

Sermon

New England Synod Worship Available for Fall 2020

Texts: Psalm 38, 2 Corinthians 4:8-12, Luke 18:1-8

The following sermon is a transcription of an unscripted dialogue between Jeanette Harris, Licensed Lay Minister at Genesis in Bridgeport, CT, and Cross of Christ in Waterbury, CT and Pr. Steven Wilco, Associate to the Bishop.

Jeanette [singing]:

Steal away, steal away,

steal away to Jesus!

Steal away, steal away home;

I ain't got long to stay here.

[Humming continues...]

Steven [reading psalm 38]:

¹O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger;
do not punish me in your wrath.

²For your arrows have already pierced me,
and your hand presses hard upon me.

³There is no health in my flesh, because of your indignation;
there is no soundness in my body, because of my sin.

⁴For my iniquities overwhelm me;
like a heavy burden they are too much for me to bear.

⁵My wounds stink and fester
by reason of my foolishness.

⁶I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
I go about in mourning all the day long.

⁷My loins are filled with searing pain;
there is no health in my body.

⁸I am utterly numb and crushed;
I wail, because of the groaning of my heart.

⁹O Lord, you know all my desires,
and my sighing is not hidden from you.

¹⁰My heart is pounding, my strength has failed me,
and the brightness of my eyes is gone from me.

¹¹My friends and companions draw back from my affliction;
my neighbors stand afar off.

¹²Those who seek after my life lay snares for me;
those who strive to hurt me speak of my ruin and plot treachery all the day long.

¹³But I am like the deaf who do not hear,

like those who are mute and do not open their mouth.
14I have become like one who does not hear
and from whose mouth comes no defense.
15For in you, O Lord, have I fixed my hope;
you will answer me, O Lord my God.
16For I said, "Do not let them rejoice at my expense,
those who gloat over me when my foot slips."
17Truly, I am on the verge of falling,
and my pain is always with me.
18For I admit my iniquity
and am deeply troubled over my sinfulness.
19Many are those who are my mortal enemies,
and numerous are those liars who hate me.
20They repay evil for good;
they accuse me, though I pursue what is right.
21O Lord, do not forsake me;
be not far from me, O my God.
22Make haste to help me,
O Lord of my salvation.

Jeanette [Singing]:

*...Steal away home;
I ain't got long to stay here.*

A psalm written so many years ago, but how appropriate is it for our time!

Steven:

I hear so much depth of emotion not just in your beautiful singing, but in the words of that spiritual and the words of the psalm to name the deep pain and the deep loss and the sense of hopelessness at times, the sense of disconnection from God. I know that I have felt that in these months especially and at other times in my life and as I talk to others, I know that so many have been experiencing that feeling.

Jeanette:

And it's a feeling that you can't just brush off. You can't just say, "Okay I'll feel better tomorrow." I know there have been times when the day has been pressing on me and I end up saying, "You know what? All I need is a good night's sleep." I often just say, "Okay, whatever took place today, I'm leaving it in yesterday and looking for a better morning and a better tomorrow." In so many instances we have to push through what we're feeling – the grieving the sorrow, the sadness the disappointment, the shock, all of those things. It's almost as if someone slaps you

and you have to ask, “Did that really happen? Is that really happening? Are they slapping me again? And again? And again?”

And here is this psalm that is crying out from the depths and I think sometimes all that is needed is for someone to hear that, and not say “Oh you’ll be alright.” Or “Have a good meal, go to sleep.” Or “go on vacation” even. “All will be better when you have some rest.” And you think, “Gee, maybe that’s what I need to do?!” But then you remember that in these times going somewhere is even questionable. So it’s almost like as David is talking, how he feels in this psalm expresses the depth of grief that so many people are experiencing even now.

I think we can consider ourselves so extremely blessed in so many ways, but I think that blessing requires us to not just hold it to ourselves, but to walk alongside any of those who are experiencing any problems, any situations, any challenges. The scripture says we should weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice. In the time of weeping is a time just to come alongside, and sometimes that coming alongside is just your presence being there or just the acknowledgement in saying “I may not totally understand, but I certainly stand with you. I stand with you in prayerful agreement that this valley of the shadow of death, this experience will be one that you’ll be able to get through it. And when you’re through it you’ll know that I’ve been there alongside you.”

It reminds me of that story about the footprints. When they see the footprints in the sand and they say “God I know that you are with me but there’s a time when things were really rough and there’s only one set of footprints.” And the response is, “That’s the time I carried you.” So I think there are times we need to be carried, and that carrying can be done by our sisters and brothers in the family of God.

Steven:

Absolutely! What strikes me in what you’re saying is the power of just naming the pain and the grief and having it heard and at times having it echoed. Saying “I have heard that you said this. I believe you. I am with you. I’m going to say it with you.”

