*Alone-liness* is what the psalmist is feeling at a deep, gut-wrenching level. Shockingly, this is that Jesus, in agony on the cross, is feeling, too, as he cites the first verse of Psalm 22: “‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’ which means, *‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’” (Mark 15:34). Jesus is feeling desperately alone in the world. He is abducted by the authorities and deserted by feckless friends. He is physically abused with spikes driven through his wrists and feet, and his head is crowned with thorns, causing blood to trickle down over his face. His pain level is 12 out of 10 and he is close to suffocation.

Most horrifying the One who put Jesus in this situation is his own Father! *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Why have you abandoned me? I never thought that *you* would leave me hanging!” This verse is filled with deep-seated shock and surprise. Jesus’ deeply theological question from the cross – “*why have you forsaken me?” –* isthe shadow of *implicit atheism*. An atheist is someone who denies the existence of God. An implicit atheist is someone who doubts God’s existence but who has not altogether rejected a belief in the possibility of God. To be clear: Jesus is not rejecting God. How could he since Jesus *is* God? But Jesus *is* questioning where God is when Jesus needs God the most.

Suffering is bad enough, but when one suffers alone, it is exponentially worse. When we suffer in the apparent failure of God to deliver us, and when that same God appears to be the One who inflicted the suffering*,* then we really feel defeated. We either give up, saying it was all an illusion or a delusion, or we hedge our bets. Jesus did both. Shortly before dying, he said, “‘*It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit*” (John 19:30). But he also cried out “*with a loud voice…‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, [Jesus] breathed his last”* (Luke 23:46). It can be very difficult to maintain a belief in God when faced with horrifying adversity, especially when the terror is inflicted by the very God whose existence you stoutly defend.

There are exceptions, of course. In the Old Testament, Job loses everything: family, home, wealth, friends. What is worse, Job cannot seem to locate God: *“Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments”* (Job 23:3-4). Though he loses everything, Job refuses to lose his faith. He argues with God, to be sure. His wife friends ridicule him, but they are completely spot on, dead right, when they argue that in dire circumstances, believing that God exists is irrational. But, when the dust settles, Job announces quite firmly: *“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth”* (Job 19:25).

The Christian writer C.S. Lewis understood Job’s agony. In his book, *A Grief Observed*, written after the death of his wife Joy, Lewis writes, “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to *believe such* *dreadful things about [God].* The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer’” (italics added).

This is where Jesus finds himself at the moment of his death. God cannot die; so, it is the human Jesus, stripped of his divinity, who breathes his last on the cross. We cannot know if the *fully human* Jesus died thinking it was all a farce, or if he died believing that this is what God was really like, a God who lets you suffer and die. Whatever we may speculate about what the psalmist was experiencing in Psalm 22, or what Jesus was thinking when he died on the cross, we know that Good Friday is not the end of the story. God did *not* abandon Jesus: the empty tomb of Easter morning testifies to this truth.

**The *CRY* Method.** During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people felt the *alone-liness* the psalmist describes. A survey of more than 2,000 Americans, conducted prior to the pandemic by The Harris Poll, showed that almost 72 percent of Americans experience loneliness. “And for many,” the study says, “it’s not just a once-in-a-while occurrence — one-third said they are lonely at least once a week.” Had the survey occurred anytime in 2020, the percentage would surely have been higher.

What do we do when we are assailed by doubts and feel forsaken by God? We might adopt the “CRY” method. **C stands for Contemplate.** We may be *cognitively* aware that we are in emotional and spiritual trouble. We may ask, “Why God, why have you forsaken me?” We might begin by *counting* our blessings or adversities. Sometimes they pile up, as the psalmist said: “*I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me*” (22:17).

We might *complain*. The Psalmist did. “*O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest*” (22:2). “*I am…scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads*” (22:6-7). “*Trouble is near and there is no one to help*” (22:11). “*All my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death*” (22:14-15).

We also might consider a *cleanse*: a food-related cleanse (riding oneself of toxins), or a digital cleanse (reducing online and social media interactions), or a spiritual cleanse (practicing spiritual rituals like prayer, Bible study, reading). When we feel as though we are in a God-forsaken wilderness, the first thing for a person of faith to do is to get their bearings. Stop and have a good think: contemplate, count, complain, and cleanse.

