

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23) – Year B – October 14, 2009 - Homily
Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
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One of the most heart-wrenching experiences I've had was to listen to the stories of woman who had been relentlessly beaten and sexually abused by fathers, husbands or boyfriends. About half of these women had lost their faith in God. Most of those who had given up on God were the survivors of abuse from men who were well known in their community as ministers or other 'upstanding' members of a religious group. Some had also received terrible advice by otherwise well-meaning clergy along the lines of whatever their partners or parents had done to them -- however violent, mean or controlling -- that they should basically suck it up, shut up, or stay married. Just for the record, that is not just really bad advice, lousy pastoral care, but rotten theology as well. As you may know, October is domestic violence awareness month, and I guess that this silent and deadly issue has been on my mind. From a spiritual perspective, it was very hard for me to hear that woman had given up on God's goodness and love, because of their worldly experiences at the hands of men. Although I have to say that I do not blame any of these survivors, especially those who found no refuge or compassion in the community of faith. Nor will I stop praying for all survivors of abuse that one day they might turn back to God, and realize that it is the one relationship in which they can never be physically or emotionally hurt, betrayed or wounded.

The psalm for this evening is a powerful lament to God for one who is suffering terribly at the hands of other people. You may recognize it as the psalm Jesus begins to pray while He is crucified, speaking in great agony, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" It is one of the most recognized psalms, second only to Psalm 23, known as the Shepherd's psalm. The lectionary selection has limited us to the first fifteen verses, which is a shame, because the message of hope, God's response, and redemption does come in the latter part of the psalm. As part of the Hebrew Scriptures, of course, there is no thought to it actually relating to Jesus specifically. In fact, in Jewish tradition this psalm is thought to have been written by King David, as a lament, perhaps relating the threat to the Jews that is also told in the Book of Esther, and forms the basis of the celebration of Purim in the Jewish calendar. As Christians, you and I, can see and hear the deep resonance with Jesus' passion. The description given is uncannily like the specifics of a person being tortured in crucifixion – a favorite Roman punishment – with references to bones being disjointed, a mouth as dry as a potsherd, and, of course, death.

I think you can see why I hear the horrific suffering of battered and abused woman in the words of this psalm, as much as the link with Jesus' crucifixion. Yet, we have to look at some of the details to get a really good sense of the writer, of God, and of the underlying themes that are easy to miss in the overtones of violent oppression and pain. The opening line itself is quite remarkable. Most psalms or other prayers to God usually begin with something like "O God" or some other non-specific appeal. However, we should notice that this psalm is very personal indeed; the psalmist directly addresses "*my* God". That's important for us, because we do have a personal relationship with God. Our God cares deeply about each and every one of us, not just humanity in general or from some unfathomable distance. God is not distant or uncaring, but always present to and with believers, even dwelling within our hearts in the person of the Holy Spirit. One of the most common questions for priests is, "where was God when ..." – you fill in the details, like when a child is killed and so on. The answer for all God's children is that God

was and is right there with each of us. It is very natural for you and me to be so caught up in the events and emotions of the moment to feel sometimes that God abandons us, and even Jesus has said so much on our behalf during His personal horror on the cross. It is often only later that we realize God never left us. As we reflect on God's great gift, promised through Jesus Christ, and given to all at our baptism, we are more cognizant that we are vessels of the Living Spirit of God in the world. And knowing that, we also know that it is not even possible for faithful believers to be abandoned by God. The deep inner joy, which is both a gift and a blessing from God, and in which we can rest during our own times of deepest desperation flows from the knowledge that Christ never abandons us. God truly is our refuge.

When we look a little closer though we hear how the Psalmist's lament is peppered with much language about what God has done for him in the past, and about God's steadfast love and faithfulness. This too gives us hope. Verse 4 reads, "Our forefathers put their trust in you; they trusted, and you delivered them." Verse 8 tells of the scorn of the Psalmist's enemies, but also how the writer has remained faithful even under such agonized suffering, "He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him." Again, the Psalmist speaks of being kept safe by God from womb to birth, and entrusted into God's care as he grows up. His petition to God is, "Be not far from me." The petition for the nearness of God echoes Moses' prayer from Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 7, when he reminds the Israelites of how close God is for them. Therefore, this prayer of lament is also covenantal, and asks for God's protection from enemies, with an underlying confidence that God truly is faithful and compassionate to all who call to Him for help. As at least one commentator has written, the personal nature of the questions and petitions to my God, "imply that life is still to be found in the divine-human encounter. Faith is greater than that which seeks to destroy it." Salvation history has shown that God's unshakeable, steadfast love is apparent, most noticeably, of course, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. God loved the world so much that He gave us His only Son, and our hope lies through faith in Christ. As Paul tells us in his letter to the church in Rome, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:3b-5).

All in all, there is no pass or waiver from suffering in life. Yet when we reflect on our own struggles, we may well conclude that suffering draws us into an awareness of, and connection with the suffering of others. That connection can bring us closer to the community of faith, and the larger world at a time when we would be tempted to withdraw like a wounded animal. Jesus suffered unjustly, for the life of the world, for my salvation and for yours. Is it any wonder that He chose to recite the opening line of Psalm 22 as he was dying on the cross for our sins, so that all might be reconciled to God through faith in Him? When we too, call out to God in Christ, we will be strengthened, and find relief from torment. Jesus has been there before us, is with us through all that the world can throw at us, and that is good news for all.

Amen.