

Monday, March 19 – Read Matthew 27:45-49. Jesus’ words on the cross can sound scary. If God would abandon him to face an agonizing death all alone, how are we to trust that God will be with us in hard times? But Jesus didn’t invent these words on the spot. They were the familiar first words of Psalm 22. In the next three days, we’ll read Psalm 22 to gain more insight into why Jesus focused on it. Jesus used the word “forsaken.” Isaiah 59:2 said “your iniquities have separated you from your God.” In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul wrote that on the cross “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.” How could bearing our sins make Jesus feel God-forsaken? How can you live out your thanks to Jesus for suffering to reconnect you with God? Jesus asked, as we do, “Why?” Scholar William Barclay said, “We see Jesus plumbing the uttermost depths of the human situation, so that there might be no place we might go where he has not been before.” When have you felt pain that made you cry out “Why?” How can it give you strength to know Jesus has been there before you?

Tuesday, March 20 – Read Psalm 22:1-11. Everything we know of Jesus says his mind was filled with the Scriptures. We do not have to believe he was literally reciting a whole 31 verse psalm to think that the whole psalm, not just its first verse, framed his heart’s cry to God. From earliest New Testament times, the church quoted this psalm as illuminating Jesus’ experience on the cross. The United Bible Societies’ Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms says, “This psalm is characterized by...a series of alternating shifts downward and upward (negative and positive feelings).” In what ways does the way despair and faith alternate in these opening verses match your experience on the journey of faith? Matthew 27:39-43 and Mark 15:29 used Psalm 22:7-8 to depict those who mocked Jesus. How, in that state, could the psalmist ask God, “Do not be far from me” (verse 11)? How can you build your reliance on God’s nearness?

Wednesday, March 21 – Read Psalm 22:12-22. Psalm 22 used violent images to express how totally helpless the psalmist felt. Surrounded by bulls, lions, wild dogs—these are experiences no one would want. No one on earth is strong enough to deal with such irresistible enemies. But again the psalm returns to trust—God (in eternity, if not always here) can deliver us from even the most fearsome earthly power. Many people’s biggest faith struggle comes at times of great suffering. Psalm 22, written in fear and suffering, is not abstract, but speaks of personal wrestling with God. It starts “My God, my God,” and verse 19 says “You are my strength.” What steps will help you build a faith-filled bond that can reach out to “your God” even at the darkest times? John 19:24 said the Roman soldiers at the cross fulfilled Psalm 22:18. Perhaps, seeing those who watched the crucifixion act out verses 7-8 and 17-18, helped call Psalm 22 to Jesus’ mind. When have you faced your own “valley of the shadow” and come out praising God because the experience made your connection to God stronger?

Thursday, March 22 – Read Psalm 22:23-31. The final movement of this, perhaps the most desolate lament in the Old Testament, breathed faith and trust. It reached beyond the bounds of this physical life—verse 29 said even “those who cannot keep themselves alive” will kneel and worship God. The psalm ended on a note of triumph: “He has done it!” This sounded much like Jesus’ final cry. Verse 24 said that God “has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one.” In what ways does this show that verse 1’s desperate cry reflects the way things feel to us at times, but not the eternal reality of God’s care for us? How can God bless and sustain you in hard times in ways other than making the hard time go away? Psalm 22 looked far beyond the near horizon. In verses 30-31, the psalmist rejoiced that “Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn.” Who are the spiritual forerunners who have told you about the Lord? Who are you telling?

Friday, March 23 – Read Luke 7:1-10. Because Jesus’ crucifixion is the only one we hear much about today, it’s easy to think the Roman soldiers were all personally hostile to Jesus. But like American troops in Afghanistan or Iraq, they were far from home. They did their work, pleasant or unpleasant. At times, they were friendly with the Jewish people, and some showed amazing faith in Jesus. While history says many Romans held Israel’s faith in contempt, here was a Roman soldier who financed a synagogue, cared deeply about his servant’s well-being and showed faith in Jesus’ healing power. In what ways do we tend to “label” people? How are you growing in your ability to see each human being through God’s eyes of love, rather than letting easy group stereotypes determine how you treat people? The centurion sensed, as many do not, that God’s power, unlike ours, is not limited by space or time. How did he apply what he knew of authority to help him realize Jesus’ power? Which of your experiences help you better take in and trust God’s power?

Saturday, March 24. Read Psalm 37:23-40. Jesus cry on the cross —“Why have you forsaken me?”—did not mean we serve a fickle God who deserts us in trouble. Psalm 22 and Psalm 37 each spoke part of an eternal whole. Jesus, as God, felt alienation from God in our place. He gave himself so that we can trust that God’s love is always with us. The poet Browning wrote that Jesus’ cry “went up from holy lips Amid His lost creation, That of those lost, No son should use Those words of desolation.” As you look back over your life, when have you felt most forsaken by God? Looking back, what can you see that suggests that God was with you even when you felt you’d been abandoned? Jesus told his disciples, “I don’t leave you the way you’re used to being left—feeling abandoned, bereft” (John 14:27, The Message). What previous experiences can you use as “markers” to help you deal with times in the future when you feel alone, helpless and forsaken?