

## Psalm 22:1-31

- <sup>1</sup>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.
- <sup>7</sup>All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
- <sup>8</sup>Commit your cause to the LORD;  
let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"
- <sup>9</sup>Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
- <sup>10</sup>On you I was cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
- <sup>11</sup>Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help.
- <sup>12</sup>Many bulls encircle me,  
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
- <sup>13</sup>they open wide their mouths at me,  
like a ravening and roaring lion.
- <sup>14</sup>I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart is like wax;  
it is melted within my breast;
- <sup>15</sup>my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;  
you lay me in the dust of death.
- <sup>16</sup>For dogs are all around me;  
a company of evildoers encircles me.  
My hands and feet have shriveled;
- <sup>17</sup>I can count all my bones.  
They stare and gloat over me;
- <sup>18</sup>they divide my clothes among themselves,  
and for my clothing they cast lots.

<sup>19</sup>But you, O LORD, do not be far away!  
O my help, come quickly to my aid!  
<sup>20</sup>Deliver my soul from the sword,  
my life from the power of the dog!  
<sup>21</sup>Save me from the mouth of the lion!  
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.  
<sup>22</sup>I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:  
<sup>23</sup>You who fear the LORD, praise him!  
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;  
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!  
<sup>24</sup>For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him.  
<sup>25</sup>From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.  
<sup>26</sup>The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.  
May your hearts live forever!  
<sup>27</sup>All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.  
<sup>28</sup>For dominion belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.  
<sup>29</sup>To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.  
<sup>30</sup>Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord,  
<sup>31</sup>and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.

You know the phrase “It’s always darkest before the dawn.” Something which can be known by numerous peoples both alive now and peoples throughout the ages. Looking at that term on the Internet: among others, some attribute it to Winston Churchill during World War II. Some Internet commentators mock the proverb as being ignorant of science because the hour before dawn really is not any darker than other times of the night. Party poopers. It’s not nice to demythologize such a saying.

Besides, it probably never was meant to be taken literally – perhaps more symbolically. “It’s always darkest before the dawn.” Anyway, in Hebrew the word for dawn is *shachar*. The word for black is *shachor*. The Psalmist’s words of introduction for Psalm 22 – a very despairing Psalm which Jesus recited on the cross – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – in the introduction the Hebrew words are According to the Deer of the Dawn – making the connection between dawn and darkness as the words begin “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Maybe Winston Churchill coined the phrase, and maybe scientifically it doesn’t stand up, but for those who have walked into the darkneses of life, the truth of it cannot be truer. But only in hindsight. Only in hindsight. Because when one is in the depth of the dark night of the soul, one can rarely see that the dawn is even remotely close to coming. It is at its darkest. When one begins questioning his or her sanity, terrified by the eruptions from deep within of a part of himself or herself which are so different – so foreign – so unwanted. When one has thought he or she has endured the worst in life, only to be dragged down even deeper into the pit of despair.

Would that any or all of us be able to glide through life – from its beginnings at our births until we reach our last breaths – would that any or all of us be able to glide through life unscathed by the pains and torments which all too often visit us. But most of us take our turn. The darkness encompasses and covers us leaving our souls crying – a heap of cold ash. What is left? Nothing left to add to the fire pit of our souls. Nothing which can light and burn and warm and give light to our lives. Nothing left. For some, that really is the end.

In Psalm 22, words echo Jesus' despair. Gnostics and other heretics cannot accept that Jesus really was in complete despair – after all he was God. But he was also human. The end came, and it all came unraveled. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you abandoned me? I don't think Jesus' despair was about dying – after all, we all will have to face that. I don't think it was about Jesus having to suffer. Certainly crucifixion was a hideous way to die. Millions have also faced torturous and cruel deaths. Still is happening. Jesus wasn't a wimp, whimpering about pain and death. Seems to me the despair was within his soul. For one so close to his Father God, to experience the separation, being cut off, abandonment – that is a cry of disillusionment. Was Jesus disillusioned at the end? I believe he was. The same cry of disillusionment and abandonment so many in the world have suffered. A fear of dying? I don't think so. A soul of ashes being thrown into the garbage dump? I do think so. Of course, we know the story of Jesus. It is the Resurrection. God taking that abandoned, disillusioned, dead body and saying that the story just does not end there. There is life. There is more fire left than any of us could ever imagine. But so often we just cannot see it. Because it is so dark before the dawn – we are more than blind to Who it is that is there with us in the darkness.

Ah, but Jesus was special. Resurrection for him. Raised from the dead. The miracle of God on Easter morning. But us? I'm no Jesus. Neither are you (I don't think). But unless we forget, Jesus did not raise himself. He may have been extraordinarily unique: divine and human. But he was dead. Dead dead. He didn't raise himself. The resurrection is really less about Jesus and more about God the Father. When we ache in the dark nights of the soul – when the shadow of death wraps

its sinister fingers around our souls to squeeze out what little life may still be there – we have to remember that in the hopeless darkneses, it is not about us having to resurrect ourselves, it is not about us groping around in the darkness trying to light the fire, it is not about us trying to find the hope in the ashes. Resurrecting is *God's* job. Is God up to the job?

