
“My God, My God, Why?”

Ps 22; Mk 15:33-39

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery on Good Friday, March 29, 2013, at Duke Chapel

My God, my God why have you forsaken me? These same words we find on the lips of Jesus, in Mark, when he cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?, which means, my God, my God why have you forsaken me?” A cry from the Christ from a cross. Not a 3 point sermon that ends with a poem. A cry. Not a sermon that climaxes and closes with what is called a musical celebration or whoop. But a word that closes with a cry of lament in the face of death. And if you can’t cry on Good Friday, when can you cry? A cry. Jesus doesn’t quote Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* or John Calvin’s *Institutes* or Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* or *Chicken Soup for the Soul* at his point of desperation. Jesus quotes Scripture! Jesus, the Word of God, quotes the word of God. This cry of lament from Psalm 22 in the mouth of Jesus can’t be avoided even if we wanted to avoid it. It is a cry that still echoes loudly down the acoustical corridors of church history so much so that here I am talking about and still preaching about “My God my God why have you forsaken me?” A cry of lament.

A cry of forsakenness. A cry of abandonment. In other words, in a text message—OMG WUG? Translation—Oh my God, what up God? I know we don’t want to hear this loud cry of lament off the lips of Jesus the Christ. I know we have problems in the church with the notion of lament. I know some love praise and worship (hey!). I know some embrace the top of the mountain and have a hard time dealing with the rough side of the mountain. I know we’ve been coopted by the capitalistic principalities and pristine powers of prosperity-gospel preaching, naming it and claiming it, a bigger house and a bigger car and a bigger bank account. I know we love a Santa Claus God who we can call up on the mainline and tell him what we want and God will grant us like Jeannie our every wish just the way we like it. I know we’ve been under the hallucination of gospel music theologies like “let’s get back to Eden and live on top of the world” when we’ve never been on top of the world. I know we, in the church, can be socialized liturgical zombies and get caught up in fancy phrases like “when the praises go up, the blessings come down.”

I don’t know about you but there have been times when I’ve sent praises up but something other than blessings come down. Jesus shows us another doxological posture before God. Because what do you do when the praises go up, and cancer comes down? What do you do when the praises go up, and depression takes up residence in your life without paying rent? What do you do when the praises go up, and you lose a long-time friendship? What do you do when the praises go up, and you fail an exam? What do you do when the praises go up, and you lose a job? What do you do when the praises go up, but you hear God crying out to God, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It almost seems as if God has given up on Godself. What do you do on this Good Friday when Jesus is on crucified lockdown about to be executed on a bloody death row? What do you do when you have to bear a cross alone? I’ll tell you what to do—lament, cry, moan, groan, and lament some more. Because as the hymn informs us, “we have come over a way that with tears has been watered. We have come treading a path through the blood of the slaughtered.”

Some have tried to sanitize and bleach the blood of Good Friday away and hang a nice little safe pretty Jesus around their neck. But the cry from the cross continues with or without us. Jesus cries for all the innocent men and women who are being lynched, crucified on contemporary crosses today. Jesus cries out from a wooden tree for all of us who ask “why?” My God, my God why have you forsaken me? How can this Friday be called “good”?

And if you think lament is out of style, remember that 1/3 of the book of Psalms are lament psalms, including Psalm 22. Lament is faithful speech. And the loud outcry of lament continues today in our

world, continues in the cries and shrieks of teenagers like Trayvon Martin on that 911 call from Sanford, FL, in February 2012—Help! Help! Help! My God, my God, why?! Help! Help! My God, my God, why?! A modern day crucifixion of a young African American male teenager who was living in Miami Gardens, FL, where I grew up and where my parents still live. Help! A loud cry but no one would help. Help! Shot to death because he wore a hoodie. Help! Shot to death because he ate some skittles. Help! Shot to death because he drank some iced tea. Help! My God, my God why? Trayvon Martin was crucified in Golgotha, FL.

