

Psalm 22
Sermon by Pastor Jean Duran
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A couple of months ago I was making a cake with my granddaughter, Arabella. As I was pressing the beaters into the mixer with my left hand, my right hand accidentally pressed the on button, which started turning the beaters, and my fingers along with them. My middle finger was so twisted and the pain so great that I was sure my finger was broken! Thankfully, it wasn't broken, but for 2 months now I haven't been able to use it and it has continued to give me a lot of pain.

This past Weds. I went to the chiropractor and had him look at it and he made some adjustments on it that have helped a lot but, he knew how much I have suffered with it over the past couple of months, and he said to me, ***“why did God do that to you?”***

I've known Dr. Mac for over 20 years and I knew that he was just joking with me, but I told him, “Oh, no, God didn't do it. It's all on me. I was the one that was stupid enough to plug the mixer in before I attached the beaters! And I've learned my lesson. I'll never plug in the mixer before I put in the beaters again!” 😊

But, I've been thinking about what he said. ***“Why did God do that to you?”*** How many times have you heard someone say something like this after going through a tough experience? Maybe you've even said something like it yourself?

This understanding of God as the punisher or avenger is enmeshed into personal and societal theology and you see it pop up all the time.

I remember seeing pictures of the destruction of the twin towers after 9/11, with the billowing smoke rising up to the heavens. In one newspaper, one of these photos ran with the caption that Jesus could be seen in these smoke-cloud formations and that he had used the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to ***punish*** the city of New York for its multitude of sins.

As a pastor, I've heard this theology expressed in so many situations. One person told me that the reason he hasn't gone back to church is that he's been away for so long that if he stepped back into the doors of a church ***"God would strike him down with lightning!"*** 😊

I remember another conversation that I had with a man in his early forties, and, after telling him that God loved him, no matter what, this person shook his head "no" and told me that he had sinned so badly that God would never forgive him and that he knew he was going to hell! He truly believed that God had ***"forsaken him"*** and that there was no possible redemption for him.

I've had people ask me why God would allow their loved ones or themselves to suffer with illness; why God would allow their baby to be still-born; why God allowed their loved one to die; why God, who was supposed to be loving and gracious, would allow any kind of suffering in the world at all? Many times, as people have wrestled with these kinds of questions, they have often concluded

that God was ***punishing them*** for something they had done. The truth is, there are no quick, easy answers to these questions.

I personally believe that the road to healing includes the very action of stating the “angst” that fills a person’s soul in the midst of these excruciating life situations. If we bottle up our anger or bitterness it just festers inside of us and it can hurt us physically, emotionally and spiritually.

I cling to the hope that, even if a person is angry at God, even if a person raises up their fist and shakes it into the face of God and asks “***why have you forsaken me?***” that even this kind of conversation is healthy and is acceptable to God. I cling to the hope that God has big enough shoulders to bear the burden of our pain and our anger ***and***, what is often, our misinformation about faith.

Our theology informs our hearts, our emotions and how we respond when faced with the suffering that life throws at us. I want you to think about your own theology, your own understanding of God. Based on your theology, how do you view the gift of life? Based on your theology, what are your expectations and what do you think you deserve out of life? Based on your theology, how do you think God interacts and connects with you in your life? It is interesting to see, within the wide spectrum of Christian belief, how theology informs differing views toward life and our relationship with God. Let me give you an example.

There is an author by the name of Joni Eareckson-Tada, maybe you have heard of her. Joni broke her neck as a teenager when she dove into a lake, not knowing how shallow it was.

Her faith community rallied around her as she struggled to regain healing and health after this accident.

When she was in the hospital, then in the rehab center and, when she eventually came home, her pastors and the members of her church constantly surrounded her in prayer. There were multiple times when the elders of her church anointed her with oil and laid hands upon her to pray for healing. The members of her church expected her to be healed and they expected her to rise up from her bed and walk. When months passed by, and then, a few years passed by, and Joni continued to be a quadriplegic, her faith community questioned her faith. They told her that she needed to get herself “right with God” and believe that God would heal her.

Their theology, was based on the literal interpretation of Jesus’ words in Matthew 21:22, when Jesus told his disciples, “whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

As time passed, and their prayers for Joni to walk again were not answered, the foundation of Joni’s faith began to erode. She began to question her relationship with God. Did she really believe? Did God really love her? Why was God doing this to her?

Having these kinds of questions drove a huge wedge between Joni and her faith community because in this church's theology there is no room for questions and doubts. It's like that bumper sticker that was popular about 20 years ago. "God said it. I believe it. That's it!"

