

Song/Prayer

O God who made our heart and ears,
we listen care'fly as you come near,
to hear your voice in many ways,
and live your word throughout our days

I.

Back about 10 years ago, the journalist Lillia Callum-Penso wrote an article for the Greenville News about OJ's Diner. OJ's is my favorite restaurant in Greenville for Soul Food. Do you know what I mean when I say 'Soul Food.' I think of it as the fried catfish I ordered when Don Austin and I went to lunch at OJ's a few weeks ago, catfish seasoned and fried to perfection that crunched with each bite I took and touched my tastebuds with the most tender, tasty meat I've ever tasted. I think of the collard greens boiled to perfection to where the taste of the greens was perfectly matched with the sourness of the vinegar that came from an old fashioned glass bottle that I sprinkled on top of them. I think of the macaroni and cheese so classic, custardy and creamy it hung on to the fork and from my mouth in strings as I savored each bite. All topped off with sweet tea that could've been used as syrup on my Sunday pancakes.

Mmm mmm.

Don, meet me in the parking lot at 1 PM. I'm ready to go back!

Yes, the food at Oj's certainly gives it soul.

But something else gives OJ's soul, too.

“The diner attracts a wide swath of the community. Here, people of all races, all cultures, all backgrounds gather in the name of good food,” writes Callum-Penso.

That is so true. Don and I were a black man and a white man sitting at a formica table together eating and telling stories and laughing and preparing to help an octogenarian black woman visit an octogenarian white woman in an assisted living facility in the Deep South.

And we were sitting in the midst of a mixed race, mixed class, mixed politics, mixed religion kind of place while we were doing it.

That is the upside-down kingdom of God at work.

That is Soul Food.

That is the Soul Food we want to talk about this morning.

The 4 C’s that make up that kind of Soul Food are -

Compassion - together with neighbors asking the question, “How can we work to tear down walls that keep people apart and build tables that bring them together, especially people who are on the margins.

Commitment - together with neighbors making the promise to have a preferential option for the poor

Creativity - together with neighbors accepting and affirming each others uniqueness that helps make the world a more human and a better place for everybody

Community - together with neighbors 'being with' each other and knowing we are not alone

Those are the ingredients for the kind of Soul Food we're talking about.

II.

In his book Soul Pancake, Rainn Wilson, who portrayed Dwight Schrute on the television series The Office, points out that we are not "human beings in search of a spiritual experience." We are "spiritual beings in search of a human experience."

And boy do we find a human experience in our topic and text in today's sermon.

The topic is "Soul Food: Hope and Suffering."

Our text is Lamentations 3:21-26.

The Hebrew title for the Book of Lamentations is Seper 'Ēkāh, which means The Book of How

It is a book of poems that leads us by the hand and heart and provides us the space and the "how to" to lament.

Let me stop here and say how deeply meaningful it is to me to see that the Book of Lamentations is a poem - the first four chapters are acrostic poems, with each line beginning with the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet and each successive line beginning with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The last chapter is not an acrostic poem. It is an alphabet poem, for it contains 22 lines and that is how many letters are in the Hebrew alphabet.

Why did the writer use the structure and language of poetry to write this lament, this human experience? Was it an attempt to bring order to the chaos. What is a search for the language of the heart, the language that poets try to speak? I wonder. Since I myself am a poet, I hear these words with the ear of my heart and hold them deeply.

There is one voice we will not hear in this book of poems.

That voice is God's voice.

God simply stands beside us in this book and lets us cry.

Suffering is a human experience.

In the Book of Lamentations, we find people suffering, discovering them in the depths of hate, injury, fear, despair, shadows, and sadness.

The time is the 6th Century BCE.

The place is Jerusalem in the land of Judah.

The catastrophe and chaos is this - The Babylonians have razed the city, burned Solomon's Temple to the ground, and exiled the people into the outer realms of the empire.

With this catastrophe and chaos came all of the scourges of war.

Death and injury; displacement; disease; psychological trauma; economic collapse; loss of property and livelihoods; social disruption; destruction of infrastructure; environmental degradation; cycle of violence; political instability; and difficulty in recovery.

And with this catastrophe and chaos came a collapse of a belief system, for in the old way of thinking, if your land was conquered by an invading army, it meant that your god was weaker than your enemies god/s and was conquered by them.

