

Put it in a Bigger Container

Reading & Reflection for Healing Sunday

February 25, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Psalm 22 and 23

Beloveds, on this Healing Sunday, we're going to put parts of two Psalms into conversation with each other and see what's revealed there. Today's lectionary offers us just a portion of Psalm 22 because Psalm 22 is *long*, but they kind of give us the good ending, and I don't want us to miss the beginning because I think it has something important for us! So we'll hear portions of Psalm 22 and then we'll hear the entirety of the psalm which directly follows it, Psalm 23. In honor of all the ways God shows up to and for us, you'll hear that I'm using multiple pronouns for God as we read. So now, let us pray for open hearts to receive God's word:

*O God, speak to our speaking,
speak to our listening,
speak to our souls' deep understanding. Amen.*

A reading from Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night but find no rest.

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near,

and there is no one to help.

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.

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

All you offspring of Jacob, glorify the Lord;
stand in awe of God, all you offspring of Israel!
For God did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
God did not hide his face from me
but heard when I cried to him.

And now, Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

She makes me lie down in green pastures;
she leads me beside still waters;

she restores my soul.

She leads me in right paths
for her 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.

The Word of Truth.

Please will you pray with me: Loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Beloveds, I love that Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 appear right next to each other. Our Psalmist has some kind of *emotional range!* As we put these expansive psalms in conversation together today, I want us to meditate on **how much SPACE there is for the vast scope of our human experience in the container of our relationship with God.**

In Psalm 22, we are with our Psalmist in the depths of despair, rock bottom. He is sure that God has ditched and forgotten him, and yet he's confused, because wasn't it God who's taken care of him since his mother bore him? "I am poured out like water," he sings, "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." I do wish I had had that last line when I was mad at my parents as a teenager. But jokes aside, our Psalmist is *suffering* deeply, and he's at a loss as to why.

Perhaps you recognize parts of your own story in this psalm, parts of what you're bringing on your heart to today's Healing Service. Psalm 22 reminds us that we are not alone in our suffering: in our moments of deepest despair, when our bones are out of joint and we feel laid in the dust of death, when we feel far from God, we are not the first to walk that path. Our ancestors, this psalmist, have been there before us. Jesus has been there before us – he cries out the beginning words of Psalm 22 from the cross before he dies: “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 22 doesn't shy away from the depths of human suffering. Our relationship with the divine, and our lives in general, it seems to say, can encompass periods of intense doubt, betrayal, anger, and angst. There is space for all of that in this Psalm. We are not alone when we feel those things.

I also love Psalm 22 because it contains multitudes. The Psalmist is working it out in real time. Alongside the intensity of his suffering, his ache to remind himself of God's goodness and nearness resounds. The psalmist writes, “he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me but heard when I cried to him.” Psalm 22 reminds us that there is space in our relationship with God for anger and disconnection and despair and there is also space for closeness and repair and relief. There is space for the immensity of our human experience and the specificity of our struggles. There is space for all of it.

These times can feel like Psalm 22 times, can't they? Mounting death tolls from wars in Gaza and Ukraine – numbers that we don't quite know how to process, that break our hearts or maybe numb us. A sense of rising authoritarianism all over the world. Deaths and illnesses in our own families. Another winter with little snow. Changes and transitions in our lives and communities that unveil the unpredictability of the future. Each of our hearts carries nested burdens, from the deeply personal and specific to the global. Perhaps sometimes we feel like the psalmist, crying, “do not be far from me, God, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.”

Or maybe your heart carries more Psalm 23 energy today. Psalm 23 feels like a praise song written by someone feeling much more secure in their relationship to God than the writer of Psalm 22. And yet, Psalm 23 also shows us that all the peaks and valleys of our human experiences fit inside of God's love for us. Not only do we get green pastures and still waters, goodness and mercy with God – we also walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and we sit at a table with our enemies. God

can't prevent hard things from happening to us, but God is with us through *all* of it, even when we can't sense them.

So what does this all have to do with our ministry and practice of healing this Sunday?

A couple days ago, I was running some errands around Porter Square, and leaving the bookstore, I found myself face to face with a bright purple sign outside of Cambridge Naturals that declared "Winter Wellness!" above a smattering of offers for moisturizers, candles, and tea. Now, I have no doubt that I am the epitome of Cambridge Naturals' target demographic. I am absolutely the type to feel despair about the state of the world and think to myself that maybe a new candle would be really nice right about now. Of all the ways to take the edge off, a love for the feeling of a new candle is not one I'm particularly mad about. We need pleasure and joy and comfort in these times, amen? But the healing we seek and offer today is different from our strategies to take the edge off, that "Winter Wellness" quick fix that suggests that individual healing in a suffering world is what we're seeking, and that we can buy or do or plan or achieve or numb our way there.

What this healing service *is* about is remembering our belonging to God and to each other. It's about remembering that no feeling or experience is too big for God to hold with us, and that we weren't born to do any of this alone. It's about remembering our interconnectedness, that our worries for our own loved ones implicate us in connection with families and communities of loved ones facing war and persecution close by and far away. It's about practicing bringing our burdens to God so that we can be light and lithe enough to keep moving together to create a world where all can be well. It's about remembering that wherever we are, whatever we're carrying, it *all* fits inside of the capacious container of God's love for us. It ALL belongs.

Healing like this gives us courage. When we put our suffering into a bigger container, it brings us out of the purgatory of our own lonely experience and into the fellowship of belonging in God. When we look around the sanctuary and see our community sharing their hearts and receiving healing, we remember that we are never alone in our suffering. Healing like this doesn't numb us out so that we can feel "well." Healing like this is one of our most powerful elixirs for staying present in intensity, staying resilient, and continuing to build God's kin-dom on Earth. It frees us from the story that we have to

carry our burdens alone, and in so doing it frees up energy that we can use to do our teaspoon to heal the world. It reconnects us to God, which, like Psalm 23 tells us, gives us courage to walk through the valley of the shadow of death together. It gives us the strength to sit down with our enemies and share food with them. And, vitally, it gives us rest in green pastures, nourishment by water, belonging and assurance of shelter in the house of a loving God who is with you, always, through every hill and valley of your experience.

Beloveds, no burden is too small for you to bring to the healing stations today. And no burden is too big. Every little bit of your experience belongs – even the part of you that doubts that it belongs. Come bring yourselves and all that you are carrying. We will lay it down together at the feet of a God who loves us no matter what, whose love is deep and wide enough to hold us even when we are doubtful or angry or full of despair. What we can't fully lay down, we will carry together and share the weight so that we might continue to walk forward boldly and nimbly, centered in our interconnectedness and our belonging to God and each other, freed up to do our part in healing this aching world. AMEN!

Benediction:

Beloveds, may you feel God's presence and love this week long after you've washed the oil off your forehead. Whether you spoke them aloud today or not, may the sharing of our burdens today give you the freedom and the courage to make bold moves, teaspoon by teaspoon, in healing our world. May you go wrapped in God's unconditional love, assured of your belonging, knowing how much you matter. Go in peace!