

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Thursday, April 5, 2012
Maundy Thursday**

MY GOD! MY GOD!

Psalm 22:1-31

In Judaism there are ten days in September and October which are termed the “high holy days.” Those are the days between Rosh Hashanah, which is the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Those are the most important days of the year. They are the days when the hearts of many, even many unfaithful or unbelieving Jews, will turn, even if only for a short time, to the God of Israel. What we enter into here tonight is our “high holy days”, if we can use that term that in Latin has been called the “Triduum.” It refers to the first 3 days, the roughly 72 hours between sundown on Thursday and the time on Sunday when Jesus arose from the dead. As Pastor Neil mentioned at the outset, Maundy Thursday has reference to the commands that God gave through Jesus on this night. One is the command to come to the table, the other the command to love one another – commands that were given in anticipation of what was happening on the days ahead. Good Friday, of course, refers to the day Jesus was crucified, the day that He gave His life for us. And then Easter, of course, is the day of Resurrection.

These three days cannot be separated any more than you could separate the words of the anthem the choir just sang and say, “Well, over here we have Him nailed to the cross, and over here we have Him buried and over here we have Him risen. We’ll have them sing that anthem, but only one stanza at a time over the course of four Sundays.” It wouldn’t work. You have to put the whole thing together. That’s what I’d like for us to do this evening, and do so by way of taking a look at Psalm 22. It is amazing. It is absolutely amazing to look at Psalm 22 and consider just how closely this tracks the experience of the One we come here this evening to remember.

It was not surprising to the writers of the New Testament, of course. This passage, this Psalm 22 is quoted numerous times in the New Testament and particularly in the Gospels. Matthew 15:34 refers to verse 1, “My God! My God! Why have You forsaken me?” Matthew 27:39 refers to verse 7 of the Psalm. Matthew 27:43 refers to verse 8. Verse 16, “Dogs have surrounded me. A band of evil men have encircled me. They’ve pierced my hands and my feet,” refers to the fact of the Resurrection. And verse 18 is referred to in Matthew 27:35. Over and over again the Gospel writers refer to this Psalm and it’s because they recognized that this is a prophetic psalm, a psalm that, while it was used and is still used in the worship of the synagogue and, in those days the temple, it nonetheless pointed incredibly to what Christ did. It does so by way of four different movements within it. The first one, in verses 1-11, speaks of David’s, and by way of speaking of David’s it speaks of Jesus’ abandonment by God. David begins with a prayer that expresses that feeling of abandonment in a way that sounds so desolate. “My God! My God! Why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O, My God, I cry out by day but You do not answer, by night

and am not silent.” The fact that he prays is his way of indicating that he doesn’t think that he’s completely alone. It is not the case that God continues to occupy the entire universe except for this little bit of space that I happen to occupy.

David is not in fact all alone any more than Jesus was in fact all alone on the cross. The fact that he prays is an indication that he recognizes that what he is talking about is not an objective reality but it is a subjective experience, a powerful subjective experience. The fact that it’s subjective doesn’t make it any less real. He elaborates on that in the second verse in which he reflects the experience that we have sometimes when we get the feeling that there’s just nobody out there. “I cry out by day but You do not answer, by night and am not silent.” Has anyone here ever just felt like you were pouring words into the air? That no one was listening? I’ve done that on a regular basis when I preach. Not tonight, but other times. I suspect that all of us at one time or another have had that experience, maybe for days, weeks, months or years at a time.

One of the things that came out during the course of the investigation being done around the possibility of the elevation of Mother Teresa to sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church that so surprised people is the discovery that these two verses would have described her own spiritual experience not just for days or weeks at a time but for decades. Decades at a time! She felt as though she had been completely abandoned by God. I suspect that if she could feel that way then it’s no surprise that some of us may occasionally feel that way.