As we were talking about and getting ready for this sermon you, Jeanette, really challenged me to name the lament. Because I was feeling some reluctance to really go there and name it. I think we really have, always, a depth of pain in our world that most of us can only imagine. Right now we are so aware of it in different ways.

It’s the pandemic – all the things we’ve lost and continue to lose day after day to this global pandemic. The way in which it has affected people in our communities and some communities more than others.

We’ve been especially aware of the systemic racism that has been a part of our society and our world for...forever, and needing to name that and walk together toward something new.

As the fires burn in the west, I think about all the people who are struggling through that and naming that we are watching and working with them and thinking about climate change.

And then on top of all that each of us has all the losses, all the things that come in our own individual lives that are missed by the news but really are huge to each one of us. It's so much pain. It can overwhelm us. And I wonder if that's why we're sometimes afraid to go there. Sometimes that's why *I'm* afraid to go there. What if we get stuck there? What if we can't get out of that?

Jeanette:

I remember the words that Jesus says so often: "Fear not!"

Steven, as you were talking about the losses, I was thinking about the losses we haven't even realized we've lost. Because the gifts we have as members of the body of Christ to share with one another...often times we negate those gifts because of that fear. I was thinking, we're on this chat today, and we might be the answer to someone's prayer. And if we are not open enough to say ok, whatever that person is praying for, maybe they're just praying for someone to listen. Maybe they're just praying for someone to grieve along with them. Maybe they want someone to cry along with them, to let out that emotional thing that they're holding back thinking "What am I supposed to do with this?" And someone comes along and says "I really do care. I really do care."

The response might be one of anger, but it's not anger at you who wants to come alongside. It's because so many people have said for so long, "I *don't* care." And they've said that by their actions. So when someone is willing to say, "Ok, I am afraid, but I'm willing to take this step. I'm willing to reach out to my sister, my brother, to that member of God's family and put myself aside." Because whatever they may have as a gift, that I need to unpack, I want to be able to do that.

It reminds me of the scripture when – I think it was the disciples – they were together and they say, "It was good for us to have been here." And I think even in those conversations – they may be challenging. They may be the conversations that at times we want to run away from: "I don't want to have that conversation. I don't want to talk about that." But then after I say, "I'm going to do this." We step into that place and we hear and we listen and we add and we take away something that we didn't have before that conversation started.

And often times that's just a little bit of hope. And enough hope to be able to say that my hope is renewed. That's amazing. Going back to the scripture again, "Weeping may endure for a night." There are people who are crying night after night after night, and sometimes there are no more tears but they're still sorrowful. So it's so important for someone to say, "You know what, I think I need to hear more of what you're going through." And the story may be repetitive because it's been pressed down for so long – it's all these layers. And as member of the body of Christ we ought to be able to say, "You know what, my being comfortable when other

members of my family are uncomfortable – that’s not fair. That’s not what Christ is calling me to be and to do.”

I think you had a scripture that you were going to share from 2nd Corinthians?

Steven:

Yes! I was just thinking of that one.

It’s that we carry with us in our bodies the death of Jesus - and also the life of Jesus! But if we deny the death that’s part of our world and part of our lives, we are denying a part of the body of Christ whether we deny it in ourselves or in the neighbor that we’re called to walk alongside. And at the same time that scripture gives me a great sense of hope because I know in hearing it that Jesus hears us.

There are times when neighbors fail us. I know there are times *I* fail to be the neighbor, to be the person walking alongside, listening and echoing. And yet God hears. God proclaims, God speaks those things that feel to us unspeakable. And that’s a great hope to me. And at the same time it calls me to keep pushing through that fear, to keep naming it and going there, it gives me that confidence to carry forward – to keep pounding at the door until we reach that place when God sweeps us up into the new heaven and the new earth.

Jeanette:

But in the meantime, there is work that has to be done.

Steven:

Amen!

Jeanette:

There are challenges that have to be met. There are obstacles that through Christ we can overcome. And we can’t be afraid. I think if we start coming together and naming what those fears are as opposed to just saying they’re only in *my* mind only in *my* thoughts. But we’d be surprised that a lot of people are thinking the same thing. The scripture of Christ still speaks to us: “Fear not! Don’t be afraid! I am with you. I am with you.”

I don’t know...I’ve got a song that I’m hoping is filled with a little bit of hope.

Steven:

I’d like to hear it!

Jeanette:

In many respects to me it’s a song of hope. It’s a soothing song. I won’t do the whole thing, but it goes like this...

[singing]

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sinsick soul.*

*Sometimes we feel discouraged, and we think our work's in vain
But then the holy spirit revives our souls again.*

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sinsick soul.*

And I think that's healing we all need.

Steven and Jeanette:

Amen.