How painful it is when a belief system collapses.

It is in the middle of this catastrophe that we find Jeremiah and his lamentations.

If you want to see how Jeremiah might have looked in this moment, reflect on a painting done by Horace Vernet circa 1844 titled "Jeremiah on the Ruins of Jerusalem." Look for a while at Jeremiah's face in the painting and see his suffering. One of my unhoused friends, Henry, shared this painting with me as we talked about this sermon for today.

If you want to hear how Jeremiah might have sounded in this moment, reflect on the cries in the verses before the text we read today and hear his suffering.

"...turned me into a skeleton of skin and bones, then broke the bones"

"...locked me up in deep darkness like a corpse nailed inside in a coffin"

*...ground my face into the gravel, pounded me into the mud"

"...gave up on life all together, forgotten what the good life is like"

This is what suffering looks like.

This is what lamenting sounds like.

Our Jewish neighbors read these words, this poem of lamentations, during the holiday Tisha B'Av to lament the destruction of both the first and second Temples by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and then by the Romans in 70 CE.

And less we think this human experience is relegated to all of those centuries ago, listen to this story two of our unhoused friends told me in the mercy center this week -

AMANDA and FRANK'S STORY

Living on the street, it's hard to relax enough to rest and sleep. We're fighting the weather, and we're fighting the street (watching our belongings so no one will steal them). So it's tough when a police officer taps you with a steel toed boot and tells you to move on. When we ask, "Where do we go?" It's hard to find a new place to sleep and try to relax and rest all over again.

Listen to a poem a friend in our Oasis Writing Group gave me permission to share for this sermon -

DARYLL'S STORY

Sometimes, we as people show our anger in the wrong way.

If I close my eyes, take a moment to think, and breathe in and out, then I can calm myself down.

I do this because I am stressed over the things of the world - backpacks, having to walk everywhere, nowhere to go, trying to find somewhere just to lay down and relax, trying to find peace of mind.

What is normal?

Is it working?

I'm tired of waking up and doing it all over again.

Is living on the street and trying to find my way ever going to change?

How can I find one true love who will love me back?

How can I find one true love who loves me like God loves me?

I have heaven, no matter what.

If you are spiritually happy, you can calm down.

God sees us and sends a helping hand.

Stay strong.

Read the road.

Just stop and pray.

This is Lamentations today.

Now this is the SUFFERING part of our Soul Food sermon.

What would happen if we stopped here?

We would only be able to say with St. Francis, “Where there is despair, let me sow...”

And there would only be despair.

III.

But we don't have to stop at despair, because as Kathleen M. O'Connor teaches us in her book *Lamentations & The Tears of the World*, our read-loud text for today is the “theological heart” of the whole book of Lamentations.

Rosa Parks is one of my heroes. She is known for her act of civil disobedience on December 1, 1955, when she refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus to a white passenger as she was required to do under Jim Crow segregation law.

“People say that the reason I refused to give up my seat was because I was tired. And I was. But it wasn't the kind of tired that came from aching feet. The only tired I was, was tired of giving in,” said Rosa.

Here's something 'lots of people forget about Rosa.

When she was a little girl, she often had to suffer the injustices of Jim Crow segregation and white supremacy alone.

When she was eleven, as she was walking home from school, a boy on roller skates came zipping by and shoved her. He thought she'd be an easy target. To his surprise, she turned around and pushed him back. She knew fighting was wrong. But she didn't want him picking on her again. His mother saw what happened. She was mad Rosa had pushed him. But y'know what made the mother even madder? Rosa was black and her son was white.

"I'll have you put in jail," the mother screamed at Rosa. "You'll never get out again."

No question that was scary for Rosa.

As she and her family were red lined out of white neighborhoods, banned from eating in white restaurants, unable to use the same water fountains as white people, unable to go to white schools, so, she cried out lamentations as surely as Jeremiah did.

But here is the good news for us today.

She was not crushed by the catastrophe and chaos of Jim Crow Segregation and white supremacy. Despair was not the last word for the day.

You see, in August of 1955, Rosa attended a two-week workshop at the Highlander Folk School on implementing school desegregation and it changed her life.

Highlander had been founded in 1930 by Myles Horton as an adult organizing training school to train local leadership for social change.