David then puts this feeling of abandonment in the context of God’s character and His actions. He says that He’s holy, that He’s enthroned as the Holy One and that He’s rescued Israel in the past. It has happened before, even at times when Israel felt like it was abandoned by God. Nevertheless, He has acted to save His people. It’s happened before in David’s life. In verses 9-11 he speaks very personally. He says, “You brought me out of the womb.” This was an act of God, even now but especially in those days when so many children died in childbirth or were stillborn. “You made me trust in You, even at my mother’s breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God.” He knows. David knows, just as Jesus knew when He quoted this verse from the cross. He knew all that His Father in heaven had done for Him in the past. And yet, that question continues to bubble up to the surface, “Lord, with all You have done for me and all that You have done in me in the past, why not now? Why do I feel like I am so alone?”

Imagine how that feeling of abandonment must have felt to our Lord. There on the cross was a man who was closer to the God of the universe than any human being has ever been. His connection with the Father, well, it’s expressed in the fact that He refers to Him as Father, but the truth of the matter is that it goes way beyond that. There’s always some degree of distance between human fathers and sons, but the distance between God the Father and God the Son – there is no distance. They are one and it says that in John’s Gospel. “My Father and I are one.” Can you imagine being so close to a person that you think of them and you as being one? And at the same time praying, “My God! My God! Why have You forsaken me?” We think we know what desolation is. Look for the cross.

Well, in David's case that feeling of abandonment results in self-accusation and self-motivation. It says in verses 6-8, "But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. They say, 'He trusts in the Lord. Let the Lord rescue him.'" Jesus did not accuse Himself. Jesus did not think Himself a worm. He knew Himself to be the sinless Son of God. And yet He experienced the same kind of rejection and humiliation that we feel when other people reject and humiliate us.

We can go even a little beyond that, however, and point to these particular verses as ones that, while they very much apply to what happened to Jesus on the cross, most likely didn't reflect His subjective experience but they suggest ours, don't they? When you feel like you've been abandoned by God, when you feel like you're all alone, you feel like you're just pouring words into the air and no one is listening, what's your immediate response? "I know He doesn't listen to me. I'm slow. I'm worthless. I'm sinful from beginning to end." What was it Isaiah said? "Woe unto me for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among people of unclean lips." Let's go beyond the lips, folks! We're unclean from the top of our heads to the bottom of our feet. And when we think that God isn't listening to us, above all, we retreat to the self-accusation and we say, "Of course, He's not listening to me. Why would God listen to someone like me?"

Did anyone ever come up to you and notice that you were depressed, notice that life just didn't seem to be going very well for you and decided to not only stab you in the back but to twist it around some and ask you, "Where's your God now that you need Him?" That may or may not have happened to you, but even if somebody else didn't do that, maybe you've done it to yourself.

The first part of this passage has to do with abandonment. The second part has to do with the aggravation of suffering. In verses 12-18 David describes himself as being in agony. He speaks of the strong bulls of Bashan in verse 12, "Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me." That suggests the crowds that heaped scorn on Jesus as He was led through the streets of Jerusalem and taken to the hill and put up for public display while He was crucified. He says that he's been poured out like water and that is suggestive of the flowing of blood from Jesus' side and from His head and His hands and His feet, from all the places where He was pierced. He says his bones are out of joint, suggesting the pain that our Lord experienced on the cross. He says his strength dries up and his mouth is dry and you'll remember that Jesus on the cross said, "I thirst." Maybe you've read the Gospels and wondered why they put that particular little detail in there? This is why. Because David, a thousand years before, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, foresaw what the Messiah would go through and one of the things that He would go through was thirst. He mentions in verse 15, "You have laid me in the dust of death," and, indeed, Jesus lay on death's doorstep on the cross.

It's not just a physical suffering. He also mentions in verse 16 that he is surrounded by haters. Isn't that expression used by people today, "A hater's gonna hate." I usually hear that in reference to basketball. I have no idea what that means. But that's what Jesus was surrounded by. He was surrounded by haters, people who looked at the Son of God, the

Messiah of Israel, at the one who a bare week before they had proclaimed King, and they despised Him. David says in verse 17 that he was naked before the world as Jesus was on the cross.

