

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, March 30, 2025

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As we continue this morning in our Lenten sermon series, we are...today marks the halfway point of our Lenten journey, which is pretty wild to think about. We've spent a good bit of time in the Gospel of Luke, and then we moved to the Gospel of John. And now we move this morning to the Gospel according to Matthew. We are in the 27th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Your bulletin says that I'm going to read 46 and 47. I'm just going to read one extra verse beginning in verse 45.

*From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah."*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

I've spoken about it before, but as a child, even though I was in a medium-sized church, many times, many Sunday mornings, I would be the only child in a Sunday school class. I've talked about how Krispy Kreme donuts kept me entertained and something called Sword Drills. Y'all are familiar, right? Sword drills, for those who are not, sword drills are a Bible drill. If you grew up in the South, then maybe you heard the Bible referred to as a sword. This sword was to help protect you against the Devil, okay? I guess if you grew up in South Carolina, that's what this thing protected you against, all right? The sword of God protects you against the Devil, and so you needed to be very proficient with your sword, okay? We did sword drills, and we would have a Sunday school teacher who called out a Bible verse to us, or if I was by myself just to me, right? So Matthew 27, and I would open the book to the middle, and then I would try to figure out where Matthew was, right? So you either move towards the conclusion of the book or towards the beginning, right? And you would learn a lot about a Sunday school teacher by the verses that they chose for you to do sword drills to. You learned a lot about their theology. I didn't know that till later, but I started repeating some of the verses that my Sunday school teacher was telling me or that I was learning, to my mom, and she was like "Let's expand your biblical knowledge here." So we would do this. When we did it at the Presbyterian church, we would become more proficient with our sword, and that was to protect us against the Devil. And in that Presbyterian church the Devil sounded a lot like a Baptist actually. And then when I went to Taylor's First Baptist and did youth group there or Sunday school there, and I did sword drills there, the Devil sounded a lot like a Presbyterian, right? And so I became very proficient in these sword drills.

I'm going to tell you a couple of stories. I promise they're going to tie together here. All right. I was thinking about sword drills this week because earlier this week I sat down in a coffee shop

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across the table from a new friend of mine. Took me 14 years of ministry to realize that I needed to have someone in the congregation where I was serving pray for me. I know y'all pray for your pastoral staff and your other staff all the time, but I needed to be able to confide in someone and have them pray specifically for the things that I am navigating as both a pastor amongst you, but also just as a regular old human, right? And so on Monday, the last Monday of every month, I'm I'm gathering, or the fourth Monday of every month, I'm gathering with a new friend, and they are praying for me. So this past Monday I sat down in my favorite coffee shop across the table from this person, and I began to share things that I'm navigating in my life, things I'm navigating as a pastor among you. And it was 45 minutes of sharing that I did, right? Nothing for y'all to worry about. Everything's fine, but it was a lot. It was a lot. And I realized it even as I began to share how significant it was. And this person listened and listened and listened, right? And when I was done sharing, this person moved their coffee cup from the middle of the table; and as if pulling from a file cabinet, they placed their hands in the middle of the table and began to tell me some stories about Jesus. And they began to connect the things that I am navigating right now just personally and as a leader. They began to connect those to the stories of Jesus from scripture. They started with one story, and I was amazed how this story really showed me that what I'm navigating is nothing new, right, that people across all time and space have navigated very similar things, and they showed me the way in which even my savior Jesus Christ has navigated some similar situations. They finished with that story, and then they got to the next thing I needed to talk about, and they brought another story from their file, and they placed it on the middle of the table, and they began to share again. And something happened as we shared coffee across the table from each other. First, I realized that I had been fully heard by this friend, right? They had truly listened to what was going on in my life. And, second, through the stories that they shared with me, I realized that I am known, and my circumstances in my life are fully known by my redeemer, by Jesus. Now when I was growing up, the sword drills were to equip me to fight off the Devil. But then when we were done talking about the things going on in my life and in our communal life together, we started to talk about our relationship with scripture. And I said, "You know, back in the day when I was learning stories, I thought I was supposed to wield them against people. But the longer I do this ministry thing, and the more time I spend in scripture, the more that I have this file from which to draw, right, this deeper well, if you will, of the stories of our God, that are not just the stories of our God, but they are stories that connect to each and every one of us in different seasons in our lives. And so I sat across from that new friend drinking coffee, and I felt this overwhelming sense of gratitude for whoever it was who led them in sword drills early on, for whoever it was that took time out of their schedule to teach them Sunday school classes, that instilled in them scripture that became part of a file that's grown over decades and decades and decades of life. I was so grateful for those who poured into that person and for the commitment that that friend, that friend had made to knowing scripture

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because in my need, that friend was able to draw forth the stories of scripture and place them before me that I might know that I am heard and fully known by my God.

