

Sunday, October 14, 2012: Psalm 22:1-15

The psalmist knows loneliness. Even the most faithful believers have anguished over the fear that somehow God is not listening to their cries.

by [Kathy Wolf Reed](#) in the [October 3, 2012](#) issue

Our church's Deacon Care Manual includes a brief section titled "What Not to Say to Someone Who Is Grieving." It lists some grief responses that we've probably all used at some point:

"It's all part of God's plan."

"God will never give you more than you can handle."

"I know exactly how you feel."

While some find these well-intentioned comments a comfort in times of loss, the words also have the potential to stifle grief or to try to explain away an inexplicable situation. Too often when we are placed in the position of caregiver, we feel the need to make the afflicted person feel better, as though that is what faith is all about. The psalmist knows better. I believe that Psalm 22 lends itself to times of grief better than any other passage in scripture.

Before I entered parish ministry I served as a hospital chaplain. If there is one place on earth where it is helpful to know what to say and what not to say, it is in the hospital. I would often overhear family members, friends and even pastors trying to encourage patients by offering them phrases of scripture such as "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13) and "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away" (Job 1:21). While I'm sure insistent optimism offers some encouragement to the suffering, sometimes these words fall on deaf ears.

The first time I walked with someone through his experience of dying was when I met Bill. A nurse had pulled me aside in the hospital hallway and alerted me to the

fact that Bill's room was crowded with family members and had been crowded day and night since his arrival. He had not had a moment of rest or peace.

When I walked into the room I found, just as the nurse had said, that bodies were crammed into the room. The TV blared as the family argued over what the doctor had said earlier that morning. Three people were on their cell phones, and in the middle of it all was Bill, seemingly swallowed up by his hospital bed, remaining still and silent in the whirlwind that was his family.

It took me a few minutes to talk them out of the room, but eventually the crowd dispersed and Bill and I were left alone. What happened next surprised me. Bill, who had seemed so silent and bewildered when surrounded by his anxious family members, began to talk and did not stop for 45 minutes. He chatted about the flower shop his family had owned for several generations and about how he'd met his wife. He talked about how his neighborhood had changed over the years and what he'd been doing the morning he was brought into the hospital. I barely got a word in until, when I sensed he was winding down, I asked the difficult question:

"Bill, do you feel ready to go home?"

He paused for a minute and frowned.

"Well, yes, I'm ready. In fact, I've been waiting now for a while, but I think somebody up there has forgotten about me. You see, I'm no good anymore. I can't do anything. It's the most terrible feeling in the world, feeling worthless. I pray every day that he will come and take me home."

We don't tend to think of someone surrounded by friends and family members as being lonely, but like the psalmist, Bill felt forsaken and forgotten. While his loved ones were trying to figure out what was best for him, the one thing they had forgotten was to stop and let him speak about his situation. His body was failing him, his "bones [were] out of joint and his heart like wax."

His prayers seemed to fall upon empty ears, and his God—where was his God?

Much of my ministry is with college students, and I find plenty of this loneliness in them. Depression runs rampant on college campuses; a student may spend four years with 20,000 other students, yet feel that he or she has no friend to trust with doubts and fears.

The psalmist knows this loneliness and reminds the reader that even the most faithful believers have anguished over the fear that somehow God is not listening to their cries. Knowing this pain, the psalmist still acknowledges a God who “took me from the womb” and “kept me safe on my mother’s breast.” The psalmist still prays to God even when unsure that God is listening.

Sometimes the best words of scripture to offer the lonely and suffering are not verses of cheer or joy. Sometimes the best words we can give and hear are the words of one who knows what it is to question faith. In the deepest pain there is solidarity, and in the deepest prayers—especially those of grief—there is a hope that outlasts all sorrow. As the psalmist cries, “Do not be far from me.”