

**“How Long, O Lord?”**

**Psalm 13, Matthew 10:40-42**

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**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**

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### **Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Our Gospel lesson this morning comes at the end of some very long instructions from Jesus to his disciples before he sends them out on a mission. After warning them that they may not be warmly welcomed every place they travel, that they may not be invited into every household they visit, he tells them that he is sending them out as “sheep into the midst of wolves.” Which may not be exactly what you want to hear at moments like this!

I doubt then that it would have been much comfort to hear Jesus say, “but have no fear. . . . you are of more value than many sparrows.” Especially since he follows that up with the part of the text that was our lesson last week about not coming to bring peace but a sword, man against his father, daughter against her mother, and on down through the family line.

But after all the dire warnings, it must have been a relief to hear Jesus say that whoever welcomes them in his name welcomes the one who sent him and there is a reward even for the simplest act of hospitality, for offering even a cup of cold water to those who thirst.

In the ancient world, given the distance that people traveled and the hardships encountered along the way, hospitality deeply was ingrained in the culture. Beginning with Abraham dozing under the oaks at Mamre and the arrival of his unexpected visitors, hospitality was part of the DNA of the community, as it has been historically for most congregations.

The same was true for early Christian communities. You remember it is in Paul’s letter to the Hebrews that people were reminded to show hospitality because they might indeed be entertaining angels. And in Acts, we read that the early deacons practiced hospitality throughout the community, caring for those in need, not unlike the deacons in our own tradition.

Rarely were the visitors part of one’s family. After all, you were probably living with your entire family instead of packing up the kids and the camels for a cross-country summer vacation to see the relatives. The travelers who stopped for the night were usually strangers; they were often foreigners, people who ate different food, wore different clothes, had different customs, spoke different languages, worshipped different gods.

Opening one’s home was risky business. But it was what they believed God expected of them, because that kind of welcoming hospitality was part of the character of their God, and hospitality was a measure of the Hebrew community’s faithfulness to God.

We would probably consider that kind of hospitality foolish, possibly even dangerous. Few of us would open our door to a stranger, much less invite them for dinner and offer the spare bedroom for the night. One writer reminds us that, “Just as the human need for hospitality is a constant, so, it seems, is the human fear of the stranger,” too often the stranger being anyone who doesn’t look like us or think like us or act like us.

In thinking about how faith communities offer hospitality, how we welcome people, I went back to some reading about the Rule of St. Benedict. You couldn’t have a better starting place for hospitality, perhaps because no one does hospitality better than the Benedictines, who for fifteen centuries have demonstrated what it means to welcome Christ and entertain angels.

David Robinson is a Presbyterian pastor who has written about living the Rule of St. Benedict, and says this: “One of the most revolutionary sentences in all Western civilization since the canonization of the Scriptures may be found in ‘The Rule of St. Benedict,’ It is this: *All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*” Robinson claims that this particular part of the rule, “has revolutionized my approach to ‘visitors’ – on Sunday mornings at worship, at my front door, in our village. How many opportunities am I missing every day to spend time with Christ in the life of a stranger?”

He goes on, “Since I encountered the Benedictine spirituality of Christ-centered hospitality, I’ve adopted a more open-hearted, adventurous approach to guests and visitors. . . . Benedict lived in a time of overwhelming societal distress and upheaval, yet he called his monks to take the risk and welcome the stranger as Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

In this present moment of overwhelming societal distress and upheaval, the world doesn’t seem like a very welcoming place. We have all been isolated for months from people and places and activities that we counted on for support and enjoyment, that provided intellectual challenges and filled emotional needs. For all of the creative ways we’ve found to get through this wilderness, and you know there have been many if you dip into any social media at all; for all the ways that we have found to cope with unexpected isolation, it’s not the same. And most likely will never be the same again. We are already living in a very different world.

And we are grieving those losses. We are asking, “How long, O Lord?” How long until we are able to welcome out of town visitors or even meet friends for lunch? How long until we can hug our grandchildren instead of kissing them on the tops of their heads while we’re wearing masks? How long until we can gather in this sanctuary to worship and sing, to greet one another in the Kirk Parlour? How long until we can celebrate the lives and mourn the loss of those who have passed away? How long, O Lord?

While nothing about the arrival of this virus was unforeseeable given the early indicators, nothing could have fully prepared us for the devastation of a global pandemic. The numbers are

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<sup>1</sup> David Robinson, “Monastic Gifts, Cloister Flowers: Benedictine Spirituality for Presbyterians,” *Hungryhearts*, Fall 2000.

staggering and continue to rise in many parts of the country and the world. Almost nine million people worldwide have been infected, nearly a half-million have died. In the United States, 2.2 million people have contracted the disease, and upwards of 120,000 have died, with current estimates for future infection rates even higher. Economic collapse has swept away more than 40 million American jobs, creating the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup>

But it's not about the numbers. It's about the people who count those numbered among their parents, spouses, children, friends, colleagues. We grieve for lives lost, for families broken by the virus. We know they are all of more value than many sparrows. We weep for those who were never able to say goodbye at the bedside of a loved one, those still waiting for the day when they can say goodbye at the graveside and be surrounded and comforted knowing that the final resting place is near to the heart of God.