I tell you those stories so that we might understand the story of this text in a different way. In his pain and in his agony, Jesus cries out "Eli Eli Lima Sabakani," that is "My God my God why have you forsaken me?" Jesus cries out. But it is not just any cry. Jesus turns to his father and draws forth from it that rich library of scriptural knowledge, draws forth from it scripture. These are not simply words that Jesus is reciting for the first time. He is quoting scripture back to those, back to God and to those who are witnessing his crucifixion. He's quoting, and some of y'all know this, Psalm 22. Let me read you the first few verses. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my anguished groans? My God, I cry out during the day, but you don't answer. Even at night time, I don't stop. You are the Holy One enthroned above. You are Israel's praise. Our ancestors trusted you. They trusted you, and you rescued them. They cried out to you, and they were saved. They trusted you, and they weren't ashamed."

Jesus quotes back to God and to all who will hear scripture. He does it to lament his situation, his anguish, his pain. In the Jewish tradition to lament to our God is a faithful act, and ours as well, because lament betrays that we still believe in the God of all creation. We still believe even in our lamenting that there is a God who listens. So to cry out is to, in fact, reach out to our God in faith. And in this cry I think we see Jesus at his realist. There are many other times in scripture that show to us this fully human nature of Jesus the Christ, but this one to me, this one perhaps illustrates it better than any others. And what's interesting about his quoting of Psalm 22 in this moment in his anguish and in his pain is that the people who would have heard this cry would have also known this scripture. They would have heard it over and over again. They would have been familiar with the tone of this text and the...the thread that was woven through it. Which means they would have understood that while this psalm begins in anguish, begins the sense of abandonment, it does not end there. It ends with redemption. "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters in the midst of the congregation. I will praise you," the psalmist says, "For God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted. God did not hide God's face from me but heard when I cried." The people who were hearing the first verse of that psalm would have known the last one. They would have known that while it begins with abandonment, it ends with redemption. Jesus is teaching us even in that moment from his deep well of scriptural knowledge. He is teaching us that the end of the story will be redemption. It might not feel that way in the pain and the anguish, but it is the truth.

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And here's what I don't know. I don't know how the Lord is going to use this scripture in your life. Maybe you grew up Baptist, and you've got a lot of scripture in your well, in your file cabinet, right? Or you grew up Presbyterian, and you can locate the books of the Bible even if you haven't committed much to memory, right? Or maybe you grew up in some other tradition that revered scripture but didn't encourage personal study or that really encouraged personal study. I don't know what your file cabinet looks like, what that deep well looks like for you. I don't know what sort of work you have done since the time of your childhood to this point.

So I don't know where this scripture is going to fit into your well, but here's what I want to tell you. If you came to this place this morning sensing that you have been abandoned, maybe by a diagnosis, maybe by the death of someone you deeply love, maybe by a change in your family, by divorce, maybe it's an issue at work or some other relationship. If you came to this place feeling like you have been forsaken in that place. If you find yourself in that place, I want you to know two things. The first is that crying out in lament is an act of faithfulness. It was an act of faithfulness for our Christ. It was an act of faithfulness for our Jewish siblings in the faith. It is an act of faithfulness even now. I want you to know as well that the God that we worship in Jesus Christ feels and knows that same feeling that you have this day of abandonment. Your abandonment is not the same as the abandonment that Jesus decries on the cross, right? It's not exactly the same, but boy it can feel the same.

But maybe you came here and life is pretty good. Maybe you, maybe things are really clicking at work. Maybe you're feeling the healthiest you felt in a long time. Your relationships seem pretty stable. Your life is going pretty swimmingly right now. If that's the case, I want you to know something else. We rejoice with you that that's where you find yourself today. We are grateful to our God that you have been located in such a place of care this day. But if that is the case, then this scripture might have another purpose for you today. Perhaps the Lord intends for you to add this scripture to your library so that it might be used at the appropriate time. Perhaps someday soon you're going to be seated across a coffee table, literal or imagined, right, from one who is feeling abandoned, feeling forsaken. Perhaps the purpose of the text then for you this day is that when they are done and you have fully listened to their story, why they are feeling the way they are feeling, you might draw from your deep well, from your library, this story and place it before them and say, "The feeling that you are feeling right now is a feeling that our God in Jesus Christ has felt. And so your tears are valid. Your cries are heard by your God." And maybe, just maybe, you might pull out your Bible, and you might turn to Psalm 22, and you might read the beginning and then you might read the end. Maybe, just maybe, you are being called this day to add to your library the redemptive work of our God.

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I want to close this morning with some words from an author who wrote a book actually about the seven last words of Jesus, John Meacham. It's entitled The Hope of Glory.

“From the cross Jesus asked the same question we ask in hours of darkness and despair. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And in this question we know that Jesus has known grief. Jesus has experienced the pain of his people. Jesus has wondered as we do why. And then his father's will is done And from darkness comes light. And from death comes life.”

And I want you to know this morning, Beloved, that this too is our story. This too is your story. This too is our faith and your faith, our consolation and yours this day. And so we wait and we watch, holding to the belief that someday in some way all things shall be made new. All things shall be redeemed. This is the hope of the Gospel. This is the hope of our Savior. This is your hope and mine.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.  
Amen.