***MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?***

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Texts: Psalm 22:1-21a, 27-31 and Hebrews 4:14-16

*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani?* *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* According to Matthew and Mark, these are the last words spoken by Jesus as he hung upon the cross with nails piercing his hands and feet, words spoken beneath a derisive sign reading “*King of the Jews*”, words spoken after hours of suffering, last words, words not whispered but cried out in anguish: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* It is hard to imagine God forsaking anyone, especially Jesus. It is hard to imagine the Son of God, God incarnate, experiencing that utter abandonment and hopelessness that is at the depth of human suffering. With God, all things are possible. Without God, nothing seems possible and all seems lost. In God-forsaken places hopes and dreams and lives find their final resting places.

I wonder how many folks voiced that cry or something similar over this last year as they battled the COVID virus or watched helplessly as loved ones did. How many times were those words uttered from frozen lips in Texas last week? How many mothers and fathers in Yemen and Syria are uttering those words today in the midst of war or in the aftermath of war that has destroyed their homes and hopes? How many children are feeling forsaken after being separated from their parents at borders or in refugee camps or by street violence? *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani?* *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

In his novel *Night*, Elie Wiesel tells of witnessing the public hanging of a young boy in the Nazi concentration camp in which he was held. The boy was hung between two men at sunset. As the noose was placed around their necks, the men cried out defiantly, “*Long live liberty*!” But the boy remained silent. “*Where is God? Where is He?*” asked someone in the crowd. At a sign from the head of the camp, the chairs upon which the three were standing were tipped over. There was total silence throughout the camp. Then the prisoners were forced to march past the executed trio. The two men were dead, but the boy, because of his light weight, was still alive. Elie Wiesel writes:

*For more than a half hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him… Behind me, I heard the same man asking, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging on this gallows…”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Where is God in such God-forsaken places? God is there – there in the midst of pain and suffering, in the depths of despair and loss, in the face of death – on Golgotha’s cross, on a Nazi rope, in a COVID intensive care unit, in a Syrian refugee camp, at a Staunton bedside. God is there, here, nearer than we know, present to comfort, sustain, and ultimately, to save us.

“Not so!” you say. “Not so. I have been in those God-forsaken places – when my son was killed, when my husband left me, when my mother was dying, when the cancer was diagnosed, when the depression hit me, when the Twin Towers fell, when COVID took my parents or spouse or child. I have been in a God-forsaken place, and God was nowhere to be found. With the world crashing down around me, I needed God. I looked for God. I cried for God, but God did not answer. Where was God when I was suffering? Where was God when I needed God most? Even Jesus felt abandoned. Where was God that Good Friday when Jesus cried, *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani* ? Did God not hear his cry? Does God not hear our cries?”

“God was there,” says the psalmist. “With you, with Jesus, with the COVID patients, with the refugees, God was there. I know for I have been in a God-forsaken place, and Jesus’ words from the cross were my words from that place. I too cried to the Lord in need of help, in need of someone to ease my pain and give me rest. I cried out, but God did not hear me – or so it seemed. God was distant and silent. I cried out, but no one delivered me from my suffering. I felt so alone. Yet there was a glimmer of hope. For, I recalled that through the ages, our ancestors trusted in God, and God delivered them – at the Red Sea, in the Wilderness, in the Promised Land. Throughout the ages, our ancestors cried to the Lord, and the Lord saved them. They trusted in God, and God delivered them. That’s the story of our faith – those who trust in the Lord will not be disappointed, for our God is a God who saves! Isn’t that what you learned when you were young, when you came to faith, when you first said, ‘I believe!’?

“Our ancestors trusted, but I was not like them,” says the psalmist. “I wasn’t as good, wasn’t as faithful, wasn’t as trusting as they. I trusted in God, and still I suffered. Everyone looked down upon me. You know the little song: ‘Nobody likes me; everybody hates me; I think I’ll eat some worms.’? Well, I was the worm! People shook their heads at me and made light of my misery. They jeered and they laughed – a cruel heartless laugh. And in my despair I thought that perhaps they were right – God would not rescue me; my cries were in vain.

“Yet – I knew that it was God who gave me life. It was God who kept me safe in the face of other dangers. It was God who comforted me in the face of my sorrows – ‘thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.’ It was God who created me and who sustained me from the moment I drew my first breath. It was in that moment that I realized that God just might be there after all, that though that place seemed God-forsaken, it was not, for no place is beyond the reach of God. That is what my ancestors told me, and their God is my God! No place is beyond God’s reach for me!” So says the psalmist.

You say it too! Each time you say, Jesus “was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into Hell. The third day he rose again from the dead…” you say that no place is beyond the reach of God, that no place is truly God-forsaken. For if God raised Jesus from the dead, from the dead of the dead, from Hell, if God could reach into Hell to raise Jesus, then no place – not even Hell – is beyond the reach of God! That is what you say, and it is what we believe: no place is beyond the reach of God!

The first words of the psalm were words of despair and doubt – ‘*Why have you forsaken me?*’ – but the final word was God’s. In the end, God did not hide his face from the psalmist, but heard his cry. God saved him. And so the psalmist sings God’s praise and urges us to join our voices in that song and in telling of God’s salvation. The psalm that begins ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ concludes with this bold affirmation: ‘*Future generations will be told about the Lord and proclaim God’s deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying: ‘The Lord has done it!’”* Jesus was among those future generations, and so are we.

Might Jesus have had that psalm – that whole psalm – in mind as he was dying on the cross that Good Friday? If I say: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” don’t the comforting words of Psalm 23 come to mind? If I say “Four score and seven years ago,” don’t the words of the Gettysburg address leap to mind? If I say (or sing), “Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens,” many of you will continue with “bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens” from *The Sound of Music*. So, Jesus’ cry from the cross, “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani?*” must have called to mind the words of Psalm 22, called to mind words of despair that turned to hope-filled praise. Let there be no doubt that Jesus suffered, for as we heard this morning in that letter to the Hebrews:

*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…*

Jesus suffered, and his cry from the cross confirmed the depths of that despair. But if his words were indeed meant to evoke the memory of that 22nd Psalm, then perhaps Jesus’ cry from that God-forsaken place was the first step with the psalmist on the path from suffering despair to bold praise. Perhaps those gathered at the foot of the cross, those who heard his cry, those who suffered with him, understood what he was trying to tell them – that no place is beyond the reach of God, that even on the cross where Jesus hung, the Lord was present.

Those words were important enough to Mark and Matthew to include in their accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion. Their descriptions of that Good Friday resound with echoes of Psalm 22 – *I am scorned by others and despised by the people…All who see me mock me…My bones are out of joint…For my clothing they cast lots.* Might the gospel writers have looked to the psalmin their writing in order to make that connection between suffering and salvation, between despair and hope, between crucifixion and resurrection? Might the psalm have been for them a template for laying out the death of Jesus so that we would understand what the psalmist understood – that no matter how alone or abandoned we may feel, no matter how God-forsaken any place may seem, God IS there. To comfort us, to strengthen us, to reassure us, to save us – God is there!

In that cry, *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani?* “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” there is a word of hope – hope for the psalmist and for Jesus, hope for COVID patients and their families, hope for refugees and disaster victims, hope for you and for me. For it is hope in the one to whom we cry, “My God, my God!” For we are never abandoned, never forsaken! Our God is there – is here – always near to us, always with us, to save us! Amen

1. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, Avon Books: New York, 1960, p.76 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)