

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" We know these opening words of Psalm 22. We might have even said these words at some point in our lives when it felt as if God was not present. These words echo throughout the ages from the psalmist who first penned them to Jesus on the cross, from the depths of despair and grief of our ancestors in faith, to faithful people struggling to make sense of their lives today. What most don't realize in the hearing of these words is that the psalmist's individual lament, which begins with words of desperation, resolves into praise. In the midst of the psalmist's deep despair God's steadfast love and faithfulness is remembered.

"You who fear...who stand in awe...who revere the Lord, praise the Lord," says the psalmist. "You who have experienced abandonment, humiliation, and despair like I have," remember God's faithfulness. "You who are broken and brutalized as am I, praise God," says the psalmist.

But, how? How can we like the psalmist find room to praise God? How can we praise God when tragedy snatches a loved one from us? How can we praise God when financial ruin tosses us into the street? How can we praise God when our churches struggle? How can we praise God when we feel abandoned or humiliated, when despair creeps in and darkness overwhelms us? How can we praise God when our neighbors think we are irrelevant? How can we praise God if our hearts are crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?"

Thomas McGrath answers that question for us by saying that praise is possible in the midst of the direst circumstances if we shift our focus. We have to shift our focus from self to God, from internal to external. Yet, when our circumstances are dire, we often can only think about ourselves. Our focus is inward, we cry out, we rage and we can easily spiral out of control. We land in the abyss of self-pity, unable to see beyond it. Yet, the psalmist knows from experience that the darkness will only recede through praise. Only through praise will we be rescued from the abyss of our circumstances. Only through praise will we shift the focus from ourselves to God, for praise prompts us to remember God.

As we remember the God who spoke creation into being and knit us together in our mother's womb, the light will begin to dawn. As we remember God's nature and being, God's self-giving love new vistas will open before us. Through praise we will remember God's willingness to tear open the heavens and come down to dwell among us, experiencing the full gamut of the human experience through Jesus. Through praise we remember God's sovereignty over all of life, even when life feels out of control. Through praise we are able to remember, to recall the promises of God – I will be with you always.

As the psalmist said, "God did not despise or abhor the afflictions of the afflicted." God does not turn his face away from our suffering. God sees and hears us cry out in all our afflictions, no matter how deep our despair. And so, the psalmist finds his way out of the abyss by praising God, even though he began by saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

Peter... Peter probably wanted to cry out these very words when Jesus said to him, "Get behind me Satan!" I can hear Peter's brain scrambling to make sense of Jesus' declaration. Get behind me Satan? What do you mean? Why are you abandoning me? I just declared you the Messiah! Why are you forsaking me now?

In an instant Peter's frame of reference spiraled out of control. Everything he thought was true for him as a follower of Jesus was called into question. He had enjoyed the notoriety

of hanging out with an amazing teacher and healer. He rubbed shoulders daily with the one who miraculously fed thousands. Peter could see himself as a man of status and power once Jesus took his rightful place on the throne of David. Peter imagined upward mobility and maybe even perks on account of this new kingdom that was at hand. Peter saw nothing but future glory as long as he followed Jesus.

So, when Jesus said that he would suffer, be rejected and killed, Peter had to put a stop to his nonsense. I don't think Peter even heard Jesus' final words, "and after three days rise again." Peter just knew that suffering, rejection and death were not part of his plan for Jesus or himself.

To cut Peter some slack, I don't think any of us like God's agenda of suffering, rejection and death. We prefer Peter's concept of faith, a little healing here, a little feeding there, a little teaching here, a little praying there, a little status here, a little power there. We prefer following Jesus, just as Peter did, as long as there is no suffering, rejection or death!

But, from this side of the cross we know that God had other plans. Instead of Peter's version of faith, we have God's version of faith. God's version of what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Beloved, the Messiah. Peter dejected and confused, is left to wonder what is next, for Jesus turns away from Peter, calling the crowd and his other disciples to clarify what it means to follow him. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves." Or as Eugene Peterson clearly translates for our 21<sup>st</sup> century hearers, "You're not in the driver's seat! You need to let me lead!"

I imagine with those few words the crowd thinned considerably. Certainly, if Jesus were to stand on a street corner today and say these exact same words he would be ignored or laughed at. Deny myself, are you kidding? Self is all that matters in our American culture. Our society espouses these values, "Me, myself and I, that is who is most important. It is what I want; it is what works for me; it is what makes me happy, it is all about me! Deny myself...are you kidding?"

But, Jesus doesn't stop at just saying we must deny our self. Jesus foreshadows the cross that he will carry saying, "take up your cross and follow me." At this point we need to stop and imagine being one of the many in the crowd. Denying self was challenging enough, but now Jesus is saying something about a cross.

In 1st century Palestine the cross meant one thing and one thing only; death, the cruel tortuous death that awaited any who dared threaten Caesar's kingdom. All of a sudden denying oneself doesn't seem so radical but dying does! And Jesus makes this abundantly clear saying, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." The crowd must have thinned even more, for who would want to follow a man who says these things?

