

From Desolation to Promise

First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2021 - Psalm 25:1-9

Preached by The Rev. Mary Keenan

It's been a challenging week. Over the past 7 days, we've experienced a winter storm of historic proportions here in Texas; lost electricity, water, and other services; been more isolated than even the pandemic made us due to icy roads; and are just now thawing out enough to see how much damage has been done and how much longer the suffering will continue.

If you were planning to give anything up for Lent this year, I think you're covered. The twin traumas of a pandemic and a brutal winter storm are something that has affected all of us. I don't believe in competitive suffering. There are no winners in that game - we've all been affected in one way or another. If you are feeling anxious, exhausted, or just tired of "coping" there is a reason for it and you are not alone.

As difficult as it has been, I think we can all use some encouragement, and to that end, I want to share with you an experience I had a couple of weeks ago that is helping me power through this week and into the rest of this Lenten season

Before the storm hit us, I heard a lecture by Ruby Sales, the civil rights activist and public theologian. Ms. Sales grew up in segregated Alabama and at the age of 17 she participated in the Selma marches and started registering voters. In the summer of 1965, still only 17 years old, she and others were arrested and jailed for demonstrating against the treatment of sharecroppers in local businesses. After 6 days, they were unexpectedly released and as they stopped in a store near the jail, a state highway department employee threatened them with a gun. Seminarian Jonathan Daniels pushed Ruby Sales out of the way and took the bullet meant for her. He died instantly.

She was so traumatized by the event that she was unable to speak for 7 months. But once she found her voice again, she used it to promote justice. First at the trial of the man who tried to assassinate her (he was acquitted) and ever since to promote civil rights and human rights.

In her presentation, Ms. Sales repeatedly referred to herself as a "witness and a remnant." These are two intentionally biblical terms. She is a witness of injustice and violence, as well as struggle and camaraderie.

In the Bible, "remnant" is an image used to describe what is left of a community that has experienced catastrophe. Ruby Sales is a remnant of the civil rights generation, reminding us of the the work still calling all of us today.

For one who experienced violence and trauma, she is fiercely committed to love. She referred to our national reckoning on racism as a “season of desolation and hopeful promise.”

Even those of us who have not directly experienced the kind of bigotry and violence she has might at this point in our current circumstances understand the “season of desolation” more than the season of “hopeful promise.”

How can we get there? How can we find hopeful promise in a disaster?

We are almost 12 months into a pandemic that has been made worse by social inequities that put a heavier burden on the poor, those with health problems, and people who are in underpaid essential jobs. On top of that, a winter storm has revealed that we are all buried under a deep blanket of inequity and greed when it comes to access to essential services like electricity. At a time of great suffering that calls out for community solidarity, a few are profiting at the expense of the rest.

How do we find hopeful promise in a the midst of that kind of desolation?

Hearing Ruby Sales’ talk, knowing her background and a bit of her journey, opened my heart to hear scripture in a new way today and see a path forward toward hope.

To you O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you;
Let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

Psalm 25:1

One thing I love about the Psalms is their emotional openness. Nothing is off limits! Fear, anger, longing, jealousy, loneliness, longing...this is the place where every feeling you could have in human experience is opened up to God.

I lift up my soul
Let me not be humiliated
Don’t let my enemies triumph over me.

The psalmist here is experiencing distress, testing, enemies. And faced with these challenges the psalmist doesn’t express hatred or pray for the destruction of his enemies (although that is a theme in other psalms and a common human reaction!). Here, the psalmist asks for wisdom, compassion, and mercy. There are some notable things about this plea:

First, this song to God is not offered at a time of comfort, but in a time of suffering. Often, we think of learning, of seeking wisdom happening at times when we can

focus and are not struggling to survive. Yet here the psalmist pleads, "Lead me in your truth and teach me" while in the midst of crisis.

God guides us in all times, even and especially in tough times.

Second, salvation has a this-worldly connotation here. In the Hebrew, the word for salvation is not just about spiritual welfare - it is also physical rescue. God cares about all aspects of our being - emotional, spiritual, relational and physical. What we learn from God's teaching includes the spiritual truth that all of creation is precious, and all of our experience offers the opportunity to meet God.

We know that the speaker of this psalm, this plea for help, is experiencing pain, and yet two themes rise up:

I lift up my soul
and
Please teach me

Scripture has reached out to us today with a message that rejects despair!

Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love,
for they are from everlasting.

Psalm 25:5

This psalm does not dismiss our current suffering and neither does God. It reminds us that God is with us in our suffering and will lead us from it. We are invited to lift up our hearts, trust God, and seek truth even and especially in the hardest of times.

Young Ruby Sales' life was changed on an August day in 1965. As the target of hatred and violence, the witness to a murder, she could rightly have sheltered in fear or raged in anger. But she did not. She lifted her heart, trusted God, sought truth - and then proclaimed it.

The 72-year-old activist I saw in 2021 was still living out her commitment to peaceful transformation rooted in faith. It is the faith of the psalmist, who like her asks for guidance, not vengeance. In her life she found what the psalmist was seeking - that our season of desolation is also a season of hopeful promise.

May it be so for all of us as well.

All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

Psalm 25:9

Amen
