

## Peace with God

Psalm 22: 1-6

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

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

<sup>2</sup>O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.

<sup>3</sup>Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

<sup>4</sup>In you our ancestors trusted;  
they trusted, and you delivered them.

<sup>5</sup>To you they cried, and were saved;  
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

<sup>6</sup>But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.

One of the most iconic movies of the 1990s – and one of my all time favorites – is Forrest Gump. There's a scene in the movie when Forrest and Lieutenant Dan are on their shrimp boat when Lieutenant Dan basically thanks Forrest for saving his life in Vietnam and then he pushes himself over the edge of the boat for a swim. As he's in the water, Forrest tells us that he believes Lieutenant Dan had made his peace with God.

We are finishing our sermon series, "Life Centered in Peace," today by talking about peace with God and there are several different angles by which we could approach this topic. One way to think about peace with God is about God making peace with us. This is the kind of peace that the apostle Paul often speaks of, for instance when in Corinthians he writes, "in Christ, God was reconciling the world,<sup>a]</sup> not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." This is the kind of peace where we trust that God forgives us for all the wrongs we've done, that God chooses grace over judgment, that God chooses to be at peace with us.

A second kind of peace with God is about recovering from the harmful things we've been told about God. A lot of Mary Page's PhD research deals with trauma and one type of trauma is religious trauma. This is the pain that is caused when people in positions of religious authority tell others that their very identity is shameful. All of us can be affected by this kind of trauma but it especially affects groups who have historically been marginalized.

It's the kind of trauma LGBTQ people experience when they are told their very being is sinful.

Or the kind of trauma women experience when they're blamed for being a victim of sexual assault or silenced by people in power.

Religious trauma is especially painful because the victim is told that their pain is the will of God. An important process of healing is to accept that the powerful abusers do not speak for God, but rather, God is always on the side of those who are hurt, those who are marginalized. Peace with God is about learning that God is not like you've been told and that God loves and accepts each of us for who we are.

Both these understandings of peace with God – that God has made peace with us and forgiven us and recovering from harmful theologies that bring shame – are incredibly important and each one is worthy of its own sermon. But today, I want to talk about peace with God from another point of view. What do we do when life seems so incredibly unfair that it makes us doubt whether or not God is with us at all?

My favorite scene in *Forrest Gump* is when Forrest and Lieutenant Dan are on the shrimping boat during the hurricane. In case anyone hasn't seen the movie, here's a little background. Forrest met Lieutenant Dan when he was drafted into the army and sent to fight in Vietnam. Lieutenant Dan had come from a long line of military heroes – a member of his family had fought and died in every single American war. Lieutenant Dan believed that fighting for – and if necessary dying for his country was his destiny. In one battle, their unit was ambushed and Forrest saved Lieutenant Dan's life, but not before Lieutenant Dan was wounded severely, so much so, that he lost both legs. He would be discharged from the army unable to fight anymore. Everything that had given his life meaning and purpose was taken from him. Lieutenant Dan turned to drinking, no doubt to numb the pain, and through a random encounter with Forrest decided to become his first mate on Forrest's shrimping boat when they found themselves stuck in the Gulf of Mexico during a hurricane.

Lieutenant Dan decided that the storm was the perfect time to have it out with God. He climbs the mast and sits at the top of the ship and yells at God, "It's time for a showdown. You and me. I'm right here!"

It's meant to be a shocking scene to see someone speak to God like that. I think many of us may cringe to see someone speak like that to God. It's not respectful. But it is actually biblical. Throughout Scripture, especially this Psalms, the writers lay before God their full range of emotions, including their anger and hurt. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes,

*The Psalms express the entire gamut of speech to God, from profound praise to the utterance of unspeakable anger and doubt. The Psalms invite us to see the world as it truly is and that all human experience is a proper subject for conversation with God. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart. ... everything must be brought to speech, and addressed to God, who is the final reference for all of life."*

I think sometimes we have this view of Scripture – maybe even in our subconscious – that it is polite, inoffensive – even the parts where the words speak of extreme anger and pain, we almost hear them as sort of preambles – something like, My life was so hard, I didn't know how I could make it but then God saved me. And we read those passages almost like we think the writer knew ahead of time that everything was going to be ok and was only talking about the bad stuff to make the good stuff seem that much better. But that is not at all what the Psalms do. Listen to these words again from Psalm 22 and as you hear them, picture the writer being in the same emotional state as Lieutenant Dan.