Golgotha, the place of the skull, was outside of Jerusalem's city walls, outside of the city of Orlando, FL. Golgotha is not at the top of the list of summer vacation destinations. Golgotha is not where a pastor wants to begin a new church building campaign but the cry of God rings out loudly from the mournful, hellish hill of Golgotha. My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Help, God! Crying out loud, outside the city walls, outside the center of human existence, on the fringes, on the borderlands of humanity. Away from the hustle and bustle of the economic, social, and religious center of power. Away from the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Away from our elite institutions. Away from our denominational headquarters. A cry that is shunned and sent away so there's no media coverage. A cry that the center of power and privilege cannot handle because this loud cry is a critique of the way life is, the status quo.

This loud cry declares that there is something wrong with the imperial system of the day. This loud cry says that there is something wrong with the religious system of the day. This expression of lament, according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, basically declares "life is not right!" So when Jesus cries out he reveals his dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. Jesus is put to death because of blasphemy and sedition. He represents another religious and political order as Messiah and King. His cry critiques the norm, what is normal, so the religious and political powers of the day attempt to kill the cry of Jesus. They not only want to put Jesus to death but they want to destroy those loud cries that come from the oppressed. Jesus cried out, in Mark, with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last." Jesus's final melody is in the tune of a Psalm 22 loud cry of a lament, that same lament that one scholar says "danced and swayed" in the belly of the slave ships of the Middle Passage. What else can you do at the foot of the cross? What else can you do on a cross? But lament! My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

But even the loud cries of lament will sometimes be misunderstood. No matter how loud you are or how hard you try, people just won't get what you're talking about. When Jesus cries out, the bystanders think he's calling for Elijah. They can't make out his voice in the 911 call to God so they think things that are not true. They think we're talking about apples, when we're really saying oranges. They think we're talking about chicken nuggets, when in fact we said chicken cordon bleu. They think we said down when we really said up. People don't always understand our cries, our laments, our anguish, our agony. It's as if Jesus is speaking a foreign tongue. But the loud cry assures us that death will be heard on this Good Friday. Even if you wanted to ignore it and electric side into Easter, that loud cry of lament is ringing out tonight. Help! My God, my God why?

Jesus may not be wearing a hoodie but he's bearing a cross. He shows us the consequence of a prophetic mission. He shows us that giving oneself to God does not mean success, prosperity or popularity. Or in the words of Howard Thurman, he shows us "the logic of what happens to love in the world." But even as Jesus goes down to death, he's not going by himself. That loud cry will have the last laugh.

Because even the lament of Psalm 22, moves as many lament psalms do—from plea to praise or hope. It begins with the cry of lament, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" but transitions and concludes with "Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it." Lament does not make its bed in a pool of sorrowful silent tears but it raises its voice before God for deliverance, trusting God to act faithfully. "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to

bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way, he breathed his last, he said 'truly this man was God's Son!'" Jesus' loud cry not only critiques the system that tried to silence him, but it destroys the very system that sought to destroy him. That cry that could only be voiced outside the city center, outside the center of religious and political power, because it was a threat. That cry that was not welcomed in the places of privilege because it would stir people up too much, comes crying back at the center and eventually tears it up.

The loud cry of Jesus causes the temple to crumble. "The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." Completely, totally, entirely, fully demolished. The cry from the cross rips oppression apart. The religious powers thought that putting Jesus out would get rid of this troublemaker but little did they know that Jesus would end his life with fighting words. My God my God why have you forsaken me? It is a cry of lament that speaks truth to power and acknowledges that life is not right. This cry may be on the margins of society, outside the city center, but it's still strong enough to tear the veil, the curtain of the Temple. The Temple was the center of the Jewish religion, economy, and social life. If you messed with the Temple you were messing with the heart of Judaism. And that's just what Jesus does even as he's dying. He fights with a word, a sword of the Spirit, and wields his power to destroy the oppressive and depressive religious powers of his day.

