

“Everything Is Holy: Our Loneliness”
Matthew 27:45-50

Three weeks ago, I read the story of a Syrian man by the name of Mohammed Aisha who had been stranded on a cargo ship in Egypt for four years. He was working on the ship in 2017, when it entered the Egyptian waters and a legal battle ensued because the ship had expired safety certificates. The crew abandoned the ship and Mohammed was ordered by a judge to be the legal guardian of the ship. This meant that he was not allowed to leave the ship until the legal and safety issues were resolved. For four years, he lived on a ship without water or electricity. Every few days, he had to swim to shore to recharge his phone and get some food. The living conditions on the ship were horrific. But the worst part of this whole ordeal for him was being separated from his family and from other human beings. There were times when he lost all hope and thought of ending his life.

What a tragic story of human cruelty! One of the hardest things for us as human beings is to be isolated from human community. Jesus experienced this kind of loneliness and isolation on the cross. Prior to his crucifixion, Jesus had a sizeable following of people. For most of his ministry, it was hard for him to get away for times of prayer alone. The crowds were always pressing in on him. Even when the crowds had gone, Jesus had his close circle of disciples and friends with him. But that all changed when he was crucified. Only a handful of mostly women disciples and his mother stayed with him. In the hardest periods of his pain, Jesus was overheard reciting the words of Psalm 22:1 which expressed his deep agony and the feeling that he was forsaken by God.

Jesus' experience of suffering parallels so many of our own experiences. One of the hardest parts of suffering is that it disconnects us from lifegiving relationships. We feel isolated by our physical or emotional pain. I think it is remarkable that the Gospel records the words of Jesus about feeling forsaken and thus giving us an example of the depth of human suffering. Jesus gave us a powerful affirmation for our suffering and loneliness. He also gave us an example of turning to prayer in such times of deep suffering. The words he uttered were the words of a psalm. The book of Psalms is often referred to as “the Prayer Book” of the Bible. This was a prayer that had been uttered by Jesus and his people many times before. They knew about those feelings of deep pain, but they also knew about the importance of being honest in prayer. The Bible is full of stories of suffering and isolation. The path to healing is often through honest prayers. People who dare to open their hearts and to share their deep sense of brokenness are the ones who also open their lives to great healing and hope. On the cross, Jesus was vulnerable before God through an honest prayer of lament. And those words resonated with those who heard them. They resonated enough that a generation or two later, these words were recorded in the Gospels. Instead of sugarcoating the emotional and physical agony of the cross, we are plunged deep into it to see that even Jesus faced the very human feelings of being forsaken. In that way, prayer is not about getting what we want from the divine. It is instead about surrendering ourselves with all of our struggles and joys to divine love. That is how our loneliness and suffering become sacred. When we are willing to pray honest and raw prayers naming our fears, hurts, and losses, and lamenting them, then we can allow grace to enter into them.

The pain of the pandemic has been at times so overwhelming for us. The loneliness of social isolation, the fear that is gripping us still, the loss of life, resources, and health are among the many things we have experienced. There is not going to be a magic switch we can flip to help us feel safe about going back to in-person worship and other social activities. Our invitation is to name our pain or our fear honestly before God. That is how we are able to see the holy even in our sense of loneliness.

One of the great German theologians of hope was a man by the name of Jurgen Moltmann. In his book, *Experiences of God*, Moltmann tells his life story and how he found the sacred during a very difficult and isolating time through prayer. Moltmann grew up in a secular home in Hamburg, Germany, planning to study mathematics and physics. He was very interested in the theories of relativity and quantum physics. But all of that changed when at the age of 19 he was drafted into Hitler's army. When he was captured and taken prisoner by the British, his world collapsed around him. He was sent to a Scottish POW camp where he was imprisoned for three years until his release in 1948. He described his POW experience like this: "We had escaped death but we had lost all hope. Some of us became cynical, some fell ill. The thought of there being no way out was like an iron hand constricting our hearts. Yet each of us tried to conceal his stricken heart behind an armor of untouchability. And then came what was for me the worst of all. In September 1945 in Camp 22 in Scotland, we were confronted with pictures of Belsen and Auschwitz. They were pinned up in one of the huts, without comment. Some thought it was just propaganda. Others set the piles of bodies which they saw over against the piles of bodies in Dresden. But slowly and inexorably the truth filtered into our awareness and we saw ourselves mirrored in the eyes of the Nazi victims. Was this what we had fought for? For me, every feeling for Germany, the so-called sacred 'Fatherland' collapsed. For me, the turn from humiliation to new hope came about through two things—first through the Bible, and then through the encounter with other people. In the Scottish POW camp I was for the first time given a Bible by a well-meaning Army chaplain. I began to read the psalms of lament and found words to express my anguish and heartache. Over time I began to summon up the courage to live again, seized by a great hope. I would walk around the barbed wire perimeter, circling the chapel on a small hill in the middle of the camp. I began to sense in those walks the same mysterious companion that had accompanied Cleopas and his friend on their way to Emmaus. This early fellowship with Jesus, my brother in suffering and redeemer from my guilt, has never left me since."

The other experience that changed Moltmann's life was the welcome he received when he and other POWs were invited to an international Student Christian Movement conference in the summer of 1947. Listen to his description of that transformative experience: "We were welcomed as brothers in Christ and invited to eat and drink, pray and sing along with young Christians from all over the world...I had fought in Holland, in the battle for the Arnheim Bridge. The Dutch students told us that Christ was on the bridge on which they could come over to us, and that without Christ they would not be talking to us at all." The grace of lament through the psalms and through worship, helped redeem a man who went on to be an avid advocate and teacher of hope. The loneliness and isolation of suffering and human cruelty became sacred through honest prayer.

Today, I invite us to listen to the words of Psalm 22. I invite you to pray them with me bringing to mind all the fear, anger, hurt, and isolation of this pandemic. If you feel like crying, please feel free to do so. I invite you if you hear or see someone crying to just let them be and to honor this sacred space for them.

I will be using parts of Psalm 22 as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in the Message:

1-2 God, God ... my God!

Why did you dump me
miles from nowhere?

Doubled up with pain, I call to God
all the day long. No answer. Nothing.

I keep at it all night, tossing and turning.

9-11 And to think you were midwife at my birth,
setting me at my mother's breasts!

When I left the womb you cradled me;
since the moment of birth you've been my God.

Then you moved far away
and trouble moved in next door.

I need a neighbor.

14-15 I'm a bucket kicked over and spilled,
every joint in my body has been pulled apart.

My heart is a blob
of melted wax in my gut.

I'm dry as a bone,
my tongue black and swollen.

They have laid me out for burial
in the dirt.

16-18 Now packs of wild dogs come at me;
thugs gang up on me.

They pin me down hand and foot,
and lock me in a cage -a bag

Of bones in a cage, stared at
by every passerby.

They take my wallet and the shirt off my back,
and then throw dice for my clothes.

19-21 You, God 'don't put off my rescue!
Hurry and help me!

25-26 Here in this great gathering for worship
I have discovered this praise-life.

And I'll do what I promised right here
in front of the God-worshippers.

Down-and-outers sit at God's table
and eat their fill.

Everyone on the hunt for God
is here, praising God.

Live it up, from head to toe.

Don't ever quit!" Amen.