

*St. Andrews Presbyterian Church
Lament: A Service of Scripture, Reflection, and Prayer
May 31, 2020*

Opening Prayer

Psalter

Psalm 94:3-6, 14, 17-18, 22

How long, O Lord, how long shall the wicked triumph?

They bluster in their insolence; all evildoers are full of boasting.

They crush your people, O Lord, and afflict your very own.

They kill the widow and the stranger and put the orphans to death.

Yet you will not abandon your people, nor will you forsake your very own.

If the Lord had not been my help, I should soon have dwelt in the land of silence.

As often as I said, "My foot has slipped," your steadfast love, O Lord, upheld me.

The Lord has become my stronghold, my God is my rock of refuge.

Epistle Reading

1 Corinthians 12:13, 24-26

Reflection

Rev. Camille LeBron Powell

One of the drawbacks of prerecording worship during a pandemic is that by the time you all get to watch and listen who knows what might have happened. A sermon preached on Friday morning sounds tone-deaf on Sunday morning. It is not right to remain silent. If we have learned nothing else in the past days, it is clear that voices have been silenced for too long and we have been silent on the injustices for too long.

September 11th happened the morning of the first day of class in my last year of seminary. I was glad I did not have to preach the following Sunday or figure out how to be a pastor then. When I was an associate pastor for the first 11 years of my ordained ministry, I often pondered what I would preach the Sunday morning following a newsworthy event. But I just had to work those thoughts into my prayers in worship. And now I have the profound privilege of preaching most weeks and man, do I realize this is never-ending— not the preaching, but the need to respond.

The sermon is, arguably, the most significant opportunity to speak and be heard. But we preachers delude ourselves if we think that the change we desire will come because we have figured out how to perfectly rewrite the sermon Saturday night or Sunday morning. We are deluding ourselves if we think that a courageous post on twitter or sharing just the right article on Facebook will bring the change we seek. We cannot preach our way or post our way or riot our way to a more just and compassionate world. The transformation of hearts which overcomes the dark chapters of history must happen in each one of us.

The reality of the situation unfolding around us is that we don't know all the facts of how peaceful protests for justice turned into flames and destruction of property. And so, we confess that part of the story we see in front of us can't be told right now. There is much we do not know. But we do know the source of the rage. We do know why someone would want to riot. We also know that often when someone kneels in protest and to bring awareness to injustice, they are told that's not the "right" way to protest. Pastors are told that the pulpit is not the place to be "political"— and

some other day we can have a conversation about the difference between “political” and “partisan” and the “politics” of Jesus. Hollywood stars are out of line when they include “political” language in an acceptance speech at an awards show. Sports stars are told that kneeling during the anthem or wearing a t-shirt that says “I can’t breathe” during warm-ups is not an appropriate way to speak out and be heard. For more than 400 years there have been knees on the throats of black people in America.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in his 1967 speech “The Other America” said, “A riot is the language of the unheard.” We’ve seen this quote all over the place in the last few days and people have tried to speculate and judge what Dr. King would say about what’s going on now.

Listen to what he did say:

“... I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so, in a real sense our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention.”

He said, “A riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?” What have we failed to hear? The protests are happening because we have failed to hear our siblings’ voices and their cries for help. We can’t hear them because our knees are on their throats.

They can’t breathe.

Breath is life. In creation God spoke the world into being. And then, God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life. (Genesis 2:7) When the state executed Christ, our Savior was lynched in an especially cruel way— a way that led to suffocation. As the gospel of Matthew says, “Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.” (Matthew 27:50) And today, on Pentecost, we remember that God’s Spirit blew through the community like a mighty wind, breathing life into the body of Christ, the church.

The American writer and civil rights activist, James Weldon Johnson renders a poetic account of the origin of humanity and offers that breath is what makes us living creatures.

“This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;
Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.”

God blew God’s breath into a lump of clay formed in God’s own image. On May 25, 2020 a police officer denied that same breath to Mr. George Floyd who (though formed in God’s own image) lay on the ground like a lump of clay. How is it that one human can so callously undo that which God has done? My gut tells me it’s fear that makes us do these things.

Walter Brueggemann writes about the fear that is gripping our nation and world right now. He says:

“Our society is now occupied by perfect fear:
The virus lands us in fear;
The disabled economy leaves us in fear;
Elementally we may be fearful that the old familiar which is precious to us is evaporating before our very eyes. The old certitudes don’t count for much.
Fear mongering has become a political strategy, because frightened people are easier to manipulate.
And of course there is always the old fear of the other, fear of everyone who is unlike us, fear of people of color.
Fear makes love impossible. Love moves us toward the other; fear draws us away from the other. Fear turns to anger under threat. Fear turns to hate; fear easily morphs to violence. Anger, hate, violence are forms of fear that we imagine will make us safe.”

Killer Mike, Atlanta artist and activist, said through tears to our community on Friday night, “I woke up wanting to see the world burn down yesterday because I’m tired of seeing black men die... [but, he added] We don’t want to see Targets burning. We want to see the system that sets up for systemic racism burnt to the ground.”

May the fires of uprising give way to the fires of God’s Spirit at work among us. This is what Mary sang about as she carried Christ in her womb, the message we sing in the Cantic of the Turning:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears,
For the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn.

