

UUCWC's Berry Street Address
Script and Sermon
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Joys and Sorrows Introduction

Reading

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Joys & Sorrows Introduction

Gather up your exhaustion, and your loneliness. Gather up your insecurities and your regrets. Put them in a container of your choosing for a time. A bucket, a box, a suitcase, a ditch. Actually, put them in something more beautiful than they deserve: a velvet box with padding, a brightly colored bag. Gather it up and rest it aside and tell it all that you'll give it its due in due time.

And then, spread the arms of your heart out wide. Breathe deep. Reach, grab, want like a child at a parade as candy is thrown, and pull forth the joys - small and large, simple and miraculous, the laughter and the return.

Matthew Sanford offers one of my most favorite images. He says: "There's a reason why, when my son who's six is crying, he needs a hug. It's not just that he needs my love. He needs a boundary around his experience. He needs to know that the pain is contained and can be housed and it won't be limiting his whole being. He gets a hug and he drops into his body."

Whatever you carry with you into this space; whatever shows up for you while you are in this space, let us offer a container for it all - for one another, and in turn, receive this ourselves. The world seeks to limit our being. Here we can drop into our bodies. Here we can feel our feelings. Here we can accept that each of us comes with joys and with sorrows.

Reading *Something Wild and Unbroken* by Carrie Newcomer

Riding my bike down a narrow country road - To one side a dense forest - On the other side a wide summer meadow. Then right there beside me, A graceful young doe Was bounding in beautiful unhurried leaps. And for just a moment We were two deer running together In the blue evening light. Then with a burst of speed She dashed in front of me And disappeared into the woods, Leaving me breathless With a feeling of visitation, Of holy communion, Like I'd been touched Ever so briefly By something wild and unbroken. Since that moment, The world has felt less weary Like anything And everything Is still completely Possible.

Sermon

When I entered Union Theological Seminary, to say I was in over my head would be a laughable understatement. I was a decent student in undergrad, but even to my own frustration, habitually underproving myself and wasting most opportunities in only the expert way an 18-year-old can.

So when I sat at that long cafeteria table of Union, in a hall filled with marble and gothic structure – Harry Potter, I thought to myself – I didn’t need a sorting hat to put me in my place. Heretical Catholics and African Methodist Episcopal students already in clerical collars; atheists praying with gratitude before taking a bite to eat, and on and on it went. Each sharing their story as to why they chose this school; how they had fought to sit in on such and such class – classes I just happened to see on my schedule – and with this epic professor or another – names I had never heard.

I shut up and listened quickly.

It was from that quiet seat, begging my brain and heart to be of sponge-like capabilities, that I watched as the thin, hunched over, sweaty man of James Cone (<https://utsnyc.edu/james-cone/>) – pace and preach the lectures he gave.

Dr. Cone, as you may have heard, died in April. He was the founder, the creative first voice, of what we call Black Theology, wherein any illustration of God that does not explicitly and concretely identify with the oppressed, is not only false, but an image then of the oppressor. In Cone’s words,

“The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience, or God is a God of racism.... The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God’s own condition. This is the essence of the Biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering....Liberation is not an afterthought, but the very essence of divine activity.” (*A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 63–64)

Do you hear that? Cone made us understand the story of a God who, in radical action, came to the world in human form for the sake of saving a chosen people. Many of you know that story. But he pushed us to hear that what was radical, was not that God chose to come to the world as human, but to come to the world essentially as a black slave in early America. Making enslaved peoples the Chosen Ones and therefore God, a god of the oppressed. And America as Oppressor. America as Empire.

It was Cone who taught me the Bible’s, not just relevance, but prophetic voice for today; how ancient stories are not so ancient for some. It was Cone who, in his flesh and voice before me, taught me there are prophets still born and teaching; how his life and works was cause for theological and social disruption.

It was Cone who nonchalantly offered that in wearing a cross around one’s neck, - symbol of public punishment, reminder by the state of the everyday repercussion for those who stole bread, and those who spoke truth to power, and those who were differently minded, and those whose skin or religious practices differed from the vision of the Empire – to wear a cross around one’s neck was as if to wear a beatified lynching rope strung on a necklace.

It was a good three years to steep into the thought and mandate that my seminary afforded me. But I learned pretty quickly what I would use in my ministry and what could be forgotten. And then also what I would be taught to forget.

For the first few years of professional congregational ministry, it really was all a lovely thought and spirit exercise. I ran Bible Studies and classes at the local prison. I met weekly with elders in the church to watch and discuss the retired PBS show *Religion and Ethics* during the George W Bush years. Marriage Equality, and ending the wars begun on 9/11 were our fights; trans kids spoke on panels; we talked of race in hidden language like *the Journey Toward Wholeness*.

It certainly wasn't easy. But it was different.

I didn't have to think much about Cone's work anymore. No more than with pride that I got to study with him; no more than to name drop or assure a search committee member that I was educated and diversely so. Yes, my *world view*, my *ministry* was *informed* by his lessons, by that liberation promise, by the God of the Oppressed, but my *people* didn't talk much of God, and I didn't hear us speak or ache or cry out for a word on liberation, and heavens not about America as *the Empire*.

