

The Passion of the Psalms: Abandonment

June 29, 2008

Year A: Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

A father was at the beach with his child when his four-year-old son ran up to him, grabbed his hand, and led him to the shore, where a seagull lay dead in the sand. "Daddy, what happened to him?" the son asked.

"He died and went to Heaven," the dad replied.

The boy thought for a moment and then said, "Did God throw him back down?"¹

Here's another one for you. One that gets a lot of laughs and one I'm sure you've heard before.

A United Methodist preacher, a Rabbi, and a Hindu were traveling together when their car broke down. They were unable to get any help, so they walked to a nearby farm and asked the farmer if they could stay the night. The farmer was happy to put them up, but he only had one extra bed, a double bed as it were, so one of the three would have to stay in the barn. The Hindu quickly volunteered, and so the Rabbi and the preacher made themselves comfortable.

It wasn't long before a knock came at the door, however. "I'm sorry, there is a cow in the barn, and of course cows are sacred animals in my religion." So, the Rabbi made his way to the barn.

It wasn't too much longer before there was another knock at the door. "I'm sorry, there is a pig in the barn. Pigs are, of course, unclean animals in my religion."

With a sign of resignation, the United Methodist preacher made his way to the barn. It wasn't much longer that another knock came at the door. There standing at the door was the cow and the pig.²

I had to include some funnies for you because this subject right here is just down right serious. It is not only difficult to preach on but even harder to hear. Our subject is abandonment and I'm not talking about being left at the curb. I'm not talking about getting kicked out of the club. I'm not talking about being snubbed by a friend. Folks, I'm talking about that feeling of loneliness, of despair, of depression. I'm talking about that feeling that no body cares what happens to you, and that there is no one to turn to, not even God.

[Psalm 13:1-6 \(NRSV\)](#)

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ²How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

¹ "Did God throw him back?" *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part II.* 40.

² "Cow and pig." *Ibid.* 27.

³Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, ⁴and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. ⁶I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Ouch! What a text! Now you see why I chose this title for my summer sermon series – The Passion of the Psalms. Passion doesn't have to be about love. Passion is that intense feeling that we have toward some thing or some one. In this Psalm – that Passion (that intense feeling) is the belief that God has abandoned you and has given you over to your enemies for mocking.

There was a church where the preacher and the minister of music were not getting along. As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service.

The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director led the song, "*I Shall not be Moved.*"

The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The director lead the song, "*Jesus Paid it All.*"

The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director led the song, "*I Love to Tell the Story.*"

With all this going on, the preacher became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The musician led the song, "*Oh, Why Not Tonight?*"

As it came to pass, the preacher did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus that was taking him away. The music leader led the song, "*What a Friend We Have in Jesus.*"³

Sorry – had to include one more funny. You see, I'm doing something here in my sermon that I do in my own life. It's my way of coping with a very serious subject. I use humor to deflect dealing with something like abandonment. I've done it my whole life. When I've had that feeling of loneliness, feeling left out, of not fitting in, feeling ostracized for being different, being bullied in grade school, when I wasn't accepted for who I was, I learned to cope by just making jokes. If I could get people to laugh then maybe I would feel accepted. This subject of abandonment is something I am passionate about.

When the Psalmist mentions abandonment he is talking about the feeling that God is not listening and in fact doesn't even care about his situation. However, he doesn't use humor to cope. Instead he takes his grievances directly to God. Listen to verse 5: ⁵But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. ⁶I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Now why this change? Wasn't this text about being angry at God? Wasn't this passage about letting God know how we feel? Why the change in

³ "The Preacher and the Music Director." *Ibid.*, Part I. 11.

tone? Do you remember when I started this series on Psalms I mentioned that these passages are wonderful moments of pastoral care. If someone had an issue such as a complaint, a problem, or even a joy, they would go to the Temple or Synagogue and the leader of that congregation would choose a Psalm appropriate to their situation. They would either sing or read it and when they arrived at the Hebrew designation called “Selah” they would divert from the text and provide a prayer or sermonette. It would be something specific to their circumstance. Now this Psalm doesn’t contain that designation “Selah.” It has perhaps been lost over time but I have suspected that if this Psalm contained it would be included between verses 4 and 5 because something changes right there. One scholar said about this text, that it was not the situation of the individual that changed, it was something within the person themselves that changed.

Enrico Caruso, an Italian tenor, was one of the greatest masters of song ever to step onto a stage. In later life his confidence was enormous, but at the beginning of his career he was unsure and uncertain.

One opening night at the opera, Caruso was standing in the wings waiting to go on when he was seized by an overwhelming attack of stage fright. His throat became constricted. Perspiration poured from him. He was actually shaking with fear.

Then the stagehands nearby were astonished to hear him say, in a whispered command, “Out! You miserable ‘little me,’ get out of my way! Out! Out!”