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

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

<sup>2</sup>O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest.

For Psalms like this, Walter Brueggemann likes to explain the purpose of these Psalms of lament by using Paul Ricoeur's philosophy that life is characterized by maintaining balance between disorientation and reorientation. This is a Psalm of disorientation – a Psalm where things aren't the way they're supposed to be. The writer feels like God has left him all alone. God has abandoned him. This is the same Psalm that Jesus quotes from the cross. "My God, my God, why have you left me all alone."

I asked you to imagine the Psalmist in the same place of anger as Lieutenant Dan. Now imagine Jesus in that place – not as the One who knew that his death was part of some divine plan but as one whose whole world had fallen apart, as One who lived his whole life in accordance with what he believed God's will to be only to feel completely abandoned by God when he needed God most. Even Jesus found himself in a place where he needed a showdown with God.

Now we might not have called it a showdown with God, but my guess is that all of us have felt times of disorientation, maybe especially in these last few years. And when I'm in that place, I can tell you what I most certainly don't want to hear,

"well, everything's just going to be ok," or

"God's got a higher plan in all this."

I don't want to hear any of that at all. I want someone to tell me it's ok to say, "God, what's wrong with you. Why did you create the world with killer germs that can spread so easily. Why did my love one get that terminal illness. Why can my child not ever seem to find happiness. What is wrong with you God." Or to use Lieutenant Dan's phrase – "God, it's time for a showdown."

These Psalms, these cries of pain, these sacrilegious outbursts are a part of our Holy Scriptures. They're part of our faith story. They're part of who we claim God is and, in so doing, we implicitly affirm the very power of our faith -- that we have a God who does not shame us for these very real emotions. We have a God that listens to our laments. We have a God who can hold our accusations and anger and even our cursing of God without turning away, without condemning.

But these Psalms don't stand alone. They go hand in hand with the Psalms of Praise. In fact, even the Psalms of Lament turn to praise at the end. This is what Brueggeman calls *reorientation*. That means that we don't go back to life as normal, we can't. We are different people because of what we've experienced. We are changed people. As much as we would like to, we can't just go back to how things were like before -- before the loss of that loved one, before that devastating break up, before the global pandemic. But instead, we move through our pain, our grief, our anger -- not ignoring it, but actually dealing with it so that we come to a new place -- a place not absent of anger and grief, but a place where the anger and grief do not have the last word. In other words, the Psalms call out to us that we can still come to a place of hope and life and even joy on the other side. Even Psalm 22 doesn't remain in the anger. By its end it moves from its anguished pleas to praise. Listen to these words:

I offer praise in the great congregation  
because of you;  
I will fulfill my promises  
in the presence of those who honor God.  
<sup>26</sup> Let all those who are suffering eat and be full!  
Let all who seek the LORD praise him!  
I pray your hearts live forever!

My guess is that Lieutenant Dan had to have his showdown with God to ever find peace with God.

For our praise to be genuine, we need to express our anger and utter confusion. We need the time and space to sit and truly experience this disorientation. We need to be angry about all the things that are wrong with the world and even blame God if we need to because, as Brueggemenn explains, "This cry allows us to implicate God in the covenant relationship that has been promised. *This cry reminds us of our part in that relationship. This cry, as it has before and will again, will eventually move us to praise. Not a false praise that comes from choosing to ignore the feelings that these disturbing realities elicit, but authentic praise that can only come through the experience and horrifying remembrance of our disorienting realities.*"

In other words, Brueggemenn is saying that the Psalms are basically really good therapists -- pain doesn't go away just by ignoring it or refusing to confront it. To jump to praise without lament, without telling God we are upset and angry when things are falling apart all around us is a cheap praise...it's more of an attempt to convince ourselves of things that we know are not true. But crying out to God in lament, in pain, in anger -- even if it feels offensive and

sacrilegious, actually leads us to a place of true praise, of true relationship, and of true peace with God.

So today, let me invite you to look to a very unlikely character as an example of what it means to be a person of faith – Lieutenant Dan. And if we ever feel like we need to, let's follow his example and tell God, "It's time for a showdown. You and me. I'm right here."