And yet Christianity has flourished throughout the ages. But, in light of Peter's preference - no suffering, no rejection, no dying - we have to ask ourselves, "Why? Why has Christianity flourished? Why do people become faithful followers of Jesus? Especially, if it means we must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and lose ourselves for the sake of the gospel, even if it means our death? Why are you a follower of Christ? Why are we followers of Christ together? Or better yet, what does it mean to be a faithful follower of Christ?"

There is a book out in Christian circles authored by Pastor Kyle Idleman, entitled, "Not a

Fan." Not a Fan calls you to consider the demands and rewards of being a true disciple. A reviewer writes, "With frankness sprinkled with humor, Idleman invites you to live the way Jesus lived, love the way Jesus loved, pray the way Jesus prayed, and never give up living for the One who gave his all for you."

Contrary to what Peter hoped, Idleman describes his book saying, "I will talk more about repentance than forgiveness, more about surrender than salvation, more about brokenness than happiness, and more about death than about life. The truth is if you are looking for a book about following Jesus that lays out a comfortable and reassuring path, you won't find it here."

I would suggest that Idleman is on the same page as Jesus. Jesus didn't pander to the crowd. Jesus didn't say following him would be smooth sailing. Jesus didn't sugarcoat the gospel. Jesus said, "Deny yourself, pick up your cross, lose your life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, and then, only then will you find life." Peterson's take makes it even plainer: "You're not in the driver's seat. Don't run from suffering, embrace it. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self." Friends, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, takes courageous faith.

If we think following Jesus is about comfort, reassurance, and safety, then we are not following the Jesus of scripture. If comfort, reassurance, and safety are our goals in our lives or in this church then we are following a manufactured Jesus, a Jesus of our own making. In the words of Idleman, Christians such as these are merely fans, not followers. Fans are Christians who know all about Jesus, but never act like Jesus. Churches can be fans as well. Where churches preach and teach all about Jesus, but never act like Jesus into the world.

Jesus went to the people and met the people where they were, Jesus was always on the move, from town to town, from synagogue to synagogue. Jesus ministry was a ministry of healing, teaching, and enacting justice. Jesus challenged the political and religious hierarchy, those who thought they had all the power and control. Jesus challenged those whose privilege labeled and excluded others because they were less than. Jesus was more often found with sinners and outcasts, then with the privileged and powerful of church and state.

Idleman reiterates that it is great to know about Jesus, but it is an entirely different matter to live like Jesus. So, what does it mean for us to be courageously faithful, both individually and communally?

Yesterday, fifteen of us attended the Presbytery's LEaD Event, an annual training event sponsored by the Presbytery of Riverside. Dr. Todd Bolsinger, Author of *Canoeing the Mountains*, was the main speaker and although he didn't use the language of our passage this morning, he made it abundantly clear that to be faithful to the gospel, to have courageous faith, means we will experience loss.

We will experience loss, because we will have to have the courage to live like Jesus in every new circumstance. And the way to live like Jesus is to be willing to sacrifice ourselves, our wants, our desires, our way, so that others might hear the good news.

Todd shared an example of a church, who carved in stone on the edifice of their church the one thing they thought would never change. They probably had thought long and hard as their sanctuary was being built years ago. A committee might have prayed and imagined together what would be most meaningful. I would have imagined something like, "The word of the Lord will stand forever," or "God is love." But, what was carved in stone... what was literally carved in stone and prominently displayed above the entrance of their sanctuary was the time

of their morning and evening worship service! I can hear Jesus saying to this church as he did to Peter, "Get behind me Satan!"

When churches set things in stone, other than the core of the gospel then we deserve Jesus' rebuke. I wonder what we have set in stone as a church? In case you were wondering about the advisory vote your Session asked you a couple of weeks ago about our worship time - 9:30 am, 10:00 am or no preference - the votes were almost evenly split! About half of us have a preference for 9:30 a.m. and about half of us have a preference for 10:00 a.m. So, your Session recommended not changing the time.

Although, our time is not carved in stone, I believe we have to ask ourselves, would we be willing to change it for the sake of the gospel? If we could reach others in our community by not only shifting the time, but maybe even the date, the location or music genre would be willing to self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel?

What I appreciated about Todd's book and the presentation yesterday is his emphasis on understanding the importance of who God has uniquely called us to be. This church has a DNA and your leadership is working towards rediscovering it by asking, "Why do we do what we do?" God is not calling us to be something we are not. Jesus didn't want Peter to be Andrew. Jesus just wanted Peter to be Peter by being willing to let go, to self-sacrifice, for the sake of the gospel.

There is so much more in this passage than I have been able to uncover in this short sermon, yet I hope we all realize both individually and communally, to be faithful to the gospel takes courage, for Jesus asks us to lose, in order to gain.

Are you, are we as a church willing to lose, to let go, to sacrifice what we want for the sake of others who do not yet know Jesus? If so, then courageous faith is needed. Amen.