek to anoint his body. It is their presence more than anything else in the story that assures us that terror, after all, cannot kill compassion. And fear cannot extinguish love.

I have been privileged on a few occasions to be with people as they have died. It can be a strangely holy time. The struggle and anguish give way at first to unbridled grief... and then to a deep and awe-filled stillness. There is a calm and a remarkable emptiness that we are at a loss to describe. But there is one thing we know for certain about that emptiness: the godforsaken God has already been there; and in that emptiness we are not alone.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? ... God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; God did not turn away from me, but heard when I cried.”

Let us not be in a hurry to turn aside from the reverence of this moment. This stillness is a holy place.

Amen

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