**R stands for Relax.** When you complete the contemplative phase, you relax. Like Job, you’ve had your say with God. You “*laid your case before God*,” and you have “*filled [your] mouth* *with* *arguments*” (Job 23:4). Now you relax and open yourself to receive God’s response. You are ready to “*learn what [God] would answer me, and understand what [God] would say to me*” (v. 5). Of course, you might not like what God says to you. God might get in your face, as God did with Job, and say, “*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements — surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its footings sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*” (Job 38:4-7).

Once you have it out with God, you relax; but you do not have to be idle while you rest in God. The disciples of Jesus, who felt utterly abandoned, were *resourceful*: they went fishing*.* No better way to *relax* for many. They also sought *restoration.* The disciples returned to Galilee and got their old jobs back. They went back to work, rejoined their communities, reconnected with family. They did not remain idle while they waited for God’s response.

**Y stands for *Yes*.**This final stage emphasizes the importance of saying “Yes” in your return to faith. This is not merely a fatalistic acceptance of things as they are; it is, at first, a small “yes” in the presence of the huge “No!” you see about you. It is belief overcoming unbelief. It is hope overcoming fear. It is a glimmer of light overcoming the all-consuming darkness. It is “yes” to God because God is the only One who can pull you from the pit of despair.

You may not emerge into the light of your “yes” unscathed. Jacob limped for the rest of his life after wrestling with God; but God can work with that limp. Henri Nouwen alluded to this when he wrote: “Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don’t have to be embarrassed; but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.”

On the cross, Jesus contemplated where God was and what God was doing. Then, Jesus rested for three days in the tomb. Finally, he rose on Easter morning, offering a resounding “YES!” to God’s grace-filled promise of salvation. Our “yes” comes when we look at the nail prints in his hands as did the disciple Thomas, and realize that Jesus has experienced everything we have, and so like Thomas, we can profess, “My Lord and my God!” We may begin our ordeal by exclaiming, “My God, my God, I can’t believe this!”, but we end it with the affirmation: “My Lord and God, I believe!”

**Separation Anxiety**

Good Friday, April 7, 2023 Psalm 22:1-15

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Brigette drives a school bus for kindergarten and first-grade kids. She has lots of stories to tell about the first day of school. She remembers picking up 5-year-old Jolene on her first day of kindergarten. Brigette remembers the scene because Jolene’s mom is standing at the bus stop in a house robe and high heels. Jolene and her mom seem Velcroed to each other: there were a lot of frantic hugs and kisses and loud outbursts of crying. There were scenes of defiance and sullenness. Finally, the tide appeared to subside. Brigette waits patiently: she’s seen this all before.

But enough about the mom! Let’s talk about young Jolene. Brigette can see the child is quite willing to get on the bus. She is dressed in a cute pink outfit and her thick and curly hair is gathered by a Boho print hair scrunchie. She is carrying an Elsa and Anna “Frozen” backpack that is just about as big as she is. Jolene is ready to go!

But mom isn’t ready. Mom’s face is wet with tears and lined with worry. Her eyes are puffy and pleading. Brigette helps Jolene up the step onto the bus and tells her to find a seat. Brigette then turns to mom and hands her the business card of a local family therapist. “Jolene’s going to be fine,” she says. As Brigette drives off, she glances at her mirror and sees mom standing in the roadway, hands covering her face, weeping.

Separation anxiety is not so much about loneliness as it is the *fear of alone-liness.* Separation anxiety is very common in young children when, for example, the first babysitter arrives, and the parents leave. But in Psalm 22, we hear an adult who fears *alone-liness*: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest*” (vv. 1-2).

This is not the cry of a lonely person, but an *abandoned* one. Loneliness can be many things, but it is most certainly the awareness of a support system that is absent. A lonely person knows that their friends and family or coworkers may not be physically with them, but they do exist somewhere and that sometime in the future they are likely to see them again. But *alone-liness* is an unwelcome solitude *imposed* (one believes, rightly or wrongly) by a force or agency outside or beyond one’s control. In the case of Jolene’s mother, it is an *alone-liness* imposed by the school.

**Good Friday Prayer:**

Now we know

all is grace

all is gift

You give us all good things

life and love

daily bread and water that quenches our thirst

friends and faith.

Most of all, in your Son, Jesus,

you meet us with a love that will never let us go

you utter words of mercy and forgiveness that override the hurts,

and heal our brokenness

you offer new beginnings where we had expected only dead ends

We give you thanks and praise

for the mystery of your suffering love that gives us life.

We give you thanks and praise

that you know our weakness and hear our prayers.

We give you thanks and praise

that all our dying and living is held in your good keeping.

Now we know

all is grace

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