I texted my good friend, Stephanie, a few days ago – the Lutheran Minister who is Tobias's (middle name) namesake. "Well, the world is ending I guess. And we have to preach a good word while it happens."

Do you have a friend who puts your cynicism in check? Who calmly calls you on your spirit's self-inflicted demise? If you don't, go out and get one today.

Stephanie wrote back a simple retort: "I guess I think of it as the Empire falling," she said – and then later, "the way to liberation won't be rainbows and warm milk and cookies."

In those few words Stephanie reminded me of the way I had entered this life, this work, this intention that was ministry. I was called to be a preacher in Dr. Cone's class, given a moral compass, and a charge to take seriously the plight of my fellow humans if I was to respect the tool of the pulpit. I was corrected that an exercise in thought and spirit was a *club*, and that a church, a congregation, whose beliefs caused, mandated, erected action, was a *religion*.

Just because I had taken a deep depressed rest in the ashes of the abhorrent reality of our country's encampment, the games that make children pawns, the ugly distractions that are words on jackets so we forget words in policy -- these were not new times, Stephanie reminded me.

Being black in Jim Crow America, African in want for Colonization was to be an Israelite in Judea. And to be a brown child on the border today, and to be a brown child on your ancestral land in the face of Capitalism throughout the history of this country, and to be a child of color on the auction block was to be an Israelite in Rome.

But it's not only the cruelty that we can point to time and again. Our wisdom sources (our UU wisdom sources) also remind us that when Herod, king at Jesus's birth, sent the Wise Ones to the

rumored baby King, they brought him gifts instead and went home a different way. The world's sacred texts also remind us that when the Pharaoh demanded that all male babies of Israelite women be killed, it was the Egyptian midwives who saved them, who held their families together, who nurtured hope after innocent, sacred, vulnerable life was born.

Throughout our history, thousands of years, peoples and cultures, stories and truths, whispered and written, good people have broken bad laws, and from such Empires fall.

To be clear, Stephanie and I did not text all of this to one another. It's that I could hear in her simple retort, in her two lines that seemed to come with ease, that my friend had decided, she could be clear, had never forgotten or been taught to forget – in fact, her faith had given her the language – that this awakening to the realities of *America as Empire*, to the possibility, a terrifyingly unknown deconstruction of being “Great,” might just make a new construction possible. From among a different people. From not only the oppressed, but those who identified with them.

Last Sunday someone asked in the Question Box service how my experiences these four years with you all has differed from the expectations I had. Many of you heard me speak about how, like my colleagues who began new ministries the Sunday after 9/11, I know our time together is vastly different than those lovely first years I knew as ministry, because my first Sundays here with you Ferguson, MO was on fire. And because of men like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, (we can continue on), *and* the people who would not let their bodies go quietly into the earth.

I don't know where we'd be today – what I'd be preaching on, what programs would be enriching our lives if four years ago white America wasn't forced to awaken to the realities of our country. I don't know how the spirit would have moved us, what it would have demanded of us, what delicious cookies we'd be having with our warm milk if the election had gone a different way two winters ago, or if his actions were not more grotesque than feared.

But I dare say, yanked from our waters, or from the expectation that our lives must assimilate to swim, we've been given the opportunity to have a ministry that matters. And not only to our own beloved tribe, but of and in the world.

Dr. James Cone said in his 1969 text, *Black Theology and Black Power*, “Being black in America has little to do with skin color. Being black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are.”

There are children in our country, once again, whose lives will forever be marked with a number and a memory of separation. That's where we are today. It doesn't mean any of the other atrocities have quieted or submerged underground. But with every wail and rage and defiance *we make* and declare it as faithful; with every promise that we will not look away from the public punishment that some try to normalize, justify, *beatify*, each time we midwife hope into the world by breaking down the power of bad laws and cruel leadership – it is one more step toward the possibility of the Empire falling.

Not for the sake of deconstruction, but for the creative and divine reconstruction that could be Liberation; the very essence of divine activity.

Adrienne Rich wrote simply, “My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.”

For all the prophets we’ve known, and for the way they speak beyond their absence.
For this season that calls us into a broken world, And for the beauty that still resides there.
For the Wise Ones who create new paths, and the midwives who birth hope into the world.
For you and us who can do the same, even amidst our rage, even amidst our pain.
For you and us, and the human family hurting and hurtful,
For they will know the power of how we love.

May it be so.

Parting Words by Rev. Karen Johnston (*an excerpt*)

It would be wrong to not give voice to our broken-heartedness,
to not name what this nation’s government is doing:
breaking hearts, spirits, and bodies of the most vulnerable,
whole families made unwhole,
but never made unholy.

These are people we claim as kin,
as part of our human family.
With this cruel reality,
and the reality
of a beautiful resistance
rising up in the land,
let these words
be a salve:

What to do with beauty?
or joy, for that matter—
in the midst of tragedy, of violence, of cruelty?
What do we do with the living?

Give each their due.
Do not lose ourselves in any of it, but find ourselves anew.
Where there is beauty, amplify it.
Where beauty is hidden, reveal it.
Where beauty is ruined, restore it.
Where beauty is absent, create it.
This will be our gift to our aching world.