

God, our Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, we're here because you're here. We're here because you've promised to do something about this world of ours. One day we're out celebrating unity and peace and then the next day we're mourning the violence and destruction of children. So, what it comes down to is we're here because we can't imagine anywhere else to go. So, we're begging you: Don't let us down. Don't let us down.

I remember growing up and hearing about these records you could play backwards and they'd tell you some secret message or something.

Apparently, you could do that with Beatles albums, but I wouldn't know for sure because my dad was more of a Monkeys guy than a Beatles guy. Or, at least, he didn't have any records by the Beatles, and when I got into them, everything I had was on CD. This whole vinyl craze thing we've got going is new, even for me. Anyway, I once heard that you could do the same thing with country music – you could spin their records backward and hear a secret message – but I heard it was actually even better with country.

Here's what I heard: If you played a country album backward, not only would you get to hear that secret, but your wife would cancel the divorce, your truck would be fixed, and your dog would rise from the dead...

You know, I actually like country music, but I'm a sap and would rather go to a funeral than a wedding, so it only makes sense that I'd like it. Country – I don't care if you're Kris Kristofferson or Toby Keith – country is all about marriages going to hell, people staring into their shot glasses, and children dying young. It's literally everything we would consider real life but don't want to talk about. It's what we live in, or (if we're lucky) what someone we know lives in. The number one country hit in 1968 was a

mom and a dad having to spell out “divorce” because their kids were in the room. “Oh, I wish that we could stop this D-I-V-O-R-C-E.” Tell me that’s not real life. In 1984, John Prine – one of these sorts of legends of country music – came out with a song called “Unwed Fathers.” I can’t get it out of my head. It’s about this pregnant teenager having to leave town on a bus to go have her baby all alone. Prine sings it with his wife, Rachel, and it’s probably one of the most devastating bits of song-writing you’ll ever hear...[Play “Unwed Fathers”]

Man, I think it’s that last verse: “Your daddy never meant to hurt you ever. He just don't live here, but you've got his eyes.” Talk about depressing. I’ve listened to this song like fifty or sixty times over the past three days. Probably more. And I think what makes it so powerful is that it’s not actually about unwed fathers. I know it makes you think that, but then you get to that third verse and you realize that this daddy isn’t really a deadbeat. “Your daddy never meant to hurt you ever. He just don’t live here, but you’ve got his eyes.” That isn’t what we really thought of when we thought “unwed father.” This isn’t a song about how bad unwed fathers are and how we should hate them because they don’t have to suffer any of the consequences of getting their girlfriends pregnant. It’s not really about that at all. It’s not really about how bad unwed fathers are. It’s actually about what it’s like being one.

“Unwed Fathers” is about how we as a people don’t really know how to deal with real life, with life as it’s handed to us, with life that’s real, with life that’s full of addiction and PTSD and third-shift jobs and school

shootings and dysfunctional politics and even just bad backs and not making foul shots...

“Unwed Fathers” is about how we live in a world that can’t make sense of unwed mothers and unwed fathers. It’s about how we don’t even know what to do with their children, so we shove them off where they can’t be found. We don’t want to have to deal with them. “From a teenage lover, to an unwed mother//Kept undercover, like some bad dream.” Like some bad dream. That’s intense. That’s maybe too intense. This song isn’t about how terrible a deadbeat dad is. It’s not really ragging on deadbeat dads at all. It’s about what it’s like being a deadbeat dad because you live in a world that doesn’t allow you even to exist. If you caught the beginning of that clip, Prine talks about how he wrote this song about those people “you can’t spot real easy on the street.” Think about that. Here are all these unwed fathers, walking right next to us, and we don’t even know it because we don’t *want* to know it. They’re “unwed fathers.” They don’t fit our view of the world – all nice and clean and neat. “Your daddy never meant to hurt you ever. He just don’t live here.” That’s us. That’s what the song wants us to do. It wants us to picture ourselves as all those unwed fathers out there. It wants us to feel what it’s like to be told you can’t see your kid because everyone has to hide their dirty laundry. Say “goodbye.” Your girl has to get back on that bus – all alone in some grey town – after she’s just given birth to your kid, but she doesn’t get to come back home. She *can’t* come back home. She’s not allowed. Because she’s some bad dream. And you’re the leftover nightmare.

I wanted you to listen to this song because I think that to make sense of this thing we call faith we need to remember life as it really is. I want us

for just a few minutes to bring down the protective walls we always put up – the walls that protect us from the reality of the real world. I want us to imagine ourselves as that unwed father or that unwed mother or even as that little baby boy that doesn't have a daddy because his dad is free to run like water through a mountain stream but not here, not here with his son. Because if we can't do that, if we don't do that, then we can't really make sense of *why* we should trust God in the first place, much less why we should trust *this* God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. Because this world that we live in – with all its unwed fathers and unwed mothers and little baby boys with no daddies – this, this world of ours is *that* God's world, too. And when we say that we trust in this God, when we say that we have confidence in him, when we say we believe that he's on our side, that he's for us and not against us, we're saying all of that while standing smack dab in the middle of a world of unwed fathers and unwed mothers and little baby boys with no daddies. And if we can't make sense of why we should trust the creator of *this* kind of a world, then we really are the most to be pitied.

