

My mother died on April 4th, 1985. A few months later, my teenage sister moved in with me. That led to a move from seminary housing to an apartment. It led to taking on two part time jobs in addition to a full seminary course load. And it led to parental responsibilities that no 22 year old is equipped to handle. As I tried to make it all work, I felt vulnerable. A misstep could have resulted in it all falling apart. Over the next year and half, things grew increasingly harder to pull off. And that led to me feeling even more vulnerable as it began to seem more and more likely that I would have to drop out of seminary to take on a full time job to make things work.

Over the last six months, you too may have felt vulnerable as you tried to stay safe handling the necessities of life. You may have felt that even with a mask, leaving your home was dangerous. You may have worried that touching even a disinfected shopping cart was risky. And you may have felt even attending church made you vulnerable to getting sick. And you were right to feel that way. Six months into this pandemic, millions of people have been infected. 200,000 people have died in our country alone. And there is no indication things will change any time soon.

But this is not the first time in history people have felt vulnerable in the face of disasters they could not control. This past Friday was September 11th, and on that day we recalled an event 19 years ago when the deaths of thousands of people made our entire nation feel vulnerable. Over the last few months, we have heard about an event in 1918 when hundreds of thousands died and the entire world was made to feel vulnerable. And way back in the 14th century, there was the bubonic plague - where 70 million died, and probably millions of people feeling vulnerable.

But while that may be comforting to know, it may not help us feel less vulnerable in the midst of this particular pandemic. We may still feel vulnerable when we learn a neighbor is infected. We may still feel vulnerable when someone we share work space with tests positive. And we may still feel vulnerable when people stand too close to us in the checkout line or refuse to wear a mask around us. But we must not let the fear of what might happen rule our lives. We must not let concern for staying safe be all we think about. And we must not let the feeling of being vulnerable rule our lives. For God is with us. And since God is with us, we need not fear.

We see this when we turn to scripture. Joshua tells us *“Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you.”* Isaiah tells us that God has said *“do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you.”* And Jesus said *“don’t be afraid; just believe.”* But what we do with such statements is important. For while God does not want us to be terrified, He doesn’t want us to act stupidly. While God does not want us to be dismayed, He doesn’t want us to ignorantly ignore medical advice. And while God does not want us to be afraid, He doesn’t want us to foolishly do things we know can expose us to a deadly disease.

What God DOES want for us is to be less terrified while acting smartly. He wants us to be less dismayed while following medical advice. He wants us to be less afraid while taking precautions to stay safe. For while God did not send coronavirus into the world, for some mysterious reason He chose to allow it to exist. He chose to allow it to spread. And He chose to allow humans to allow

it to run rampant. Not because God wanted anyone to die. But because of free will, God has to allow consequences have to flow from our actions. For if He were to prevent the negative consequences of our actions from occurring every time we did not choose well, we would never learn to choose well. We would go about life carelessly because we would know that God would always step in to make things right - no matter how poorly (or sinfully) we chose to act.

This leaves us in a situation where we are called to trust that God is in control, that God loves us, and that God will not let anything harm us for all eternity. However, in this world, bad things can still happen. So we need to ask God to be involved in our lives through His power, helping us overcome that which might normally overpower us. We see this way of living in Jesus. As He went about His life, He increasingly came to realize WHO He was, and began to follow His Father's will for His life - even when it began to point to the cross. Then, on the cross, Jesus showed us how we are to live in the midst of difficulties, how we are to follow God's will with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength even when it is not easy, and how we are to strive to hold onto our faith despite the pain life can throw at us. We see all this in Psalm 22.

As Jesus hung on the cross, Matthew tells us in his gospel that He cried out in anguish, saying "*my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" What Matthew doesn't say is that those words were a direct quote from Psalm 22, verse 1. The full text of that verse says "*my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?*" This full text of Jesus' quote is important to know because Hebrew, particularly Hebrew poetry, often used a literary technique called parallelism. Parallelism was used when a writer wanted to say something important, and did so by repeating a single idea in a different way. So when we see parallelism in the Bible, we need to understand that the writer is not expressing two different thoughts, but a single important thought in two different ways.

