

Are you afraid of the dark?

In the clear light of day, with the sunshine streaming in, on Boy Scout Sunday with all of these fine scouts to help us find our way, “No, we’re not afraid of the dark.”

Courage comes easy in the clear light of day, but when it gets dark, everything changes. Our mind plays tricks on us; fear kicks our brains and our bodies into overdrive as the “fight or flight” instinct takes over our consciousness.

An upcoming reality show I’ve seen advertised on the SyFy channel has some fun with this reality. Using infrared and other high tech recording techniques, it puts contestants in a completely dark room and then subjects them to various surprises. Their best selves aren’t on display. It’s a computer aged approach to the classic Haunted House techniques of using bowls of peas and cold spaghetti to inspire horror.

We can laugh; we’re not the ones in the dark. But when the shoe is on the other foot, and we’re the ones longing for light, our smiles fade, our spirits tremble, and we are afraid; we discover in the dark a depth of fear that puts our existence at risk. We may be so far down that we can’t get back up; we may be so far gone that we’re beyond the point of no return.

We’re in the dark; and, we are afraid.

“Darkness at Noon.¹”

Jesus was afraid. The past 24 hours were a bloody blur – betrayed by Judas’ kiss, grabbed by soldiers, beaten, thrown into a dark pit to spend his last night, he lived the cry of Psalm 88,

Psalm 88:4–6 (NRSV)

⁴ *I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;*

I am like those who have no help,

⁵ *like those forsaken among the dead,*

like the slain that lie in the grave,

like those whom you remember no more,

for they are cut off from your hand.

⁶ *You have put me in the depths of the Pit,*

in the regions dark and deep.

His last night was bad; his last day was worse – tried before Pilate, scourged,

¹ Title of a classic novel by Albert Koestler.

condemned, and crucified. All under the watching, jeering eyes of the crowd who were so entertained. He lived Psalm 88; now, he's living Psalm 22, because to top it all off, it's getting dark. His friends have abandoned him; his people have rejected him; now, there is darkness at noon; God himself is turning away. *Psalm 22:1 (NRSV) My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*

Jesus was afraid. We're not comfortable with this idea. We Presbyterians in particular like to believe that God is in control, and because God is in control, there's really nothing to be afraid of. It will all work out in the end, so don't be afraid when there are whispers of layoffs and your boss calls you into her office and says, "I'm really sorry, but..." It will all work out in the end, so don't be afraid when the routine x-ray turns into a visit to the oncologist. It will all work out in the end, so don't be afraid when your life takes a turn that leaves you "*in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep.*"

We don't want a Jesus, who is afraid, because if he was afraid, then there are times when we'll be afraid, and we'd rather not be afraid; we'd prefer a "get out of fear free" card that exempts us from any and all anxiety. After all, God raised Jesus from the dead. We're Easter people. It will all work out in the end.

There is no resurrection without a cross. There is no Easter without a Good Friday. The price of new life is the end of our old life; the life we've known; the life we love; and our desperate plea, "It will all work out in the end," is a plea to hold on to that life; to stay where we are as we are.

God's answer to that prayer is "no." And when God says "no," we are afraid. We feel forsaken. "*Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*"

② "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

Jesus was afraid, and he cries out in his fear in a language that is foreign to us; a language we need to learn – not Hebrew or Aramaic; the language of lament.

The Bible is full of lament; the Psalms in particular are filled with them; Psalm 22 and 88 are but two examples. Job is a lament in book form. Lament is the language of faith in the darkness. Lament calls a cross a cross; it doesn't gloss over painful realities with the self-deception, "it will all work out for the best,"

or “God is teaching me something through this,” or any of the other half-truths (which after all are the best kinds of lie) we tell ourselves to avoid today’s pain by focusing on what tomorrow may bring.

We can’t avoid today’s pain; we can’t get around it; we can only go through it; and the way through it is through the language of lament.

Lament is not a language our culture wants to speak. We are masters of pain avoidance. We have a pill for every ill; a bar on every corner; and thanks to the glory of the Internet we can self-medicate and give ourselves shopping therapy to our hearts’ content or our credit limit (whichever comes first).

We are masters of pain avoidance. And to be clear – seeking therapy and taking a prescribed anti-depressant or pain medication is not what I am talking about; these are tools to work our way through a difficult time. When our goal is to avoid pain, we have no intention of doing any work; we want to avoid it; we want it to go away and leave us alone! We want to stay where we are as we are! “Just as I am,” now leave me be!

Avoiding pain is a core belief of our culture. “Thou shalt not whine,” because if you express your pain, I might become aware of my pain, and the whole house of cards I’ve constructed to conceal my pain from myself will come crashing down; I’ll be face to face with my pain; and I have no idea what to do with it.

Matthew 27:46 (NRSV) “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Biblical faith offers us another way; a way through the pain; the way of lament – faith crying out in the darkness.

Down through the centuries, folks have tried to take the sting out of Jesus’ words. Psalm 22 ends on a hopeful note, so they suggest that Jesus is really referring to the whole Psalm (especially the hopeful ending). He isn’t really in pain; he isn’t crying out in anguish; it’s more like the closing number from Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, when Brian and countless others hang from crosses and sing, “Always look on the bright side of life.”

But the people standing at the foot of the cross didn’t hear it that way. “*He’s crying out for Elijah!*” One man dips a sponge in sour wine (the ancient world’s version of PowerAde) and starts to raise it to Jesus’ lips, but another stops him, “*Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.*”² They heard a man in pain; they heard a man crying out in anguish; and they wanted to see what

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 27:49). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

would come of Jesus' anguish.

Notice that I did not say "what would come of Jesus' *despair*." (I love that delete key!). Jesus did not lose hope even in the midst of the darkness, even when he did not understand. He cried out from the darkness, "My God, my God!" He asked, "Why?" He believed in God enough to take his pain to God. He did not avoid his pain; he confronted it in faith; he did not say, "it will all work out in the end." He did not say, "I'll understand someday." He said, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

Frederick Dale Bruner wrote, "Faith at its deepest level may be believing in God, but still crying out to him when we don't feel his presence."³

This is the language of lament; a way for us to speak to our pain through our pain. We cry out to the God we don't see, yet in whom we still believe (or at least in whom we are trying to believe). We cry out from our darkness and demand that God give us light. And yes, we demand!

Lament has no place for pious clichés like "if it be your will." Lament calls a cross a cross; and it demands that God be God; that God live up to God's covenant promises and it accepts that God is free to live up to God's promises as God sees fit. It won't be easy. We may not understand. And God knows, we don't like to hear the word, "No."

Lament dares to believe that God can endure our wrath, and that because of that God-forsaken man on Calvary, we can endure our pain when the life we know is taken from us and we are born again to new life.

There is no Easter without a Good Friday. There is no resurrection without a cross. There are no "hallelujahs" without "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Amen.

³ "The Seven Last Words" by Kathryn Roelofs and Norman B. Steen, *Reformed Worship*, December 2011/Number 102