Psalm 22, what was in that first video we played today – Psalm 22 is all about *this* kind of world, except that the passage for today started in the middle of the psalm, when things had already started to get better. But, if you go back to the actual beginning of the psalm, you hear something different. Some of you might find it familiar: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me? Can you not see all my pain? Come on, God!” the psalmist yells. “I've cried out all day, and you've said nothing. I've cried all night, and you've given me no peace!”

Out of all the psalms in the Bible, Psalm 22 is the one that the New Testament's authors seemed to have liked the most. It's quoted all the time. The most well known, of course, is when Jesus says it hanging up there on the cross, about to die: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I remember having a real problem with Jesus saying this. How could God forsake himself? If Jesus is supposed to be God, then what's going on here?

And then it hit me, Jesus is talking to people seeped in these psalms. This would have been like me standing up here and singing just the line, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..." Or even, "O say can you see!" You all know what's coming next. Everybody does. I don't have to keep going. You know the rest of the song. So all I have to do to get the point across is to sing that first line.

So, what's the point? Why Psalm 22? Because Psalm 22 is the story of God. It's the story of a God who has joined the ranks of all the unwed fathers and unwed mothers and little baby boys who have to live at home without their mommies and their daddies. It's the story of a God who, as the psalmist says, has been "poured out like water," whose "bones are all out of joint," whose "heart is like wax" and whose strength has all dried up. The Book of Hebrews tells us that we can trust *this* God because he has suffered through the muck and the mud just like we have.

But, more than that, we can trust this God precisely because that's what it means to be the creator of heaven and earth. In the 1700s, a guy named William Paley said we should think of God like a great watchmaker. "Suppose I find a watch on the ground," Paley said. "And suppose that somebody next to me asked why the watch was there, and not just right

there in that place, but why the watch existed at all.” “Nobody,” Paley goes on, “nobody would say that the watch must have *always* just been there, must have always just existed.” “No, what we would actually say is that there must have been, at some time and at some place, a watchmaker – someone who made the watch for the purpose of telling time; somebody who understood how it was made and who actually did make it.” “*That’s* our world,” Paley said. “That’s our universe.” “Everything about the watch that makes us think that it must have had a maker – well, all of that is also true about the whole of creation.”

I don’t like this analogy, actually. It gives us this image of God as someone who created the world and then sold it off or even just lost it on the side of the road. Whatever the case, God, the one we call the Father Almighty, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, has left. He made the world and now he’s gone. So long. See you later. Adios.

But that’s not Psalm 22. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” takes a turn in verse 21. For twenty-one and a half verses, we cry out, wondering where God is, wondering how it got to be so bad, wondering if it’s ever going to get better, wondering what the right way forward is, wondering if our family is ever going to have Christmas together again, wondering if we’re ever going to get to sleep normal hours, wondering if our kids are even going to make it through first period. “Your daddy never meant to hurt you...”

But then the dawn breaks: “From the horns of the wild oxen, you *have* rescued me.” God the Father Almighty, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, *comes*. And the psalmist can’t stop himself: “Everyone! We can trust this

God! He didn't forget us! He didn't ignore our suffering! He hasn't turned his back on us! He *has* heard our cries, and he's here! The poor *will* eat. The hungry *won't* be hungry anymore. So, let's sing, for *this* is our God!"

For a long time, Christians have read Psalm 22 as a story about Jesus. Not only does he quote the first verse of the psalm while up there on the cross, but it seems to fit his life so well that people just can't think it's only a coincidence. "Dogs have surrounded me," the psalmist says in verse sixteen. "An evil gang has come. They have pierced my hands and my feet. They look and stare at me. They've stripped me clean and have divided my garments among themselves, and they've cast lots for all of them!" Doesn't that sound just like Jesus, bloody and beaten, stripped clean by the Roman soldiers who then go and divide up his clothes?

And that's the point. When we see Jesus, we see God. But he's no watchmaker – at least not one that creates the world and then leaves, letting it roll on to wherever it will. What we say about "God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth" is intimately tied up with what we say about Jesus Christ, his only Son. That's the whole point of our other reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. God the Father Almighty has made known to us his will, his agenda, in the life and work and death and resurrection of Jesus. This is a God who didn't create just to then leave us all alone. This is a God who meets – actually, who *has met* – us personally in the very midst of real life, the one who identifies with the unwed fathers and unwed mothers and little baby boys without daddies – *this* is the Father Almighty, the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

And *this* is why we can trust this God. We can trust him because we know what he's all about. The psalmist calls it "deliverance." Paul calls it "redemption." Jesus himself calls it "love." And that's what we trust, that the God who created all of this – the God of this world of unwed fathers and unwed mothers – *this* God is still here, still working, still delivering, still redeeming, still loving – still working through the Spirit, through the Church, through us to make sure that little baby boys have more than just their fathers' eyes.

How do I know this? Because I'm marrying an unwed mother and an unwed father in May. And their son, who's got his father's eyes, is going to be living with both.