As a result, when Jesus quoted the first half of Psalm 22, verse 1, He wasn't merely speaking about feeling that God has forsaken Him; He also was stating that it felt like His Father felt distant from His suffering, that His Father was obscured from His vision by His suffering, that His suffering had come between them. And the reason it felt that way has to do with the fact that Jesus was not just the son of Mary. Jesus was also the second person of the Trinity. Which is why Jesus said earlier in His life "*I and the Father are one.*" It is why He said "*the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.*" It is why He said "*anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*"

For Jesus was closer to the Father than any other human had ever been. But now on the cross, He felt that closeness blurred, obscured, threatened. And that caused Him anguish. But we must not stop at that anguish if we want to find the hope Jesus offers US when we feel vulnerable. This is because of another fact that we need to understand about the things the Bible records for us in its texts. And that is the fact that when a Jewish rabbi quoted the lead verse of a passage, those listening understood they were making their comments in reference to the entire passage in which that quote sat. So, when Jesus quoted verse 1 of Psalm 22, those listening knew He was referencing more than just that one particular statement in His anguish.

We see that this was the case because of the reaction of the crowd. As Jesus endured the physical anguish of being crucified, and the spiritual anguish of feeling the presence of His Father obscured, Matthew tells us *“the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him.”* But their words were not made up on the spot. When they said that, the *“chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders”* were knowingly quoting Psalm 22:7. For in that verse, the psalmist wrote of his own suffering, saying *“all who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: ‘HE TRUSTS IN THE LORD; LET THE LORD RESCUE HIM.”*

Which is why Jesus replied to their quote of verse 7 by quoting Psalm 22:1: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* For Jesus would have known - like any good rabbi referencing the entire passage - that the psalmist went on to say to God *“in you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.”* He would have known - like any good rabbi referencing the entire passage - that the psalmist went on to say to God *“for [you have] not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; [you have] not hidden [your] face from him but listened to his cry for help.”* And He would have known - like any good rabbi referencing the entire passage - that the psalmist went on to say to God *“for dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations.”*

And it is in those two things together (the parallelism of verse 1 of Psalm 22 and the text of that full psalm) where we find the key we need to be freed from feeling vulnerable not only in the midst of a pandemic but any time danger threatens us. For there was Jesus on the cross. His life was being taken away from Him. And yet He knew His Father was not only in control, but was going to deliver Him. He knew, as the psalmist said, that because He *“trusted”* He would be *“delivered.”* He knew that because He *“cried”* out to God He would be *“saved.”* And He knew that because His Father did not *“disdain”* His suffering, His Father would not only *“listen”* to His cry for help, but answer it in such a way that He would show His *“dominion”* not just over the nations, but over life and death. And three days later, those very things came to pass.

But to fully see the guidance Psalm 22 offers us as we struggle with feeling vulnerable in the midst of a situation we can’t control, we need to turn to the 11 verses from Psalm 22 that I read. When we do, we see that God lays out exactly what WE need to do, so we might (as Joshua said) be *“strong and courageous,”* so we might (as Isaiah said) *“not be dismayed,”* and so we might (as Jesus said) not *“be afraid; [but] believe.”* For instance, in verse 4 we are told to say to God *“in you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.”* For if we put our trust in God, He will ‘deliver’ us as well. The psalmist tells us in verse 5 to say to God *“they cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.”* For if we so trust in God that we cry out to Him, we also will not be ‘disappointed.’ And the psalmist tells us in verse 11 to say to God *“do not be far from me.”* For if we so trust in God that we cry out to Him to be ‘not far’ from us, we will find the ‘help’ we need to move from feeling VULNERABLE to being INVINCIBLE. For as Jesus said *“with God all things are possible.”*

To show that, I want to return to the story I told you earlier. Throughout 1986, I began to feel more and more vulnerable as it grew more and more likely that I would have to drop out of seminary and take on a full time job. For that was likely to derail ever being ordained. But I chose not to wallow in feeling vulnerable. I told God that I put my trust in Him. I cried out to God in my despair, rather than giving in to it. And I asked God to not be far from me even as I was preparing to make the tough choices that seemed to be looming before me. As that struggle went into 1987, it did not seem like things could continue that way much longer, and I would have to make a very unwanted change to make things continue to work for my sister and I.

But then God answered. I was offered an appointment as a student pastor at Bethesda United Methodist Church in Phoenixville. Bethesda had a parsonage. Bethesda paid enough of a salary that I could finish seminary on time and go before the Board of Ordained Ministry. As a result, I was ordained a Deacon in May of 1988. But things didn't stop at that point. I stayed at Bethesda two more years, and in that time God threw in a bonus.

During my second year at Bethesda, I met Sandy at an event that was related to the Phoenixville Council of Churches. And as a result, I was able to joyfully say along with the writer of Psalm 22 *"in you our fathers put their trust . . . they cried to you and . . . were not disappointed."* I therefore invite YOU to trust God. For you will not be disappointed. God will do great things IN you, FOR you, and THROUGH you. God will become more real to you. And you will find yourself able to move past feeling VULNERABLE to feeling INVINCIBLE. For as Jesus said *"with God all things are possible."*