

Psalm 42:7-11

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?" Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Mark 15:34

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

“My God, My God, Why?”

The photos and videos of Katrina's devastating effects this past week relayed to us images of widespread destruction and despair around the gulf coast. Many of the scenes looked and felt God-forsaken. Forgotten by God. It alludes to the absence of our knowledge of God's presence and is only used properly by those who have known and believed in God's presence with them and the world. In times like these people of faith cry out, "My God, my God, why?"¹

Yet we are often uncomfortable with language that indicts God, with language of lament. I've rarely heard it voiced this week. Yet this response is one of hope! I've heard people thanking God that they are safe, that their family is all right and that they are reunited. Stories of survivors getting by, and stories of aid and relief finally on its way. These are the stories that have been labeled stories of hope. But as we thank God for the safety of some that leaves unanswered the reality of the fate of the others and our initial question. What about the thousands dead or dying, even now? As people of faith we are called to go where the media cannot or does not want to go. We are free to ask, my God, why?

To cry out and question God is almost unheard of anymore in mainstream Protestantism. We are hesitant to raise our voices and rail against God. We fear, though we proclaim God has set us free. The scriptures even show us that God's people have always been free to argue with God and cry out against pain and suffering. My God, my God, why?

Jesus' words show forth his humanity and his faith. Jesus felt abandoned, left alone in his suffering and proclaimed himself as such. This makes all the difference in the world to our grappling with suffering today yet we are often uncomfortable with Jesus' humanity in the scriptures. We deny angry Jesus. Jesus whose mission develops. Jesus who changes his mind. Jesus whose family and hometown think he's lost his marbles. Praise be to God that the evangelists and their communities told a comprehensive view of Jesus' humanity and divinity. His cry from the cross was just as surely filled with anguish and pain as the criminals next to him. What makes his cry different is his acknowledgment of feeling abandoned by God. He cries out to God expecting answers

nonetheless. It was a cry of faith in spite of his apparent God-forsakenness. His lament calls God out; like the psalmists who rail against God's absence with them in their pain. His words had been voiced by his Jewish tradition for centuries. The poet of Psalm 42 writes as one abandoned by God. The waves and billows surround overhead. This is the bottom of the pit for the psalmist, God-forsakenness.

Today is our stifled repression, our lack of honest questioning of God, carried out because we feel we must be polite? Or is it because we are scared to face the total chaos of this world and fact that we are not in control? If we don't ask the question why, we can maintain a sense of knowing how the world works and achieving our own security within it.

Humanity as a whole will never be able to make sense of suffering on a macro level. Only individuals and groups can claim what their suffering or another's suffering has meant in our own lives. Often we can't even do this till years have passed. It would be cruel and arrogant for any of us to try to redeem the suffering of another, to take away the senselessness of suffering, for our own comfort. Counselors often say individuals and families must claim traumas we've suffered, and work through our denial, in order to move beyond. In faith, we cry out why because we know our lives depend on God. Hope is in the question; hope that the one who questions God will again know God's presence. The psalmist cried to "God my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?'"² Faith and questioning go hand-in-hand.

The mistake we make when we fear being honest before God is that we make God too small. Like God, Creator of the cosmos and all that is in it, can't handle our anger and questions! The Jewish tradition as a whole often seems more honest in their prayers. While doing my chaplaincy in New Jersey I worked with a number of Jewish families dealing with a beloved one's trauma. "No God! Why God? God I cannot take this!" I was witness to ongoing arguments of faith. It was honest. Those families changed my faith forever. I claimed for myself a biblical way to pray that I had neglected. Total honesty and grappling before God. My God, my God, why?

One theologian puts it this way "Even Jesus, who fully embodied dependence upon God, could not escape disquietude of the soul. Neither shall we. The good news, however, is that neither shall we be able to escape the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, which are manifested in God's desire to lead us back to God's own self."³

We are called to hope in God. Ultimately, "We cannot answer why such tragedies happen. What we can do is speak with the sure and certain conviction deep in our souls that God is present in the midst of the pain and panic, and that God will continue to be present each and every hour. God's faithfulness will endure."⁴ We claim God as our help even when we cannot perceive God with us or God with the world. In doing so we recognize we are not self-sufficient. We stand in need awaiting God's consolation, God's presence, to be made known.

We are called to respond to suffering. What are we to do? What is a Christian response? There are many responses. Lament. Prayer. Generosity. Love. Hope in God.

Out of chaos and darkness, God raised Hope for the world and sent the Spirit to be with us always. “Hope in God; for I shall again praise, my help and my God.” Amen.

¹ Quote from Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46.

² Quote from Psalm 42:9.

³ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms*, The New Interpreter's Bible: a commentary in twelve volumes. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 854.

⁴ Excerpt from a “A letter of concern and encouragement from the PC(USA) Office of the General Assembly,” in response to Hurricane Katrina. September 1, 2005.