

A lament psalm without lament (Psalm 22:23-31; Mark 8:31-38)

Lament psalms typically move to trust at some point, but reading only those verses feels strange in Lent.

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The closing section of Psalm 22 is a curious choice for the second Sunday in Lent. Many churches use this psalm extensively during Holy Week, especially because Jesus quotes its first line from the cross. Some churches, including mine, pray this psalm aloud in unison while the altar is stripped before Good Friday. Our voices waver as we watch sacred items being removed.

Psalm 22 is a psalm of lament, and Jesus asking why he has been forsaken never fails to shake me. I wonder whether those ancient words of prayer brought him any comfort during such suffering. I wonder how hearing those words affected those who were with him at Golgotha, especially the women who watched from a distance. Could they hear the words? Did they take up the rest of the psalm together, perhaps under their breaths, while they watched him die?

The poignant parts of the psalm are skipped on this second Sunday in Lent, leaving us with words of faith, praise, and glory. So instead of hearing a cry about being forsaken, we read that God did not hide God's face. We hear about rescue, praise, proclamation. After a harrowing opening, the psalmist seems to burst with trust and faith. Lament psalms typically move to trust at some point, but reading only those verses feels strange in a season when we are called to remember our deaths.

Maybe we need to hear the positive parts of this psalm so early in Lent so that we can last through the whole 40 days. We've been told on Ash Wednesday that we are going to die. We watched Jesus being tempted in the desert, and throughout Lent he will move toward Jerusalem. Lent looks long from this second-Sunday vantage point. Maybe we've given up chocolate or alcohol and some 12 days in aren't convinced that we can keep it up, so we want to hear about the poor or afflicted eating and being satisfied.

The psalm ends with future generations proclaiming deliverance to people yet unborn, an important reminder—on a Sunday when Jesus chastises Peter for “setting his mind on divine things rather than human things”—that human things, including the generations that follow us, matter to our faith journey.