

“Cries and Celebrations”

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A Reflection for our Congregations’ Anniversaries, during a Season of Gratitude

Psalm 22

October 22, 2019

Imagine someone is here. They are our special guest for our congregation’s anniversary.¹ Think about what sorts of things you’d expect our anniversary speaker to say.

We are ready, anticipating, hopeful, happy.

[Move a single chair to the centre of the stage.]

But instead of standing, they sit in this chair.²

They cry: *“My God, my God, why have You left me alone?”*

They pour out their anguish, their suffering. They plead to God: God who feels far away, God whom they know is their only hope.

The minister quickly gets nervous. This is not expected. You are watching . . . listening . . . feeling them as they weep in front of us. How does this sit with you?

Oh, also, we are in a “Season of Gratitude.” They are supposed to speak about being grateful! Grateful to God!!

II

My God, my God! You’ve forsaken me. Abandoned me. Why?

Someone crying like that, they have known God. They’ve been close to God. Now, nothing. No sense of God. No feeling of God. No assurance of God. Their suffering is constant. God is absent. Why?

Remember God in the good ol’ days? (It’s anniversary Sunday, after all.) Back then, people trusted, and God rescued. People suffered, and God saved.³ But now . . . this person is a mess. Where are You, God?

Their sense of themselves is as low as a worm. Mockery buries them. Their faith is turned against them. *“Trusted God, did you?”* people are sneering. *“Where is your God now?”*⁴

¹ Elora United Church’s 184th anniversary, and Bethany United Church’s 176th.

² Some of this reflection, including the idea of using a chair, I adapted from a sample sermon, “Wisdom from the Bench” by in the stewardship resource by Molly Bell, Trisha Elliott and Caroline Penhall, Season of Gratitude, Philanthropy Unit (Toronto, ON: United Church of Canada, 2019), pp. 22-24.

³ Verses 3-5.

⁴ Verses 6-7.

They are dying up here. Brawny bulls, ripping lions, wild dogs, goring oxen — this is the pantheon of beastly terrors that describes what is done to them.⁵

They are falling to bits, body and soul.⁶

This is our anniversary guest. But a stranger? No. They are here, with us, every Sunday. Among you, among us, in the pews (and sometimes standing at the front). They are us. Maybe they are you.

So together, let's cry the first part of Psalm 22.

You can read [Psalm 22:1-21 here](#).

III

It's been 18 decades of us being us. A congregation's anniversary celebrates times when we have been at our best. What are those? I'm sure we have good and different answers.

Maybe this is when we've been at our best too. When we've been a church-community where people could come and cry. Neighbours, strangers, friends, ourselves . . . crying out "*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*" Pleading with God, "*Hurry and help me.*" Maybe we are at our best when folks can pray their own words, hard words that echo the Bible's words.

[Add another chair beside the first.]

Maybe we have also been our best when we heard cries like these. I mean, really heard them. When we've heard them among us. When we've heard them beyond us. We've heard cries from those who are isolated, violated, broken down and sitting alone, and we've sat with them. We've helped as we could. We've joined our prayers to theirs. Or, we've simply sat and waited together for God.

These can be our best times because we are Jesus' church. Jesus cries.

Jesus was on his cross, nailed and hung to die, and he cried out. The church's Lord cried, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" Psalm 22 was already many centuries old. Jesus made it his own. Jesus made our cries his own. Our cries became marked on God's flesh: mocked, breaking, devoured, his clothes gambled for, his life done for. Our sense of abandonment, forsakenness, hopelessness, he made his.

We are his church. We always have been. We always will be. Jesus' church cries out. And

⁵ Verses 12-13, 16, 20-21.

⁶ Verses 14-15.

Jesus finds his church among those who cry.

IV

Also, Jesus finds his church among those who celebrate.

Their cheeks are marked with dried up tears. Their throats are raw from pleading to God. But it is a Season of Gratitude. Psalm 22 does not finish with crying. It turns to celebration.

If the first part gives voice to Jesus' crucifixion, and ours too, the second sings out "resurrection": his and ours too.

You can read [Psalm 22:22-31 here](#).

A celebration breaks out. There is a movement in the words we just said of how the circle of gratitude ripples and spreads. It starts small, with the person's family. Then gratitude spreads through the assembly. It spills out from the congregation, and breaks out throughout the nation.

It is not stopping! Gratitude will grow through the latitudes and longitudes of the earth. Gratitude will spring to life among all the world's families. Those who are powerful will come down from their high towers to move their feet. Those who are weak will bust some mighty moves.

Listen! "Those who descended to the dust" — the dead — will get up and get down. Remember, this is a song of resurrection. Listen! Even those who have yet to come along — the not-yet-born — will be birthed onto the scene with songs on their lips. Remember, this is a song for the future.

V

What happened? The first part of the Psalm ended. The second part began. We don't know what went on between the period that finished the crying, and the capital letter that started the celebration. It does not tell us.

We don't know how things switched from bad to good. Maybe they did not switch. Perhaps the situation changed, but maybe it did not. We don't know what.

We do know Who. God. God listened. God answered. Some had said that God's silence to suffering was a sign of God's despising, God's detesting. But God said, "No way!"

Now, we don't get an answer to why God seemed silent. We don't get an answer to why God felt absent. What we do get is Jesus. Jesus' deathly cross, and Jesus' empty tomb. What we do get is God's Presence, and God's power to save.

This is why we are his church. This is why we always will be his church. That is why we celebrate today. That is why we are grateful every day.

Because we are Jesus church, we celebrate as those who have sat beside the chair, and still do. Celebration springs from us who have sat on the chair, and still do.

Because we find Jesus there.

All praise, all joy, all tears, all cries, and all gratitude to God! Amen.