By a tremendous effort of will, Caruso was changing his self image. He was saying to the fearful, timid element inside of him that the strong, positive element inside must prevail, would prevail, and in the face of this fierce counterattack, the “little me” shrank away. He went onstage, where he sang with the beauty and power that was characteristic of the great Caruso. At the end, the audience surged up, shouting “Bravo!”⁴

Like Caruso we have the ability to change that “little me” inside of us. Our situation around us may not be changing but we can adapt ourselves to what is happening. It is the way we cope. Some of us use humor, others cry, some use chocolate to cope, others just retreat. But the Psalmist says these are not appropriate ways to cope especially with that ultimate feeling of abandonment. Instead we must bring our problems, our pains, our despair right to the feet of God and let God know how we feel. Be honest with God. And, folks, I’m here to tell you that is OK. In fact, I believe, we need to do this even more than we do.

I had a parishioner once who would not enter the church building because she was angry with God. She’d sit right on the steps but she would not go in to the church building. She was a young woman right out of college and entered into an affair with a man twice her age who was already married. When I spoke to her she told me that she was mad that God allowed her to enter into this relationship and she was not going to enter the church that she was nurtured and raised in because God did not stop her from getting into that situation. She didn’t go to church because she was too guilty that she was mad at God.

⁴ Norman Vincent Peale. “Getting rid of the little me.” *Ibid., Part III.* 35.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, relates the story of a boy who becomes mentally ill because he can't handle his anger at his father. Michael Gordon loves and admires his father so much that he can't face the fact that he often resents him and feels angry toward him. The psychiatrist, Danny Saunders, is able to help Michael because he has had to work through his own ambivalent feelings of love-hate-admiration-anger toward his own powerful, admirable, dominating father, and has done so successfully. Kushner contrasts that success story with that of Rabbi Kalman, a teacher in the rabbinical seminary attended by Danny's best friend. Rabbi Kalman is a survivor of the Holocaust. His wife and children died in the concentration camps. He is a rigidly Orthodox Jew who considers it a sin even to raise questions about God and why He does things the way He does. One must believe wholeheartedly, without doubts.

Kushner contrasts these two individuals. He writes, "Just as Michael became sick because he couldn't handle his anger at his father, Rabbi Kalman has become a tyrannical, unsympathetic person because he can't face up to his anger at his Father in Heaven. Rabbi Kalman permits no doubting, no questing of God, because somewhere in the recesses of his mind he knows how furiously angry he is at God for the death of his family, and he knows that any questions will end in an angry outburst against God, maybe even the rejection of God and religion entirely. And he can't risk that happening."

Then Kushner writes, Michael is made whole by being taught not to be afraid of his anger. His anger is normal, understandable, and a lot less destructive than he has believed. He is told, to his immense relief, that it is all right to be angry at people you love. But no one tells Rabbi Kalman that it is all right to be angry at God.⁵

This is one of several stories that Kushner tells in his famous book. For Kushner, his book was a way to come to grips with what was taking place with his son. He had *progeria* or rapid aging syndrome. His son would be dead, basically from old age after only a few years. Kushner had every right to be angry. He had every right to be mad at God, but he took to heart the Psalm and he wrote his book so he could change. In his introduction he says, "I am fundamentally a religious man who has been hurt by life, and I wanted to write a book that could be given to the person who has been hurt by life – by death, by illness or injury, by rejection or disappointment – and who knows in his heart that if there is justice in the world, he deserved better. What can God mean to such a person? Where can he turn for strength and hope?"⁶ Rabbi Kushner concludes, we can always turn to God.

I agree with this wise man. I believe God is big enough to take our anger. I agree with the Psalmist. We have permission to let God know when a prayer goes unanswered. It is OK to tell God that we are still grieving and lonely. It is acceptable to say to God, God – we've worked hard in this life and we are not getting what we deserve. And folks, we have permission to say to God, life isn't

⁵ Harold S. Kushner. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. (New York: Avon Books. 1981). 107-108.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

fair. So go ahead and bring your grievances to God and then remember God is big enough to take it and will always love us no matter what.

There is a story that takes place during the Holocaust. In one of the German concentration camps the Jews decide to put God on trial for allowing the Holocaust to happen. In this awful setting a judge was appointed, a jury was selected, a prosecutor was chosen, and God was even given a Defense Attorney. The trial went on. After it was over the verdict was read and God was found GUILTY! Guilty for allowing the Holocaust to happen. But that is not the end of the story. After the trial – after the verdict – these Jews who were probably about ready to be killed they had worship.

Folks, who do we turn to when we are angry? We turn to those we feel safe with – parents, a best friend, a close colleague. The Psalm says – it's OK, its safe – to also turn to God. Amen.