Perhaps, as one commentator noted, what we need right now is to recover the biblical tradition of lament. "Lament is what happens when people ask "why?" and don't get an answer. It's where we get to when we move beyond our self-centered worry about our sins and failings and look more broadly at the suffering of the world."<sup>3</sup>

Lament is the very public witness of intense personal grief. It allows for the unbearable sadness out of which it is written, while at the same time, it speaks for the community, naming their grief and pain. In his book about David entitled *Leap Over A Wall*" the late Eugene Peterson wrote this about lament: "Lament isn't an animal wail, an inarticulate howl. Lament notices and attends, savors and delights – details, images, relationships. Pain entered into, accepted, and owned can become poetry. It's no less pain but it's no longer ugly. Poetry is our most personal use of words; it's our way of entering experience, inhabiting it as our home, and not just watching it happen to us."<sup>4</sup>

We can choose to be alone in our grief, but "the church (has always) offered one of the few places where we can lament, where we can express our disappointments to God in the presence of a loving community."<sup>5</sup> And sadly, that loving community isn't available in the ways that we have counted on for so long.

We all miss the personal touch of a pastoral visit, the fellowship on a Sunday morning, the peaceful beauty of this sanctuary and the glorious music that has nourished our souls for decades. We are lamenting the very things that have always allowed us to grieve and to share our grief with each other.

The thirteenth Psalm, our Psalm for today, doesn't come up in our common lectionary very often. By some quirk of fate, the timing is remarkable given what we're living with at the moment. It

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<sup>2</sup> Reggie Ugwu, *Bad Things Happen. Accepting It Is Good*, New York Times, June 18, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Jamie Howland, *How Long, O Lord?* St. Benedict's Table, April 5, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Carla Wilks, *How Long? Renouncing Evil*, Mount Seymour United Church, January 26, 2020.

is designated as a Psalm of David, and it reflects the anguish of a person who has had their old way of life torn away and is not able to see a way forward.

It is a Psalm for all of us who face an unsettling medical diagnosis, those of us who have lost a loved one or friend to the Coronavirus or other terminal illness, those who are recovering from this dreadful virus, those who are facing long-term unemployment and having to decide between paying rent or buying groceries. It is a very personal lament that speaks of the terrible hurt and anger and depression that can overwhelm any one of us, at any time.

In this Psalm there are enemies, “How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” And enemies that will surely prevail without God’s help. “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God . . . or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed.’”

One commentator has written this, “We have no identifiable personal enemy in this time of pandemic, but rather an impersonal adversary . . . that is particularly threatening to those who are weakened or compromised by age or by pre-existing conditions.”

He goes on to say, “It is also particularly fierce for people whose health is compromised through conditions of poverty,” which, not surprisingly, includes those populations that have been consistently marginalized. For the most part, COVID-19 is erratic and unpredictable, but it is not an equal opportunity virus when it comes to response.

And here is where we hear the other voices of lament today. It is no secret – and should be no surprise – that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected the Black population both in urban centers and rural areas. It has spread through city neighborhoods and outlying reservations of Native People where health care is minimal at best and underlying health conditions are rampant. It has flourished in areas where an immigrant population is living in sub-standard housing, struggling with food insecurity, and fearful of medical care for reasons of their own safety and security.

It is unfairly targeting those who cannot afford to miss work and who rely on public transportation. Those who make it possible for the rest of us to shelter safely in place because they’re still stocking shelves in the grocery stores and delivering mail and standing on the frontlines of medical care risking their health and safety.

On Memorial Day, those other voices of lament grew louder when the sweeping pandemic of systemic racism exploded in our faces on the corner of 38<sup>th</sup> and Chicago in Minneapolis. Following the death of George Floyd, it didn’t take long for it to spread across the globe. In the aftermath of the violence, the streets were filled with the lament of four hundred years of violence and anger, four hundred years of heartbreak and anguish and grief. How long, O Lord, must we bear this broken world?

Make no mistake, the protests that continue are an ongoing lament. A lament that we all need to hear, that we dare not close our ears to any longer. It is a lament that should make us

uncomfortable knowing that just offering our prayers of support or sympathy will not change systems and policies that have been in place for generations.

The one thing our prayers can change is ourselves, so yes, of course, we will continue to pray for a change of heart and an open mind and the courage to act on what we've learned. The rest we have to work for. And it will not be easy. But then, it never has been. It's just been easier not to hear the lament. God willing, we will hear it now.

How do we offer a cup of cold water in times such as these? How can we offer hospitality when we are not able to be the church in all the ways that we've become accustomed? In all the ways of being the church that are comfortable and second nature to many of us? Where do we begin? Well, maybe we need to trust that God is sending us to places that make us uneasy and uncomfortable for a reason, to places where we have to relinquish our comfort and our complacency in order to realign our priorities, to take a risk.

Maybe God is asking us to set aside everything we think we know about the pain and humiliation and violence of racism and just listen. Offer a cup of cold water by listening to the people who live with it every single day. Listen without interruption, listen without judgment, listen with open hearts, listen to learn – not to teach or preach or give advice. Offer a cup of cold water by reading one of the multitude of resources or participating in one of the anti-racism activities that are available online. We all still have much to learn.

In a sermon given on this Psalm at the Duke University Chapel earlier this month, Rev. Bruce Puckett ended his sermon with these words: "So as I close this morning, I invite you now to lament with me. I encourage you to lament today for lives lost. Lament for people's humanity being pitted against each other. Lament that the world isn't right. Lament the pandemic. Lament racial injustice. Lament partisan politics. Lament that in our country black lives have not mattered the same as white lives. Lament Xenophobia. Lament hatred of all kinds. Lament that justice is not served. Lament the absence of love between neighbors. Lament whatever you recognize needs lamenting."<sup>6</sup>

And then remember to pray the last lines of the thirteenth Psalm: "But I trusted in your steadfast love, my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because God has dealt bountifully with me."

Whatever our circumstances at this moment, wherever we stand listening to these voices begging for justice, wherever we hear that ongoing lament, remember that truly God has dealt bountifully with us. So give thanks for that abundance and offer a cup of cold water to those whose lament has gone unheard far too long. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Puckett, *Learning Lament*, Duke University Chapel, June 7, 2020.