# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Jesus’ Death and the Old Testament”**

**Matthew 27:45-49**

**October 6, 2019**

Today we conclude our sermon series on how New Testament persons and writers used Old Testament texts by considering the words of Jesus from the cross. Many Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in the 24-hour period leading up to his death. Some of the more notable are: He would be crucified; his body would be pierced; none of his bones would be broken; people would cast lots for his clothing; he would pray for his executioners; he would be executed with criminals; he would not speak in his own defense; he would be forsaken by his followers; he would be betrayed by a trusted friend; the price of the betrayal would be 30 pieces of silver. All of these prophecies recorded in the Old Testament were fulfilled by one person, Jesus of Nazareth. The common thread that runs through them is suffering. I invite you to turn with me to Matthew 27:45-49. We are told that Jesus was crucified at nine o’clock in the morning. Three hours later . . .

At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o’clock. At about three o’clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, *“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”* which means “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Some of the bystanders misunderstood and thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah. One of them ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, holding it up to him on a reed stick so he could drink. But the rest said, “Wait! Let’s see whether Elijah comes to save him.”

For six long hours Jesus has been hanging on the cross, experiencing the kind of suffering where one minute feels like an hour and an hour feels like a day. We can’t help but wonder what he was thinking and praying during those six hours. If it were me, knowing that I was going to die, my prayer would be: “My God, my God, let me die now. Please release me from this agony, take away this suffering, and let it be over.” And as the minutes and hours go by, there is no relief from the agony, no let up in the suffering, no answer to the desperate prayer. God is silent.

Darkness has settled on the land, and out of the darkness, out of the pain and suffering of the man hanging on the cross, comes a voice: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” We cannot know all that Jesus was thinking during these dreadful hours, but his direct quotation of Psalm 22 suggests that he was crying out in anguish over God’s silence. Turn with me to Psalm 22 as I read the first two verses

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help? Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer. Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief.

Everyone experiences suffering. Each one of us has known the pain of being hurt and the ache of loss, as well as the distress of seeing someone we care deeply for experience their own suffering. And we have cried out to God in our suffering, asking him, begging him, to give us relief, only to be met with God’s silence. The hurt remains, the ache is still with us, the distress lingers. Why this suffering? I don’t know the answer to that question, but I do know what God’s Word says to those who are in the midst of suffering: “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and delivers the crushed in spirit” (Isaiah 61:1). Let me read for us the next three verses of Psalm 22

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. Our ancestors trusted in you, and you rescued them. They cried out to you and were saved. They trusted in you and were never disgraced.

Those who trust in God will be rescued. Those who cry out to him will be saved. In spite of what we feel, regardless of the words of accusation we toss at God that he has abandoned us in his silence, he has not deserted us. God may not be answering our questions of “Why aren’t you relieving me of this suffering,” but he walks with us in the midst of them. He invites us to include him in our pain, to let him be the One who sustains us in our suffering, promising that his rescue and salvation is coming.

But, we say, “I don’t want to be sustained in my suffering. I don’t want to include God in my pain. I want to be healed!” We want what we want when we want it, but God may want something different for us. And when it comes down to what we want God to do for us versus what God wants to do for us, he is always going to win.

The Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth shared with them about what he called his “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know what it was, but we do know that it caused him to suffer. And he prayed earnestly to the Lord to take it away, begging God to relieve him of the pain. And each time God said, “My grace is all you need.” The grace of God is not only all the good things he gives us, the blessings that enrich our lives and give us great joy, but his grace is also the strength and faith he gives us in times of suffering. In fact, Paul goes on to say that he welcomes times of suffering for Christ, for in those times he experiences the love of God holding him close. Does this mean that Paul enjoyed suffering and so should we? No, it does not mean that at all.

What it does mean is that when we suffer, we can be assured that our suffering is not without meaning, that our pain is not without purpose. God asks us to surrender to his will, even when his will includes allowing us to suffer for a time. As Paul assures us in Romans 8:28, “God works all things together for good for those who love him.” That surely includes God working in our suffering for our good.

To surrender to God’s will means that we accept God’s will, whatever he should choose. But to surrender does not mean to despair, to believe that a time of suffering will never come to an end. While we suffer, we lean into hope. While we suffer, we pray with expectation of God’s deliverance, not with discouragement that his silence in not immediately relieving our suffering means that he doesn’t care for us. When God asks us to surrender to his will in the midst of suffering, he is asking for our full trust.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, those who put together the Old Testament as we have it decided to place another psalm of David immediately after the one from which we have read. After David’s psalm of lament, questioning the silence and perceived absence of God in his life, we encounter his psalm of the assurance of God’s continual presence. His most well-known and beloved twenty-third psalm:

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I have all that I need. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not be afraid for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.”

David knew the presence of God, even when facing the threat of death. The rod and staff of God represent God’s ability to accomplish his will, whatever it may be, in spite of the dire circumstances in which David found himself. So it is with you and me. No matter what suffering we are experiencing, God is close beside us, protecting and comforting us. He knows the plans he has for us, and even when those plans include allowing us to go through times of suffering, they are always plans for our good. With open hands we pray to God, willing to let him choose the best path for us, even when the path includes suffering.