In her book, entitled with her name, "Joni" she writes about this period of her life. She turned to God's word for guidance and she found, in the scriptures, examples where people of faith struggled and went through all kinds of bad experiences and many of them questioned and doubted and talked to God about it. And, God did not strike them down! God talked with them. God reminded them of his love and grace. God empowered them to go through these experiences, not over them! Joni's theology changed as she discovered that faith wasn't something that erased these life challenges but, rather, faith was a power to get her through the "fires and raging waters" of life to the other side.

Joni, who is now 69 years old, has learned to live as a quadriplegic in a wheelchair and her testimony is powerful! I encourage you to look her up on the internet and read her story. She bears witness to God's constant presence with her. She believes that God has always been with her; before her accident, when her body was broken, as she sought healing, and as she learned to live with her limitations. Joni would be the first to say that her accident was not meted out as a punishment from God. Her inability to walk again wasn't due to her lack of faith. She had a broken neck! The question wasn't "what would she do now," but rather, "what could she do now with God's help." She has moved forward in faith like the apostle Paul who wrote "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:13)

As Lutherans, like Joni, we turn to God's Word to teach us about our faith. And this is what Jesus did too!

After Jesus endured severe injustice and suffering and ridicule, he hung on the cross and flung out into the universe his heart-rending question, "**my God, why have you forsaken me?**" Throughout the centuries, those who have endured suffering have felt empowered by Jesus to share their own similar feelings with God. "Why me God? What have I done to deserve this? Why have you forsaken me?"

If we are going to look to Jesus to lead and guide us in our own relationship with God, then we must seek a deeper understanding of what Jesus was saying as he voiced these words. Why did Jesus say **these** particular words? Were they simply expressing an honest angst of his heart? Did he truly feel that God had abandoned him at that point? *Or, is there something more going on here?*

Jesus, as a rabbi and, like many Jewish men of faith at that time, would have memorized great sections of Hebrew scripture because there weren't a lot of written scrolls available to read whenever they wanted to refer to God's word. Psalm 22 was one of those Psalms that were most often committed to memory. **Why Psalm 22?** This psalm presents a unique model for a person of faith to express themselves. In a sense, it acknowledges that it's ok to talk to God in anger and to express doubt in the midst of life's uncertainties. It allows a person to be

honest with God about how they are feeling and reacting to life, especially when they are feeling overwhelmed by circumstances.

Psalm 22 reminds us that God, like anyone who loves a child, will listen to our ranting and raving and screaming about how hard it is, how life sucks, and how unfair we think it is that this is happening to us! And after hearing even the worst that we can throw at God, God will still love us!

As Jesus hung on the cross he turned to scripture and he quoted the opening verse of Psalm 22. These words expressed how forsaken he felt but Jesus also knew that that wasn't the end. Jesus knew the rest of Psalm 22, and, as his mind and heart fast-forwarded through the whole of Psalm 22, it gave Jesus hope and strength because Jesus knew "Love" would win!

As Jesus passed the words of Psalm 22 through his mind, he knew they spoke of his own journey; the rejection, the mocking, the physical abuse, being surrounded by his enemies and being betrayed by his friends. But, Jesus knew that wasn't where Psalm 22 ended. The words at the end of the psalm were like a huge hook pulling him through toward the finish line! The words of the psalmist sung out with truth even when Jesus could not. Listen carefully to what Jesus remembered as he turned to the words of Psalm 22. "Praise God! God has not hid his face from us! When we have cried out to God, God **has** heard us! God is the one who has dominion over me and over the world; not my enemies, not my circumstances, not my pain. In other words, our enemies can try to defeat us, but, **they** will be defeated because "Love wins!"

With **this** knowledge, affirmed and reassured by the words of Psalm 22, it is no wonder that Jesus was then able to utter at the end “it is finished” (John) and then “yield his spirit over to God.” (Matthew/Mark)

Today, as you reflect on where you are at in your own theology, in your own understanding of God, I want to encourage to study scripture and to learn from Jesus. Jesus had the confidence to ask God questions and to tell God how he was feeling, and yet, he didn't let his anger or doubt sever his relationship with God. Jesus chose to acknowledge the existence of pain and suffering and acknowledge the truth that they didn't have the final word. Jesus chose to remember that God was with him. Jesus chose to put his faith and trust in God, who had been with him when he was in his mother's womb and Who continued to lead and guide him throughout his life. Jesus chose to believe in the power of love to transform suffering into redemption and death into life. Jesus chose Love. And, love always wins! May you allow “Love” to win in your life each and every day! Amen.