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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 13: 1-4; Psalm 22: 1-2, 9-11
May 31, 2020

Moral Inhabitants:
The Dangerous Memory of Suffering and the Power of Lament

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?
Psalm 13: 2

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.
Psalm 22: 1-2

This isn't the sermon I intended to preach today. But it's the one I feel compelled to preach – compelled by events, compelled by history, compelled by conscience. It shall take the form of a lament, that venerable and too often unacknowledged form of poetry and prayer found in the Psalms and the Prophets. And its refrain shall be that of the Psalmist: How long, O Lord…How long? This isn't the sermon that I intended, but sometimes circumstances insist otherwise.

Like many of you, I had been following the story in Minneapolis as it unfolded, and I had watched the bystander video of George Floyd pinned to the ground, while a uniformed man pressed his knee into Floyd's throat. Beyond the horror of the act itself, it served as an indelible image of what it is to navigate American life while black, an image that called forth other historical images of people in authority unleashing their fury upon black bodies. We all know the images. You don't need me to list them for you.

The anger was justifiably fierce in Minneapolis, but not only there. From New York to L.A., from Denver to Louisville, the streets are still in flames as we record this, as weeks, months, years, decades, and centuries of grief and torment, pain and outrage pour forth. Each city, each region, has its own grim story. In Louisville, the pain is attached to the death of Breonna Taylor, who was shot dead after police stormed her apartment. In Georgia, the pain grew from the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery, who was shot for the crime of jogging while black. The grief and torment everywhere grew from the knowledge that what happened in Minneapolis happens and has happened throughout the United States as long and longer than the country has existed. There's only so much abuse a people can take. Sooner or later under such conditions, things will erupt.

But it's not only George Floyd, or abusive authority figures. No doubt it also has something to do with the unequal and uneven effects of the coronavirus, which has ravaged black and brown communities at a rate three times greater than that within white communities. It's not that it was ever a mystery. It's not that it was ever hidden. Still, the virus has functioned as an apocalypse, which is to say, an unveiling, revealing what many people in our nation and in our world still refuse to recognize. Uneven access to health care, to a living wage, to paid leave, to adequate housing and living conditions, to

decent food, to medications, to ample space – all that conjoined to whatever stresses had already been piled upon so many lives has left far too many susceptible to the disease. Yes, more than 100,000 people have died of Covid-19 in our country, and yes it has taken the rich and the poor, the young and the old, and yes it has afflicted people of every race and background. But it's taken such a bleak toll on black and minority populations because of some rather disgusting decisions our country has made about who belongs and who does not, about which lives have value, and which do not. Add all of that to the legacy of racial violence in this country, add it to the legacy of police brutality, add it to the legacy of Jim Crow, add it all up, and the cries of pain and outrage we're witnessing right now seem not only appropriate but long overdue. How can it be, after all, that armed thugs can occupy a state capitol building in Michigan, without consequence, while a black man can be fatally shot simply by going for a run in a Georgia neighborhood? How can the first instinct of a national leader be concern for property, rather than human lives? "How can this be?" – this sustained assault upon black and brown bodies, this sustained assault upon the poor, but also upon democracy, upon justice, upon morality, upon basic, ordinary and common human decency?

How long, O Lord? How long?

As fortune would have it, I've been reading a collection of Toni Morrison's essays and speeches, entitled *The Source of Self-Regard*. Most of you know that I consider Morrison not only a great novelist, storyteller, and essayist, which of course she is. I also regard her as the preeminent American theologian of the 20th and 21st centuries. She has an uncanny ability to see beneath surfaces, to discern meaning in disparate phenomena, and to chart places within the human experience that had not previously been articulated. She confronts suffering in a way reminiscent of the Scriptures themselves, and bears witness to divine beauty where others see only carnage. In that, she is Luther's heir, a theologian of the cross, helping us to discern the hidden face of God in the wreckage of our abuse, in the calamity of our deceit, in the cries of our pain, and in the void of our confusion. Morrison tells the truth in a way theologians rarely do, which is why her voice radiates.

It's in that collection that I read an essay called "Moral Inhabitants," from which I've borrowed the title of this sermon. It was first delivered to a national gathering of Lutherans back in 1976, on the occasion of the bicentennial of the United States. It is a lament: a lament for the inability, both historic and contemporary, to imagine the life of another in all of his or her fullness, in all of his or her difference. That failure, she says, "is an intellectual flaw, a shortening of the imagination, and reveals an ignorance of gothic proportions as well as a truly laughable lack of curiosity."[1] It is a failure as recent as a knee to the throat, as old and older than, the republic itself. That moral sense, by which Morrison means not only the ability to imagine the life of another, but the pursuit of human cooperation, and of humans relating to one another in mutually constructive ways, has too often been considered a tertiary concern. When education is treated as an expenditure of time necessary to make more money, or simply to train for a career, where is one to learn how to become a moral inhabitant? It's not an easy question, nor is there an easy answer, for the very history of the United States militates against such a perspective.

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[1] Morrison, Toni, *The Source of Self Regard* (New York: Alfred Knopf Publishers, 2019), pg. 43.

To that end, Morrison asks us to consider some of the things the men of vision and power in American history have actually said.[2] Here, for example, from a letter dated December 3, 1833, is Andrew Jackson, whose visage currently adorns the oval office for all visiting dignitaries to see:

> *Indians have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race…they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere long disappear.*
>
> How long, O Lord? How long?