But even amid the dark words of Psalm 22, there is still hope. Almost like gasps for air. After the opening words:

<sup>1</sup>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.

After those words are these words:

<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.

Providence. One of my favorite words. Some time ago I mentioned that a trendy term these days for providence is: “It’s a God thing.” It’s a God thing. I’m not sure I really care for putting the words “God” and “thing” side by side. I hope that it is only a trendy phrase – a fad phrase which will someday fade away. I prefer the word “providence.” Again, I cannot imagine the hospital in Anchorage changing its name to “It’s A God Thing Hospital.” Providence.

So, I come up for a gasp of air as well. Providence. Last summer we celebrated Leisa’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. You may recall. Lots of red hats among the congregation. A lot of women wearing purple. Leisa was given a pink hat because it was her last day as a 49 year old. She was not old enough to wear a red hat and purple clothing. Her

birthday was the next day – on Monday. Right after the service, a couple who had worshipped with us all summer said goodbye. They had been camp hosts over at Homestead RV Park for the summer. They had been very interested in Leisa's role as the moderator and defacto pastor of the Olgonik Presbyterian Church in Wainwright on the Arctic coast. They had a gift for Leisa. They had a winter coat they wanted to give to her since they did not anticipate ever being back in Alaska. And it was purple. They had no idea that it was Leisa's birthday. They brought it as a gift to celebrate and support her work with the Olgonik congregation. A beautiful winter parka with wolverine fur around the trim of the hood. An amazing gift. A providential gift. The timing of the gift – even the color of the coat. Providence.

Perhaps the first time she would get to use it in Wainwright was to be last fall. She was scheduled to go up to Wainwright for the weekend – Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and then home on Monday. As it turned out, on Thursday (the day before she was to go), the doctor told her that she had cancer. They called me over and I went right away. By the time I got there, Leisa and her doctor had already been in conversation for maybe half an hour. While it was still sinking in, it became evident that Leisa still was planning on flying up to Wainwright for the weekend. She had a job to do, and she was going to do it. Of course, heading up there for the weekend would not have made any difference for the cancer – nothing was to be done about it over the weekend, after all. But I could not bear the thought of her being gone and mostly out of phone contact after hearing the word cancer. So, I said “no.” No. I said “no” to She Who Must Be Obeyed.

Back in early October, I related to you a very strange experience. I woke up in a rage at God. What did Leisa do to deserve getting cancer? We still had a ways to go in

dealing with all the biopsies and eventually the mastectomies – who knew what the future would bring? I awoke finding myself literally shaking my fist at God and yelling at God. As Leisa was already in the shower, she did not need to hear me. The intensity of the emotions shocked me. I told you all about that last October. What I did not tell you, I will now tell you: It was as if a Voice spoke to my soul. Not many words. Just a few. Something along this line: “Remember the coat? That is for her to wear in Wainwright.” My soul settled.

This coming Friday, Leisa will finally be making her trip to Wainwright – the one I have known for several months that she would make someday. Providence. Even the Psalmist, writing from the darkest despair, words which were on Jesus’ lips as he was being crucified, even the dark words of the Psalmist conclude with the coming of the dawn:

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

<sup>22</sup>I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

<sup>23</sup>You who fear the LORD, praise him!  
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;  
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

<sup>24</sup>For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him.

<sup>27</sup>All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.

<sup>28</sup>For dominion belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.

<sup>29</sup>To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.

<sup>30</sup>Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord,

<sup>31</sup>and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.

We have a congregation here. Maybe about a hundred and fifty who come through these doors week after week, sitting side by side, joining voices in song and liturgy. Sometimes you do not know that the heart of someone beside you or someone near you is breaking with grief, in agony over a darkness which has come over his or her life. We are not all transparent. We think we know, but so often we don't. Sometimes they are holding on only by a thread. And we wish we knew. Once in a while we may say or do something which only brings a darker shroud over their already breaking souls. If we only knew. But this we can know. God can and will be a blessing through every one of us. God blessing others through your hands. God blessing others through your words. God blessing others through you.

A month ago when Leisa preached her first sermon after being on sick leave for a couple months, it was Communion Sunday. She told of how, a month earlier, as she was at home recovering from surgery, two of the Deacons of this congregation stayed with her during the worship service. Again, a Communion Sunday. It was Noël Guinotte and Sally Koppenberg. Sally had already been a blessing to me, having brought over a large platter of gyoza – one of my favorite Asian foods. Frank Lombardo, who had arrived home from a month-long trip two days before that Sunday, took communion over to Leisa, Sally, and Noël. As Frank was giving the bread to Leisa, he said: “The Body of Christ.” Leisa heard it with new ears. There, surrounding her in those three, were the Body of Christ.

The dark nights of the soul will come. When they come, sometimes one can lose any hope of a dawn ever coming. But then, the Body of Christ. But then, Providence. But then, the blessing of God through you. But then, the dawn comes... Amen.