

THE ARTICULATION OF GOD'S ABSENCE¹

Psalm 22

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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It is an extraordinary gift for me personally to be reunited with my friend Randy Posey after decades of being out of touch. Back in our college days we worked together with youth services. He was the singer and I was the preacher. We were quite a team! And then after I was a groomsman in his wedding and he sang in our wedding, we lost touch. Now in an extraordinary coincidence, Randy was singing in a performance of *Ahmal and the Night Visitors*, sponsored by Worcester Opera and performed in Gordon Hall in this building, and we discovered each other! What a wonderful reunion! So I welcome Randy and his wife Mary to this service.

I

Randy and the choir have performed a section of Handel's *Messiah* that is certainly not the most well known. If you were to stop almost anyone on the street and ask what part of Handel's *Messiah* was their favorite, those who are familiar with *Messiah* might very well say *The*

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Hallelujah Chorus. In fact, that would probably be the one part of *Messiah* that many people could identify.

If *The Hallelujah Chorus* is the Mattahorn of *Messiah*, the music we heard this morning is the Valley of Despair. It begins with the tenor voice, accompanied by music that sounds hostile, shrill, and jeering: *All they that see him laugh him to scorn: they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads....* It is an angry-sounding piece, and then the chorus joins in.

Up to this point in *Messiah*, the chorus has been the good guys, at times the people of God, at times the angels announcing his birth, but always representing the good. Now, we have something entirely different. This time the chorus represents the unruly crowd having their obscene fun at a public execution. They are the demonstrators outside death row holding up signs that read "Crucify him!" The words they sing are meant to taunt Jesus on the cross: *He trusted in God that he would deliver him*, and every time they reach the word "deliver," the second syllable goes up an interval and the last syllable goes down an interval, so that when they sing *deliver him*, it has the effect of a blow in the belly.

This is not a place of pleasure in Handel's *Messiah*. It is music as profound and as moving as can be found anywhere in the whole oratorio, but it is not fun. It is the direct opposite of *The Hallelujah Chorus*.

II

But that is one reason Handel's *Messiah* remains so contemporary. Life is not always the singing of *The Hallelujah Chorus*. Some people are, but I would guess that the 4.4 million Americans who have lost their jobs in the last year are not. I would assume that anyone employed by General Motors is not. And I am sure that the 2.2 million Americans who are unable to pay their mortgage and are going through foreclosure are not.

Massachusetts has so far been spared the full extent of pain borne by some in other regions and states. But if any of you are in this situation, I hope that you will have the confidence in my respect for your privacy to allow me to provide pastoral support for you at this time. A huge number of people can more readily relate to this part of *Messiah* these days than they can to *The Hallelujah Chorus*.

For many people, coming to worship becomes a time to cover up the fact that deep within they are singing, not *The Hallelujah Chorus*, but *He trusted in God that he would deliver him*, and they don't feel very *delivered!* Let it be said clearly that if nothing else, the church must be honest. There are times when Psalm 22 is more appropriate than Psalm 23! And this section of *Messiah* draws its inspiration from Psalm 22: *My*

God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Of course, we are familiar with that phrase, for two of the gospel writers (Matthew and Mark) record Jesus quoting this very psalm from the cross.

And then for twenty-one verses of this psalm we get a lament from someone who is really feeling abandoned by God. If you think that the Bible is full of sweet and pious statements, just read this psalm and say hello to reality: this writer is virtually castigating God for deserting him. *In you our ancestors trusted...to you they cried*, shouts this writer, and they were delivered. You did it for them back in the good old days, why don't you come to me now? The first twenty-one verses of this psalm are virtually a dressing down of the Almighty. It is an articulation of God's absence.

Now is that any way to speak to God? The answer of scripture is YES! The writer of Psalm 22 is articulating the absence of God, and this psalm has been recited or sung in temple and synagogue and church from that time on.

It has struck me this week that even the compilers of the Psalter—those who edited these psalms and put them into the order in which we find them—seem to be conspiring in the very way they ordered this psalm. The two psalms immediately preceding Psalm 22 are triumphant

celebrations of a king's victory. The psalm immediately following Psalm 22 is, of course, Psalm 23, which begins *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*. It is that greatly loved and incomparable psalm assuring God's presence. And there, as if surrounded by those singing *The Hallelujah Chorus*, is the lone survivor crying out, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

III

If this situation resonates with you this morning; if you feel like the singer of this psalm surrounded by those who seem to be singing *The Hallelujah Chorus*, then I have some things I want to say to you.

The first and foremost is that you are not alone. In this place, on this day, at this hour, you are welcome to articulate your sense of desolation from God. If you can't articulate it, then try these words on for size. They just may fit!

*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 mouth is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue sticks to
my jaws;
You lay me in the dust of death.*

Whoever the original writer of this psalm was, he was doubtless not the first to utter such words. They have been either articulate or inarticulate upon the lips of countless millions of perplexed and suffering

people as the years have come and gone. Who among us has gotten very far into life without having had wrung from our heart this tearful cry? This is a question that has literally sobbed its way through the centuries. It is as old as humanity. It is as new as the pain of any broken heart. *My God, my God, why...?*

Then there is another crucial thing to say: God is not angry at you for articulating your questions, your perplexities, even your frustrations toward God. How do we know? Because it is clear that when Jesus quoted these same words, God was not angry at Jesus. The perplexity, the anger, the sense of forsakenness on the part of Jesus was not due to the anger of God. The cross of Christ is not a symbol of God's anger; it is a symbol of just how far God's love is willing to go! The perplexity and pain therefore that wrung this cry from Jesus was certainly not born of any anger or displeasure on the part of God toward Jesus.

What have we to offer baffled people today who stand face to face with veils through which they cannot see, and doors to which they find no key? Well, we have this at least: we can offer a Christ who has walked that road and who is, therefore, able to enter into full sympathy with us. We can be sure that our Christ is not angry because we question. After all, he himself said "Why?"

IV

The articulation of the absence of God in Psalm 22 lasts for twenty-one verses. Who knows how long that was in time? Maybe twenty-one years! It can last a long time. But through all the perplexity and desolation of those twenty-one verses, God is still described as **MY God**. Then, at long last, comes the breakthrough after those twenty-one verses:

*From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.*

Do you notice that in all of this time of perplexity; all the time when the writer feels abandoned by God and can articulate only the absence of God, he is still within the congregation! He is still a part of the worshipping community! So that when the breakthrough finally comes, the first thing he does is bear witness to it among those who have stood by him, loved him, and supported him through the crisis.

V

Here's a promise: there will come a time when you will sing *The Hallelujah Chorus*. But for some of you, that time is not now. At this moment, all you can do is to articulate the absence of God. But do I need to remind you that when Jesus remembered the first verse of this psalm and cried out in his native Aramaic, *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?* Meaning

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? God was never closer to him than at that moment?

Maybe one reason you are in this worshipping community this morning is to hear that assurance: God has not really forsaken you; God is nearer to you now than you think. It is only a small step between the articulation of the absence of God and the articulation of the words, *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*