Amen.

Litany of Lament

The apostle Paul tells us that, “the body is one and has many members” (1 Cor 12:12) and so it is with the church. Though we are many, we are one body in Christ. He goes on to tell us that we are blessed with different purposes and talents. We are different, but we need each one of us. And so, he says, “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor 12:26). Today we grieve –

The body of Christ has the coronavirus.

Lord, hear our prayer – this new disease has ripped through our land and torn us apart from one another. It has left some who suffer alone, afraid, and overwhelmed by wires and tubes and machines to fight for your gift of life. We lift our voices in mourning the more than 100,000 lives lost in our nation and the more than 365,000 who have died globally. Such numbers are too terrible for us to grasp, loving God – such sorrow too much to bear. Enfold us in your loving arms and teach our hearts to heal.

The body of Christ is infected with racism.

Lord, hear our prayer – you taught us to be one body, one people, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and yet there are those who would abuse and attack and vilify so many who you call our brothers and sisters. Come, Holy Spirit, root this hatred and ignorance out of every heart. Come, Holy Spirit,

lead us in the path of righteousness and justice. Do not let us turn a blind eye, dismiss, or deny that people still hate people and harm people. Teach us to listen and learn, to grow and to do the real work of healing the body together.

The body of Christ is our salvation.

Lord, hear our prayer – you are the one who redeems us, who rescues us and prepares us for eternal life. You laid down your life for us so that we would lay down our lives for each other. Being saved isn't about me – it is about us, reconciled in the body to God and to one another. We hear you speaking in every cry of grief. We hear you speaking in every call for hope. We hear you speaking in every act of love and grace.

We are the body of Christ. Come Holy Spirit. Come!

A Prayer in a Time of Anger, Unrest and Injustice [Adapted from prayer by Slats Toole]

Holy One, whose Spirit is poured out upon all flesh, whose children you empower to prophesy, whose youth see visions and whose elders dream dreams, we cry out to you with a loud “Hosanna!” Where else shall we go, O Savior? All else has failed us. You alone have the words of eternal life.

You came that we might have life more abundantly, but that abundance eludes too many of us, O God, and hate and bigotry are ever present. Our news cycles are filled with despair. Our hearts ache as we wade through a global pandemic, reaching grim milestone after grim milestone. But even as we navigate a new threat, old ones still linger. Communities of color bear the uneven weight of a new disease, yet we see that racialized violence and the systemic injustice undergirding it have by no means given way to the demands of a pandemic. We speak some of the most recent names: Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Tony McDade. We add them to the litany already in our macabre collection: Aiyana and Emmett, Eric and Sandra, Jordan and Rekia, Trayvon, Atatiana and Tamir, and the myriad others in far too long a list. This great cloud has witnessed persistent injustice and our perseverance in the face of it. Yet, how can they rest when so many keep joining their ranks?

We are slow to confront our complicity and investment in white supremacy and dominance. We live in a world in which Indigenous, Black and Brown siblings are expected and compelled to offer forgiveness at a discount. Far too often, life continues as if nothing has happened while our gaping wounds are still open. When the cheeks are turned, they are met with another hand to the face, gun to the head – or knee to the throat. Forgiveness is too infrequently met with repentance. This, O God, we name as sin. It is our sin. Many of us lament and strive against that sin. Help and empower us to continue that work with diligence and faith. Too many of us still waver and are unconvinced that there is a problem. Remove our hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh that are softened toward our siblings. Help us to reckon not only with our personal failings, but also with our institutional history and the ways the church has helped to create systems of inequity. By your Spirit, help us to corporately live into our creeds and confessions and provide sanctuary for all God's children. When we say that “that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” [The Belhar Confession] and that “the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination,” [The Confession of 1967] help us to truly mean it.

We humble ourselves and cry out to you in the hope that you will hear us and heal us. We lift the communities of Louisville, Minneapolis, Georgia's Glynn County and all where racialized

violence has occurred and unrest has been stirred. Holy God, we recall the words of our ancestor Dr. King, who reminded us that “a riot is the language of the unheard.” Open our hearts, minds and understanding to your movement in the margins, so that when your people speak, they are indeed heard, and when they tell the truth about your deeds of power, they are not dismissed as something other than sober and of a clear mind. In this way, let the fires of uprising give way to the fires of your Spirit, where your people hear the Good News of your kin-dom, hear it with joy, and make haste to take part in it. Let us release our attachment to our current world order and walk bravely into the world you’ve intended for us, even and especially when it costs us something. We are mindful that, as the Rev. Dr. Cornel West states, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

Lord, hear the prayers we lift up to you now...

A Time for Silent Prayer

There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord,
for you to reveal yourself to us.
There is a longing in our hearts for love
we only find in you, our God.

For justice, for freedom, for mercy:
hear our prayer.
In sorrow, in grief:
be near; hear our prayer, O God.

There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord,
for you to reveal yourself to us.
There is a longing in our hearts for love
we only find in you, our God.

[From the hymn *There Is a Longing in Our Hearts* by Anne Quigley]

Your kin-dom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus is still Lord. To the one and only God, our Divine Parent, Jesus, our Gracious Sibling and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Benediction