Rosa had arrived at Highlander in low spirits, "tense and nervous" following years of political activity that had produced almost no change.

Spending two weeks alongside 47 others strategizing for school desegregation began to lift her spirits. She was in awe of Septima Clark, who ran the workshop, how calm and courageous she was.

She found the 4 C's of Soul Food.

She found hope.

IV.

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, there is a whale named 52 Blue. Scientists named him this because when he sings, the frequency of his whale song is around 52 Hz. When other whales like 52 Blue sing their whale songs, they sing at frequencies between 15 and 25 Hz. They can't hear his song. Because of this, he is known as the loneliest whale in the world.

Whales are communal creatures. They live their whole lives in family groups called pods. They migrate from warm waters to cold waters to find food and to give birth to their young. They follow the same migration routes together year after year. 52 Blue is different. He lives alone. He doesn't follow a predictable path. He wanders the ocean, a wandering whale.

Suffering I can lead to the very depths of despair when it is done alone.

Poor 52 Blue.

After the NYT wrote a story about 52 Blue, thousands of people wrote in to say how much they identified with the world's loneliest whale because they were lonely, too.

When they found each other through 52 Blues story, they began to write songs about him, paint pictures of him, and even write poems about him.

They made community out of loneliness.

They found the 4 C's of Soul Food.

They found hope.

I wrote this Fibonacci poem for 52 Blue. If you're interested in learning about him, you can follow Lonely Whale on Twitter @lonelywhale and you can read a wonderful piece titled 52 Blue by the great writer Leslie Jamison in The Atavist Magazine here - <https://magazine.atavist.com/52-blue>

52 Blue

whale

song

singing

where are you?

wandering, singing

singing an unheard wan'dring song

can you hear me? are you there? are you?

i am alone

list'ning, longing for a song gently sung

i hear you, words on water, i'm here,
i'm here

we sing at diff'rent frequencies
migrate along diff'rent routes
wandering, wondering

unheard, unknown,
wandering the sea
words on water

singing an unheard won'dring song
wondering, singing
who are you?
singing
song
whale

V.

Mary Gauthier, one of my favorite singer/songwriter, who grew up hard in Louisiana, wrote a song called "Mercy Now."

Darby Wilcox sang it before here at Triune.

I consider it Triune's Theme song.

Isn't it true?

We can all use a little mercy now.

I was thinking about that song for this sermon and thought, "You know, we could use a little hope now, too."

So I took the liberty to change the word mercy for hope for today and make the title of the song "Hope Now."

Listen to it as such and see if it resonates with your heart as it does with mine.

My Church and my Country could use a little mercy (hope) now

As they sink into a poisoned pit

That's going to take forever to climb out

They carry the weight of the faithful

Who follow 'em down

I love my Church and Country and they could use some mercy (hope) now

Every living thing could use a little mercy (hope) now

Only the hand of grace can end the race

Towards another mushroom cloud

People in power, well

They'll do anything to keep their crown

I love life, and life itself could use some mercy (hope) now

Yea, we all could use a little mercy (hope) now

I know we don't deserve it

But we need it anyhow

We hang in the balance

Dangle 'tween hell and hallowed ground

Every single one of us could use some mercy (hope) now

Every single one of us could use some mercy (hope) now

Every single one of us could use some mercy (hope) now

Yes, every single one of us could use some hope now.

So in the midst of all of the chaos and catastrophe, we quietly hope.

And we loudly hope.

We are tethered to each other in the upside kingdom of God, in the Beloved Community, to buoy each other in a time of suffering.

TOGETHER

We sit together.

TOGETHER.

We stand together.

TOGETHER.

We walk together.

TOGETHER.

We work together.

TOGETHER.

We live out Compassion, Commitment, Creativity and Community.

TOGETHER.

We work our hearts out to house unhoused people.

TOGETHER.

We help people put food on their tables.

TOGETHER.

We lead people to rehab.

TOGETHER.

We build tables and not walls for everybody - no matter the color of their skin, the country of their origin, the status of their papers, who they love, which bathroom they use, how much money they make, how many years they spent in school.

TOGETHER.

Where there is despair, we are sowing hope.

We are being hope.

We are doing hope.

In the midst of suffering.

And that, beloved community, is the Gospel.

Amen.