Here is Theodore Roosevelt, the subject of a recent adulatory biography, in a letter of 1901:

> *I entirely agree with you that as a race and in the mass the blacks are altogether inferior to the whites. I suppose that I should be ashamed to say that I take the Western view of the Indian. I don't go so far as to think that the only good Indians are the dead Indians, but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely in the case of the tenth. The most vicious cowboy has more moral principle than the average Indian.*
>
> How long, O Lord, shall my enemy triumph over me? How long?

Here is Sam Houston, who gave the city of Houston both its name and a deeply troubled history, from an 1848 speech to the US Senate:

> *The Anglo-Saxon must pervade the whole southern extremity of this vast continent…The Mexicans are no better than the Indians and I see no reason why we should not take their land.*
>
> How long must we wrestle with these thoughts, O Lord? How long?

Here is Benjamin Franklin, in 1751:

> *Why increase the Sons of Africa, by planting them in America, where we have so fair an opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red?*
>
> How long must we have this sorrow in our hearts? How long?

For the sake of completion, let us add a more recent quotation to Morrison's litany. Here is a tweet from the current resident of the Oval Office to the governor of Michigan, dated May 1st, 2020, when the aforementioned protesters armed with assault rifles and far right extremist ideologies occupied the Michigan State House:

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[2] Ibid. All quotations, save final two contemporary ones, taken from pgs. 44-46.

These are very good people, but they are angry. See them, talk to them, make a deal.

As a study in contrasts, let us also include the pronouncement from May 28th, in response to the unarmed protesters who made a public outcry following the murder of George Floyd:

When the looting starts, the shooting starts.

God help us, but how long must this last?

We might wonder at the gross double standard of those pronouncements. Armed extremists in a government building are worthy of recognition and dialogue, while unarmed citizens, pained, grieving, and outraged by yet another merciless death, are threatened with punitive violence. But should we be surprised? Such is the language, then and now, of the conquerors: unreflective, unimaginative, unconscionable. To which we can only respond with the Psalmist: how much longer? How much longer?

Where are we to turn in order to enlarge our moral imaginations? How shall we become moral inhabitants of the country, of the globe, in this pandemic moment, when cities burn? How do we train ourselves to see and imagine the lives of others, and thereafter to construct an inhabitable future? Where shall we turn to learn the language not of the conquerors, but of the conquered, the vanquished, and the afflicted?

One answer lies in the teaching of the humanities. It lies in the insistence that the arts contain invaluable insight into the vision sometimes gifted to humanity, but also to the blindness of soul and the hardness of heart with which we are so often afflicted. To read the Toni Morrisons and the Ralph Ellisons, the Alice Walkers and the Jesmyn Wards, is to learn how to think, see, speak, feel, act, write, pray, sing, legislate, eat, live, breathe, move, build, and love as those undergoing a kind of holy rehabilitation. We need the humanities more than ever right now.

But I believe another site of moral imagination can be found right here, in places like this. Religion in general, and the church in particular, at their best, are some of the preeminent places still capable of creating moral inhabitants of the earth. In part, that has to do precisely with the language of lament, preserved in the Psalms, the Prophets, and the Gospels. The lament is born from a recognition of the tragic dimension of life. It's born from a recognition of the distance between what is and what should be. The lament is the language not of the conquerors, but of those that the conquerors have too often assumed have no real perspective, or voice. The laments of the Psalms prove otherwise. They are the poetic language of the dispossessed of the earth, of those who know their value even if others do not, who speak their value even if others devalue them, and who write their value even under the threat of erasure. The language of lament, then, is the language of resistance, which dares to question intolerable treatment at the hands of others, which dares to speak truths that others would hide, which traces paths of the human soul scarcely dreamed of by men of vision and power.

The lament, then, is what the theologian Johann Baptist Metz calls "the dangerous memory of suffering."[3] That memory is dangerously liberating, disrupting a prevailing order which allows a few to flourish at the expense of the many. It is not a comforting memory, like the screen of nostalgia, but a disruptive and disturbing memory which makes a claim upon us. It is an insistent memory which will not let us settle down into comfortable complacency, a history of the vanquished that tells transgressive and liberating stories. "Every rebellion against suffering is fed by the subversive power of remembered suffering," Metz writes, which is to say, is fed by the power of lament, the power of crying "How long, O Lord, how long?" The church is a place that tells such stories, that preserves such dangerous memories, that rebels against unnecessary suffering. We do so because we know the power of lament.

But the church is also a place that knows the power of grace. Grace is without reason. It is without why. And that's good news, because no reasonable person could be optimistic when faced with such a grim history as our own. Progress, then, depends upon the unreasonable actions of unreasonable people, who, despite the evidence, trust that there does remain available such things as beauty, as decency, as goodness, as hope, as healing, as moral imagination within the world. Toni Morrison puts it this way: "If we see the world as one long brutal game, then we bump into another mystery, the mystery of beauty…Unless all ages and races of man have been deluded, there seems to be such a thing as grace, such a thing as beauty, such a thing as harmony, all wholly and freely available to us."[4]

We'll close with another lament, one that bears much in common with the Psalms, even if the expression is different. It comes from the singer Beyonce, and it belongs to the great tradition of protest songs and lamentations found in the spirituals and the blues, in jazz and R&B. The song is entitled "Freedom," from the album *Lemonade.* If you wish, you can find the lyrics included with the Order of Worship in our Virtual Meetinghouse. "Freedom, freedom, I can't move," comes the refrain. Let it be a lamentation – for George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, for Breonna Taylor and for everyone else with a knee planted on their neck. Let it be a lamentation for us all, as we shelter the dangerous memory of suffering, and as we seek to become the moral inhabitants we so wish to be.

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[3] Metz, Johann Baptist, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Crossroads, 1980), pgs. 109-115.
[4] Morrison, pg. 48.