His loud cry decenters the center of the religious order. His loud cry establishes another order. He had predicted the Temple's demise (Mk 13:1-2) but now he accomplishes it as the curtain splits. Through a loud cry all sanctioned religious segregation was destroyed. The way they did "church" was undone. The center of religiosity crashed through the cry of God. The veil of oppression was ripped, tore up from the floor up. A loud cry opens up access to the divine. No longer divisions between profane and sacred. All have access to God through the death of Jesus. He cried and died and starts a new era and a new way. One simple cry tore up the whole system! No guns, no tanks, no shoe bombs, no knives. Just a cry of lament. When Jesus cries and dies, something has to change. When Jesus cries and dies, something new has to rise. His death destroys harmful ways of doing religion and church. His death kills the way we kill each other in the name of God. His death is not really his end but the end of destructive ways of human life. Jesus does not die alone because the Temple dies on that day. From the top to the bottom. So don't underestimate the loud cry of Jesus because it is that cry that opens up God's future for us and gives us access to God's presence in the world and our lives. God's presence is loosed into the world through a cry! The loud cry and death of Jesus tear the veil of the Temple. But they also tear the veil from the eyes of people as the centurion testifies, 'truly this man was God's Son!'" Jesus' cry tears the veils of the religious and political establishment so that so that there can be new possibilities in the world and in your life. You shouldn't underestimate a loud cry of lament because as one of my colleagues has written, "the spine of lament is hope." (Clifton Black)

That cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is not just a cry of lament but a cry of hope. Hope that "a change is gonna come." Hope that "trouble don't last always." Hope that God is not finished with us yet. Hope that God can do something about our struggle and trouble and our crosses. Hope that God is in the midst of despair. Hope that God will rescue us from the horns of the wild oxen. Because even when I cry out in anguish (help!), I can still cry out "my God, my God." God is there at the cross. "My God." I may endure a cross but I know that I can still say "my God." I may not know all the answers to my questions but I do know "my God." My God can handle my questions. My God can handle my despair. My God can handle my anger. My God can handle my anxieties. My God can handle my loud cries so "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" That cry of Jesus puts the religious and political systems to shame. Without that cry, it would be the same old, same old. Without that cry, oppression would prevail. Without that cry, "the strong bulls of Bashan" would still "surround me." Without that cry, we might think that the kingdoms of this world are actually the kingdom of God. But with that cry, a new day has begun. From top

to bottom. You might have thought it was the ending, but it's actually the beginning. From top to bottom. So don't underestimate a cry. That cry of Christ is creating a new reality, from top to bottom.

So cry out. Cry out with a loud voice. Lift every voice. Let it resound loud as the rolling sea. Cry out loud until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Cry out loud until the wolf lies down with the lamb. Cry out loud until death and mourning are no more. Cry out loud until new systems and structures are put in place to protect the innocent and convict the guilty. Cry out loud until the "New Jim Crow" prison industrial complex is destroyed. Cry out loud for the Trayvon Martin's of the world. Cry out loud for the Iraqi immigrant, Shaima Alawadi, who was killed in California, left to die next to a note that told her to go back to her own country. Cry out loud against hatred of any kind. Cry out loud for the poor and cry out loud against the system that keeps them poor. Cry out loud for the orphan. Cry out loud for the widow. Cry out loud for Jesus. Cry out loud to Jesus.

If someone didn't cry out, slavery would still be in existence. If someone didn't cry out, the Jim Crow laws would not have been abolished. If someone didn't cry out, blacks and women would have never received voting rights. If someone didn't cry out, Duke would not be commemorating 50 years of its first black undergraduate students. If Jesus never cried out, the temple curtain would not have been torn. If Jesus never cried out, the centurion would still be spiritually blind. If Jesus never cried out, we wouldn't have unmediated access to God. But because Jesus cried out, we can know that even lament is worship. Because Jesus cried out on the cross, we can learn that God will never leave us nor forsake us. If I ascend to heaven, God, my God, is there and if I make my bed in Sheol, God, my God, is there. So cry out, don't drop out of the Christian race. Because when you cry out loud, you will learn "dominion belongs to the Lord" and "proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it." Because when you cry out loud, God will take the thing that has been hurting and hindering and harming you and do just like God did with the veil of the temple, and tear it up from top to bottom.