## Wisdom from the Bench

*Based on Psalm 22*

This sermon is adapted from the Called to Be the Church Stewardship Resources.

*The preacher sets out a single chair in the view of the congregation.*

Imagine for a moment that someone is sitting in this chair. Imagine that that person is in pain and begins to describe their suffering. They start questioning their faith: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And then for the next 18 or so sentences, they pour out their suffering: “I cry by day, but you do not answer…I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me…Many bulls encircle me…they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion. I am poured out like water…My heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast…You lay me in the dust of death…My hands and feet have shriveled” (Psalm 22:2‒16).

Tough stuff, isn’t it?

That’s the way Psalm 22 starts. It’s like the psalmist is sitting across from God letting the tears and frustrations flow. They are in despair.

We can all identify with that. Who of us hasn’t sat in that same chair from time to time? Suffering is part of what it means to be human. Some of us may be feeling this way in the midst of this pandemic which just seems to go on and on.

In the account of Jesus’ crucifixion in Mark’s gospel, Jesus turns to the words of Psalm 22 to express his pain. He doesn’t just cry out to a generic God, but he cries the intimate words of the psalm: “My God, My God.” It is as though the intimacy of his relationship with God magnifies his feeling of being forsaken. It’s one thing to feel forsaken by a stranger; it’s another to feel forsaken by a loved one isn’t it?

We might imagine who in our society would echo this psalm, who sits in this chair. We can see those who are isolated, violated, broken down, left out, sitting there. Those isolated in ICUs, especially if they are two provinces away. We hear cries like this from all sectors of our society every day. Sometimes they are so painful to listen to that we tune them out, distract ourselves, turn off the television or computer.

(*Set another chair alongside the first.*)

As hard as it is, the call of the church is to sit in the forsakenness. To sit in the pain and the suffering. To show up in the despair. To listen. To act with love. As a denomination, we do that when we listen deeply to Indigenous peoples, when we proclaim “Black lives matter,” and when we encourage everyone who has ears to listen, to pay attention to the needs of those who are relegated to the margins of society. As a denomination, we transform suffering by joining together and giving to the Mission and Service Fund so that we can make a bigger difference than we ever could on our own.

This week our Craft/Study group read and discussed the chapter called *Listen* in [See No Stranger](https://valariekaur.com/see-no-stranger/) by Valarie Kaur. She was reflecting on talking with and listening to people, like one who doesn’t believe every person is a human being, and she writes “Deep listening is about drawing close to someone you find absolutely abhorrent ...the goal of listening is not to feel empathy for our opponents, or validate their ideas or even change their mind in the moment. Our goal is to understand them.” A few pages later she tells of an experience of Sister Simone Campbell who as an attorney and progressive nun criss-crosses the country as part of the “Nuns on the Bus” tour to find common ground with disaffected conservatives. She writes:

“in the lead up to the 2016 presidential election, on a stop in Indianapolis, she [Simone] listened as a white man railed at her about the immigrants and Muslims invading “his” country. His parents worked hard, his grandparents worked hard, and for what? He was going to vote for Trump, because Trump understood him. Sister Simone wanted to tell him that the economic policies that would actually help him were championed by progressives, not Trump. But she stopped herself. She pushed herself to be curious. *You have a story and I need to hear it,* she thought. She kept listening – and then she heard his pain. She picked up on a refrain that his parents worked hard and wanted a better future for him. “It sounds like you feel ashamed that you did not live up to your parents’ expectations,” she said. His eyes filled with tears. That was it. The need to belong. To be seen. To be loved. To succeed. To matter. His rage was a symptom of his pain.”

When we listen, we can help transform people’s pain, and deepen our own understandings. When we show up, listen, and act with love, we serve the same purpose as expressed in verses 19 to 20 in Psalm 22—the verses that form the transition from despair to hope. Where there is hope that God is not far away. Where there is hope of help and relief from suffering.

In fact, there is such a shift in mood at verse 19 in Psalm 22 that the last part, the hopeful part, is considered a later addition, an entirely different psalm welded to the first.

At verse 19, the conversation begins to turn to hope as the psalmist articulates what they need: “O Lord, do not be far away!” And then they remember what God has done in their life in the past: “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me” (v. 21). You have rescued me before. You’ve heard me cry out before. And then they flash forward to God’s promises: “Posterity will serve God; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim God’s deliverance to a people yet unborn” (vs. 30‒31). There will be satisfaction.

There will be praise. There will be new life.” Amen to that!

But there’s another way to consider the psalm in light of justice that I want to share with you today.

Here’s the thing about doing the long, slow work of justice. (*The preacher stands between the chairs, holding both.*) While we can be the shift to hope, the verse 19 in the struggle for justice, that shift can seem a long way off, and we can find ourselves in the seat of despair—despairing that what we are doing isn’t enough or it is too small in relation to the magnitude of problems. We can despair that we aren’t up to the task at hand or wonder whether the sacrifices and commitment are worth it.

In those grinding moments, the deliverance extolled in verse 31 seems like an impossible dream, foreign words, someone else’s story tacked on. But it is very much our story.

The genius of Psalm 22 is that it invites us to own both the lament and the praise. (*The preacher moves the chairs together so that the seats form a bench.*) To think of lament and praise less as single, isolated chairs than as a bench. Not as opposites, but as a continuum. Part of the ebb and flow of doing the work of justice. It is normal in doing anything worthwhile to slide between despair and hope. Doing God’s work is not easy. That’s why we need the scripture.

And each other. That’s why we are connected to congregations across our country. That’s why we are a “United” church. We are united in our call to join God’s mission, rejoicing together when the going is easy and encouraging each other when the way of life, or the work of justice is difficult.

Those who crafted books of the Bible were true artists. There is a reason why certain books are placed after others and certain chapters follow others. It’s not random.

Lounging on the bench of Psalm 22 (*the preacher may sit down on the “bench”*), we are invited to gaze out at the green pastures and the still waters of Psalm 23. God whispers to us that even in the darkest valleys, God is there:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
[God] makes me lie down in green pastures;
[God] leads me beside still waters;
and restores my soul.
(Say it with me if you know it….)
[God] leads me in right paths
for [God’s] name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Sometimes we are the ones called to show up in despair, to listen and act in love. Sometimes in doing so, we can despair that what we are doing isn’t enough.

That’s when God slides alongside us, (sometimes as a person) feeds and anoints us, and drapes an arm over our shoulder and says, “Goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life.”

And that communion with God is soul restoring enough to get us off the bench and take another step on the path of stewardship and justice for God’s name’s sake.

Amen.