

She was 23 years old, and she was dying. She had contracted the HIV virus, which had developed into Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome, more commonly known as AIDS. She had been raised in a very pious home, and a few years before, when her family had learned that she was HIV-positive, they had cut off all ties with her, and told her in no uncertain terms that her disease was God's punishment for her sins.

I was not much older than her. I was serving as a chaplain intern at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta, and I just happened to be on call that night when she called for a chaplain at about 2 a.m.

I listened as she shared her story. She knew death was not far away. She knew that she had been abandoned by her family and community, and, although she didn't say it out loud, I could tell that she wondered if she had been abandoned by God, too.

Perhaps it's not something we like to admit or talk about in polite company, but I suspect that everyone, at some point or another, has come or will come to a similar point in life that some refer to as "the dark night of the soul." Sooner or later, we come to a point where we feel completely and utterly alone, where we feel that God is completely absent, a point where when we pray, it feels like we're talking into a dead microphone, and to pray at all seems like a waste of time and breath.

Even Jesus, hanging on the cross, cries out the opening lines of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's an altogether human experience to feel that in moments of great pain and distress, God is silent, or even worse, absent.

As I listened to this young woman's story, I fretted about what I could possibly say or do that would bring any comfort or solace to her. She had obviously paged the chaplain because she was in great spiritual and emotional pain, and I knew better than to pat her on the arm and tell her that it was all going to be OK, because that would have been a lie. I held a small bible in my hands, and I thought about sharing with her Psalm 23, but she was deep in the valley of the shadow of death, and somehow, those ancient words of comfort and hope didn't seem like they could hold the weight of the room.

And then I remembered Psalm 88. Years before, I had heard the preeminent Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann give a lecture on the psalms of lament, with a focus on Psalm 88, which he calls, "an embarrassment to conventional faith."

The Psalms are unique in biblical literature, because not only are they God's Word to us, but they're also our words to God. The Psalms are the prayer book and hymnal of ancient Israel. Jesus was raised as a first-century Jew, as were all of his disciples

and earliest followers. They would have grown up praying and singing the psalms.

And as Brueggemann points out, of the 150 psalms that have been passed down to us, two-thirds of them can be classified as psalms of lament. And typically, in a psalm of lament, the psalmist brings a petition, a prayer request before God. The psalmist lays out the situation and explains to God why God should remember God's covenant and act to bring some sort of relief or resolution. Oftentimes the petition is stated in very strident terms, like in Psalm 22, that begins "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

In most of the psalms of lament, there's a turn. There's a point at which God does listen, God does act, God does bring some sort of deliverance or relief to the problem. Psalm 22 may begin "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," but by verse 21, it's apparent that God has heard, and God has acted, because the psalmist prays, "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

Usually, psalms of lament follow a pattern: petition, resolution, and then praise and thanksgiving for God's saving acts.

But not Psalm 88. There's no turn in Psalm 88. God certainly has not

acted on the petition, and in fact, it's not even clear if God has heard it. And the final word in Psalm 88 is darkness. In fact, here's the Reader's Digest of Psalm 88. "God, I'm hurting badly, I think it may even be your fault, and my friends and companions have shunned me, and I'm in darkness. The end."

You won't ever see Psalm 88 cross-stitched, framed, and hung in the church parlor, but I for one am so thankful that it's right there in our bibles. When the psalter was being compiled ages ago, I bet there was an argument about whether or not to include it at all. Walter Brueggemann is right – it is an embarrassment to "conventional faith," which so often portrays God as divine Santa Claus.

To me, the very fact that Psalm 88 is in our bibles is further proof that the biblical story is true, because like it or not sometimes, life happens, and Psalm 88 is all we can pray. God, this hurts. God, I think this might be your fault. God, my friends and companions have shunned me, and I am all alone here in the dark. The end.

Sometimes life happens and it feels like no one in the world could possibly relate to or understand what we're going through. And we look at our peers in our workplaces and our neighbors and our classmates, and we scroll through our social media feeds, and we come to church, and everyone looks so nice in their Sunday best, and everyone seems to have it all together,

and we think, boy, I must really be a mess. Everyone else is up there on the mountaintop, and I'm way down here in the valley of the shadow of death. I must be doing this faith thing all wrong.

My sister, my brother, here's what I want you to know. You don't have to pull any punches with God. You don't have to use a bunch of flowery language or hem and haw or beat around the bush when you talk to God. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the creator of all that is, seen and unseen, and at the same time, because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God knows personally what it is to be human.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it is to go through whatever it is that you're going through, so you don't have to hide it from God. You can tell God exactly how it is.

Praying like this is not an act of disrespect, or apostasy, or heresy. It's an act of deep biblical faith. When things are going well, it's easy to pray the psalms of praise and thanksgiving. It's another thing entirely to keep praying when it seems like no one is listening, and you're all alone there speaking words into the darkness. The act of biblical faith is to keep praying, keep bringing your petitions and supplications and laments to the feet of God, *even* and *especially* when it seems like a waste of time and breath.

Because if the psalms are indeed the prayer book and hymnal of ancient Israel, then our great-great-great-grandmothers and great-great-great-grandfathers in faith have prayed Psalm 88.

So, if and when you find yourself in that place of darkness and silence and a foreboding sense of utter isolation, remember that you are not the first child of God who has ever passed this way, nor will you be the last. You don't have to have it all together. You don't have to dress it up. God is big enough and loving enough and gracious enough to handle whatever you throw God's way. If Jesus can cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" you can, too.

God has called us into this thing called the church to do life together. The Apostle Paul reminds us that the church that it is the body of Christ, deeply and intimately connected to one another. When one member hurts, all hurt together, and when one rejoices, all rejoice together.

Someone once asked me why we Presbyterians are so insistent in our worship upon the practice of reciting unison prayers and creeds and confessions. They said, "What if I don't really believe everything in the Apostles' Creed? Why do you make me stand up and say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?" Doesn't that seem disingenuous?"

There are several answers to that question, but here's one that I want to leave you with today. When we pray together, we pray as the church, the body of Christ. It's not just my prayer. It's the church's prayer.

When we recite a creed or a confession, we do it as the body of Christ. It's not just my confession. It's the confession of the church.

And I thank God for that, because to be honest, some days I just don't feel like praying, and so I need the church to pray for me.

And some days, I'm not as confident in the faith as others, and so on those days, I need the church to confess the faith for me. And I suspect that you've experienced the same.

And that's why I give thanks that God has knit us together in this thing called the church, the body of Christ, where we do life together.

God has knit us together in this thing called the church, where we can boldly pray prayers that some would call an embarrassment to conventional faith.

God has knit us together in this thing called the church, where even in our darkest hours, even when we feel most alone, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and we know that we aren't the first children of God to have passed this way, nor will we be the last.

God has knit us together into this thing called the church, where even when we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death, we testify to each other and to the world that though darkness may reign for a season, because of Jesus, in the end, all will be well, all will be well, all manner of things shall be well.

Thanks be to God. Amen.