

Psalm 88; Mark 14:32-36

“O Lord, why?”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In the words of Psalm 88 – “*O Lord, why?*” – tonight’s readings give voice to some of the deepest laments in scripture. Psalm 88 is the only psalm that ends, not with words of hope, but with utter abandonment. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus offers a prayer of lament in Gethsemane as he faced betrayal, suffering, and death.

Tonight’s psalm may resonate with you as we journey through this world where it is easy to be surrounded by people in large cities yet live as unknown, unacknowledged, and at times feeling unloved. In any city anywhere in this world, one might ride the train, seated next to strangers, close enough to hear their sighs and brush up against their shoulders, but receive neither greeting nor embrace. I remember a dear friend in Japan who lived alone with no family nearby, say one to me once that he often went for days without speaking to or being addressed by anyone.

Yet the lament and pain of the psalmist go deeper than simply anonymity in the world. The writer feels a deep fear of death for they have been shunned by friends and neighbors. The psalmist’s words, “*You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them,*” suggest perhaps a terrible, contagious and deforming disease that has left them suffering physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This feeling of abandonment by friends, family, and even God, means death is felt to be close by. The writer describes their feeling saying it is like “*going down to the Pit,*” near to *Sheol*, the place of death. The Psalmist writes, “*O Lord, why do you cast me off?*” The writer is afraid of dying, of being one of the forgotten dead who dwell as ghost-like “shades” in a land of “forsaken forgetfulness,” remembered by no one, not even by God. The doors to past pleasant memories, have now been shut, and at the same time the door to the future, once opened wide, is now rapidly closing.

Despite the grim nature of this psalm, I am grateful it is in the Bible. It is part of sacred scripture because our laments are sacred. The psalm begins with words of faith: “*O Lord, God of my salvation,*” witnessing to what faith amid lament looks like. It is a faith unafraid to share with God our bitterest sorrows. In our feelings of abandonment, we bring our laments to God because God never abandons us.

In contrast to this utter honesty before God, however, we are often less than honest with one another. In our society, we are expected to “smile and be happy” through all circumstances. Feeling as if we don’t want to burden others, we don’t share our deepest burdens with them. Psalm 88 reminds us of when we feel abandoned and alone, to call out, “*O Lord, God of my salvation.*” Laments are sacred words of faith!

This was certainly the case with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing he was about to be betrayed. Jesus knew he would be arrested and turned over for trial, and likely for execution. To whom could Jesus have confided other than to God? He had tried to tell the disciples about his suffering and cross, but they offered no sense of understanding.

Mark’s gospel gives voice to Jesus’ emotional and spiritual anguish saying he was distressed and agitated to the point that he threw himself on the ground to pray. Have you ever been driven to your knees in prayer?

Like Psalm 88, Jesus could feel the doors closing in his life. He had shared meals and community with many, and now those times were past. At his last supper, he instituted a new meal, giving his disciples a new command to love one another. But how could he know if they would continue with him in faith? Have you ever had to turn something over to someone, and simply walk away?

Jesus’ past ministry of healing and teaching was also behind him, and the door to a future with his disciples was rapidly closing. Like Psalm 88, Jesus knew that he would be shunned by those who had been his companions, and he would experience deep loneliness accompanied only by God. Have you ever closed a door, knowing you could never open it again?

Jesus said, “*Abba, Father, for you all things are possible, remove this cup from me, yet not what I want, but what you want.*” Jesus asked God to prevent him from the suffering and death he knew was coming. Jesus feared dying. Jesus was human like you and me. Sharing our humanity, Jesus feared death for us. He asked God to remove his cup of suffering; in doing so he forever suffers with us in our Gethsemane moments.

This is the self-denial that he calls us to: driven to our knees in prayer, having walked away from our past, and experiencing life’s doors closing, he calls us to trust in him. He opens the doors of tombs that death walls us into. Trusting in him, we place our still unseeable futures into God’s hands.

As Jesus died, he cried from his cross, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” Jesus gave voice to our anguish, voicing our fears to the only one who brings life out of death.

An important part of being a human being is knowing that as we suffer, we are able to place our unseen future into God's hands. It could be illness, it could be the death of a loved one, it could be the sudden loss of work, it could be a bitter betrayal by a friend. To suffer in an ultimate sense as a human being is to suffer out of our own control, and yet praying, "*O Lord, God of my salvation, not what I want, but what you want.*"

The Letter to the Hebrews (5:7-9) described Jesus' lament in this way: "*and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.*"

During Lent, dwell on his words, "*yet not what I want, but what you want.*" These words help us abandon ourselves into the mystery of God's infinite grace – a grace we cannot yet see or touch except through suffering and lament.

You are not alone when you suffer, and you are not alone in your laments, because your laments are sacred.

When you cry, "*O Lord, why?*" he will open a new door to life for you stretching out into God's infinite grace.

Jesus kneels with you in your Gethsemane moments. Spend time with him in prayer.

Amen.