# SERMON SERIES: DOG DAYS

# “Sad As A Hound Dog’s Eye”

## Psalm 22:11-18

The month of August is known as the “dog days” of summer due to the oppressive heat and humidity. Kids and teachers have begrudgingly returned to the classroom. There are only a couple of weeks left to squeeze in that last-minute vacation before we turn our attention to Fall.

“Dog Days” is also the title of the sermon series we’re using this month. We’re looking at passages of Scripture that reference dogs, as well as the metaphors or slang phrases associated with our canine companions. Last Sunday we looked at the final chapter of Revelation, and the eternal reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked, those who end up in the doghouse.

Let’s turn to our Scripture reading for today, Psalm 22:11-18.

***When we moved here in 2014 one of our dogs was a basset hound named Jazmine. Sadly, due to an accident we had to put her to sleep the day before Thanksgiving 2016. For some reason I’ve always been partial to basset hounds. Maybe it’s their lackadaisical manner. Maybe it’s their wrinkly skin. Perhaps it’s their huge noses or paws. I’m not really sure why I’ve been attracted to bassets, but we can all agree that they’re one of the saddest-looking of all dogs. Just check out the front of your bulletin! Those droopy eyes and long ears make them look so pitiful. It’s where we get the phrase we’re using today, “sad as a hound dog’s eye.” If you’re sad as a hound dog’s eye, you’re down pretty low.***

*11Do not stay so far from me, for trouble is near, and no one else can help me. 12My enemies surround me like a herd of bulls; fierce bulls of Bashan have hemmed me in! 13Like lions they open their jaws against me, roaring and tearing into their prey. 14My life is poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax, melting within me. 15My strength has dried up like sunbaked clay. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You have laid me in the dust and left me for dead. 16My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs; an evil gang closes in on me. They have pierced my hands and feet. 17I can count all my bones. My enemies stare at me and gloat. 18They divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing.*

Psalm 22 is attributed to David, although we have no idea when it was composed or under what circumstances. It’s a song of lament—or sorrow—specifically, as it relates to death. Scholars believe this psalm was used in corporate worship for someone who was severely sick or facing imminent death. ***Much like we might hold a service of healing or a time of prayer for the sick, so was this psalm used.*** And in it David expressed one of the darkest mysteries of suffering and dying: the sense of being forsaken or abandoned by God. The first verse is a gut-wrenching cry of desertion: *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help?*

The ancient Israelites believed that God dwelt in the midst of his people. He wasn’t like other gods who were represented by statues and idols—gods who were distant and uncaring. Yahweh was among his people: as a cloud and pillar of fire in the wilderness; through the Ark of the Covenant; later in the temple; and even later, in Jesus himself.

The essence of the covenant was that God could be trusted to deliver his people in times of desperation. Yet when faced with the onset of death David could not feel or sense God’s presence. Theology told him one thing; his experience was telling him something else. He was close to death and deliverance was nowhere on the map. Theology and experience clashed. ***It still clashes for us today. We know what our theology teaches us about life and death, resurrection, and eternal life. But as the shadow of death looms ever closer—as we realize there will be no last-minute reprieve—our experience weighs heavy on us.***

That first verse of Psalm 22-- *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?--*may sound familiar to us. Both Matthew and Mark record this agonizing question as the last words Jesus spoke from the cross before he died. Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose this verse? There are one hundred fifty psalms and sixty-one of those are laments. Jesus had a pretty big catalog of material to pick from. Why choose Psalm 22:1?

Why not choose Psalm 5:1-2: “*O Lord, hear me as I pray; pay attention to my groaning. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God…”*?

Why not Psalm 31:9: “*Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am in distress. Tears blur my eyes. My body and soul are withering away”*?

Why not Psalm 69:3-4: “*I am exhausted from crying for help; my throat is parched. My eyes are swollen with weeping... Those who hate me without cause outnumber the hairs on my head”*?

Let’s consider a few possible answers…

First, Psalm 22 was understood to be what is called a “messianic psalm”—that is, it was a prophecy about the coming of Messiah. It’s likely that Jesus quoted this first verse as a way of fulfilling the prophecy referring to himself.

Part of our Scripture reading also gives us this sense of the messianic prophecy: *My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs; an evil gang closes in on me.* This sure sounds like the jeering crowd, the smug religious leaders, the scowling Roman soldiers, who gloated over the dying form of Christ.

*They have pierced my hands and feet.* Not much needs to be said about that one, does it?

*They divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing.* This was also fulfilled at Calvary when the soldiers huddled together and gambled for the few pieces of clothes that Jesus owned.