In verse 18 he says that he was treated as if he was already dead. “And they divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” It was as if he was already gone. Why would we want to wait? Let’s go ahead and divvy them up. So far as we look at the psalm, through verse 18 it is nothing but dreary. If we were to just stop right here, we’d get a really strong sense of what those first 24 hours of the final three days were like. Betrayal. Trial. Torture. One of the worst forms of execution ever devised by human beings. That’s the picture we get in these first 18 verses.

But then a light begins to dawn. In verses 19-21 we have the answer to a cry for help. We begin with the continuation of that prayer of David’s that asks for deliverance. “You, O Lord, be not far off. O, my strength, come quickly to help me. Deliver my life from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs.” And right here there is a change, which the New International Version doesn’t reflect. The English Standard Version actually gets it better. It says, “You have rescued me from the mouth of the lions; saved me from the horns of the wild oxen.” He prays and deliverance comes. He exalts that he has indeed been rescued. It doesn’t change everything that he has gone through before. It doesn’t make it any less terrible. But here deliverance comes. And that is akin, not to Easter, but to Jesus’ cry on the cross and His final words on Earth before His resurrection, words from John 19:30, “It is finished.” I am convinced that He said this *not* as confession of defeat but rather as a proclamation of victory. He has been rescued. He has been delivered. And then he gave up his spirit and breathed His last.

The Psalm ends in verses 22-31 with a witness to God’s gracious goodness. David says that he will witness to Israel regarding the goodness of their God. In verses 22-23 he says he will praise God in the Temple and he will call on Israel to echo his praise. Can anyone here say, “Praise the Lord?” You’re saying, “We’ll think about it. It came out of nowhere. Don’t know what to do about that.” Can anyone here say, “PRAISE THE LORD!”? That is what David expected out of Israel. Despite all the terrible stuff that he described he has been rescued. He has been delivered. He has been redeemed. And so it is that he calls out in praise and he calls Israel to echo that praise. And the basis of that praise is that God has answered his prayer. “For He has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one. He has not hidden His face from him but has listened to his cry for help.”

David was heard. Our Lord was heard. We are heard. And in both instances – David’s and ours – we are heard because of what Christ has done. And having been heard, it says in verse 25, he will fulfill his vows. He will fulfill the vows he has made to the Lord. Another way to put that is, “He will carry out God’s commands, for instance, to love one another “as I have loved you.” It says in verse 26 that he will help the poor as God commands. It says in verse 27 and 28 that the nations, not just Israel, but the nations of the world will come to the God of Israel because of the faithful witness of His servants. Can you say, “Praise the Lord”? And when you do that, it echoes not just through this

room but it echoes in concert with the praises of a billion or more other believers who gather on this night as well so that the world hears of what God has done.

And that good news, David says at the end, will go forth to all generations. This isn't just for David's day. It's not just for Jesus' day. It's for posterity. It says, "Posterity will serve Him. Future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim His righteousness to a people yet unborn – for He has done it." Isn't this amazing? In one psalm, written a thousand years before Nazareth and Bethlehem and Jerusalem, a thousand years before we have the suffering and the pain, the agony, the death, the rescue, the resurrection and even the Great Commission. Because where do you think posterity is going to hear if they don't hear it from us? How is it that future generations will be told about the Lord unless we do that? What about our children and other people's children and even for children collecting Social Security – children of all ages, as the expression goes.

We're called this evening to proclaim His legacies. We do so when we say, "Praise the Lord." We do so when we sing His praises. We do so when we pray, even though we may feel like He's not there. We do so when we tell others about Him. And we do so when we come to this table. What we do at this table this evening and what Jesus commanded His people to do is not just between me and God. It's not one-on-one. This is a meal for the family. This evening God's family gathers together to hear anew the good news of what He in Jesus Christ has done and to proclaim to the world He has given His body, which we now take as bread. He has spilled His blood, which we now take as the cup. And as we do so we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.