Psalm 22 directs us to the fact that pain and suffering are part of life, and the end of life remains the same for us all. We’re reminded that Jesus walked the same road we walk. He knew pain and suffering. He felt his life drain away as he hung suspended between heaven and earth. We don’t travel anywhere that Jesus has not already been.

Second, while Jesus could’ve quoted from other psalms of lament--or even from texts like Job or Jeremiah—Psalm 22 was used in corporate worship. Therefore, it sets the loneliness and fear of dying in the context of a caring community.

We all get sick. We all age. We all die. And nothing is as tragic or hollow as dying alone. ***This was one of the driving factors in Mother Teresa’s ministry to the poor in the slums of Calcutta. She believed that every person deserved to die with dignity, in the company of someone who loved them and would walk with them that final mile.***

David cried out, *Do not stay so far from me, for trouble is near, and no one else can help me. My enemies surround me like a herd of bulls… Like lions they open their jaws against me... My life is poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax, melting within me.* While we may not refer to our bones “being out of joint” or our life “being poured out like water,” we nevertheless understand their meaning and implication: someone is wasting away. And they long for the presence of others to make the end bearable.

***We need a supportive, loving community around us when we face these moments of inevitability. This is why we take food to the home of the bereaved; why we sit with them and hold their hand; why we cry with them; why we pray for them.***

Could it be that by quoting Psalm 22:1, Jesus was crying out for company--for his friends and family--for someone to help him face his death? A few of the women who followed him were present at the cross, but his disciples—his closest friends—stayed away (at least all of them except John). They couldn’t keep watch and pray for him during his agony in Gethsemane; they weren’t present in his final hours. There was no beloved community to help ease his transition--no words of love, no support, no comfort. Was he “sad as a hound dog’s eye” because he entered death alone and abandoned by those who claimed to love him the most?

Third, a careful study of the other psalms of lament reveals that they have a vindictive or escapist theme. Many of the lament psalms call for God’s punishment on the wrongdoers. They seek divine justice for what was committed against the one suffering. Some pointedly ask for God’s healing so the psalmist can go out and exact revenge. Still others ask for forgiveness of sin, since sickness was associated with sin.

Jesus embraced and endured his pain and suffering. He wasn’t asking God to punish those who crucified him. Rather, his request was *“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34). Jesus wasn’t seeking divine justice against those who had humiliated and tortured him. He didn’t ask for healing so he could come down from the cross and take his revenge. He didn’t ask to be forgiven of sin because he had no sin…

*Until…*

The fourth reason Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1 was because he had taken on the sin of the world on the cross, and in doing so he became sin: 2nd Corinthians 5:21--*For God made Christ, who never sinned, to become sin itself, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.* And by becoming sin, Jesus was wrenched away from his Father. Our sin created a rift between Father and Son. For the first and only time in all existence, Jesus was truly, completely, terribly alone.

Not only were his disciples and friends nowhere to be found. He also had no connection whatsoever with his Father. The Father abandoned Jesus because of the sin Jesus had become—because of what he bore for the salvation of the world. The agony of separation, the devastation of rejection, was the ultimate expression of pain and loneliness.

***Author Max Lucado put it this way:*** ***"Here is the cup, my Son. Drink it alone."***

***God must have wept as he performed his task. Every lie, every lure, every act done in shadows was in that cup. Slowly, hideously they were absorbed in the body of the Son. The final act of incarnation. The spotless Lamb was blemished.***

***The King turns away from his Prince. The undiluted wrath of a sin-hating Father falls upon his sin-filled Son. … The Son looks for his Father, but the Father cannot be seen.*** ***"My God, my God…why?"*** ***It was the most gut-wrenching cry of loneliness in history, and it came not from a prisoner or a widow or a patient. It came from a hill, from a cross, from a Messiah.*** ***… Never have words carried such hurt. Never has one being been so lonely. … The two who have been one are now two.”***

Jesus died alone so that we don’t have to. He died as the fullness of humanity’s sins so that we don’t have to. He experienced suffering and was sadder “than a hound dog’s eye” so that we need never be alone, even if all others leave us. For the one who suffered and died on our behalf remains with us forever. We don’t have to ask “Why have you forsaken me?” because he has not. He never will. That abandonment and rejection was dealt with once-for-all, on a faraway hill called “The Skull.”

We’re not promised an easy or trouble-free life. Nowhere are we guaranteed good health or longevity. Instead, we *are* guaranteed the trials and struggles, the difficulties, the illness, and the death that comes to all. And these things may indeed make us “sad as a hound dog’s eye,” but they don’t rule us. They don’t hold us prisoner. They don’t have the final say. For we belong to Christ.

We’re going to close this morning--fittingly enough considering what we’ve learned about Psalm 22—with a time of prayer for Leroy here at the altar. If you’d like to come down and lay hands on Leroy, and pray for him, during this time, please come forward…