

Out of the Silence

In March, when Ramona's school called to cancel the next few weeks of classes, and then GU moved classes online, and the public library closed, and restaurants shut their doors, I knew being home, isolated, would be difficult, for all of us. I, like many, fear the loss of income that may result from the pandemic, but this fear pales in comparison with the heavy sadness of recent police murders of Black Lives— George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN. Breonna Taylor in Louisville, KY. Ahmaud Arbery in Glynn County, GA. Tony McDade in Tallahassee, FL. Dion Johnson in Phoenix, AZ.

My separation from community makes me feel powerless to effect change, helpless as our nation groans for change, for justice. I want to be part of bringing justice. I want things to change. But human infrastructure has failed me—government, police, the economy, churches. The world is burning. God's people are burning. And I know that no salvation can come from the likes of me. Indeed, I wonder what it means for someone like me to have God's grace, God's salvation, when it seems the lit match has dropped from my own privileged hand into the dry grass of this nation. I hate what the power of my skin and my socioeconomic status have done, and yet I love to be comfortable. I mourn the pain of my sisters and brothers, but I don't want to wake from the soft dream of my safety. I fear I have nothing to give. I fear I will have to give everything.

In the passage from Genesis this morning, we read about one of the great foremothers of our faith. Sarah was blessed. She was the first wife of a great and powerful man; she had status, and she used that status to keep herself comfortable. In this reading, we hear how she is finally blessed with a son, one who inherits the promise and prosperity of Abraham. But Isaac wasn't Abraham's first son, and the verses immediately after our reading speak of Sarah's sending away her servant Hagar and Hagar and Abraham's son, Ishmael. And I get why she did this. She didn't want a rival for her husband's affections, either for herself or her son. Now that she had her own child, she had no use

for the surrogate child of Hagar and didn't want to be reminded of Hagar and Ishmael's claim on her protection and provision.

Jewish writer Eleanor Wilner's long poem, "Sarah's Choice," imagines a future Sarah who regrets what she has done and who wishes to heal the rift by reconciling Isaac and Ishmael. Wilner imagines Sarah imploring her son to make peace with these words:

And Sarah spoke out of the silence
 she had herself created, or that had been there
 all along. "Tomorrow you will be
 a man. Tonight, then, I must tell you
 the little that I know. You can be chosen
 or you can choose. Not both."

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"But mother," said Isaac, "if we were not God's
 chosen people, what then should we be? I am afraid
 of being nothing." And Sarah laughed.

Then she reached out her hand. "Isaac,
 I am going now, before Abraham awakes, before
 the sun, to find Hagar the Egyptian and her son
 whom I cast out, drunk on pride,
 God's promises, the seed of Abraham
 in my own late-blooming loins."

"But Ishmael," said Isaac, "how should I greet him?"
 "As you greet yourself," she said, "when you bend
 over the well to draw water and see your image,
 not knowing it reversed. You must know your brother
 now, or you will see your own face looking back
 the day you're at each other's throats."

Sarah tells Isaac, "You can be chosen or you can choose. Not both." It feels so good to be chosen.

We want other people to choose us. But how often do we do choosing that makes a difference? How

I wish Isaac had reached out in peace to his brother, that Sarah had reached out to Hagar. But I

understand the worry in Wilner's Isaac, who does not want to lose his blessing and doesn't know

how to greet his brother. When we prosper from the sins of our forebears, it feels so much easier to

continue down that wide, paved road. We make excuses, often ones with a measure of merit in

them, and so instead of working toward change, however imperfectly, we stay silent. Or, because we don't know how to exit onto another path and because we can look away from the misery others walk in each day from the vantage of our clean, easy boulevard, we say, tomorrow is a better day to act. We will wait until then. But for those who don't hold power—who aren't as educated as us folks with college degrees—the onramps to that easy road are broken and full of holes, walled off, inaccessible. The powerless cannot solve the problem alone.

Wilner's dream of a healed rift is like the dream of a healed America, paralleling my hopes for somehow reaching beyond the bounds of my own privilege to heal what is broken in our country right now. I think Jesus speaks to this today in the passage from Matthew in a few ways.

First of all, Jesus says, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Really, Jesus? Why only them? Well, what world did Jesus' disciples come from? The world of the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus wasn't sending them out to those who were different but to those most like the disciples. Their own stubborn people, the rule-abiders, the ones who thought they already had all the right answers and saw no reason to change, and even those who said they wanted God's grace for all—but who found excuses to remain absent from the harvest. Jesus wanted his disciples to ask their own people to change.

With us, too, Jesus often calls us to speak love, unity, and Christ's peace and grace to those most like us—those we understand because we are like them. As we speak truth to those like us, it is essential for us to listen to the voices of those different than us, and for us to work on leveling privilege, deconstructing racism, bigotry, and elitism, according to the needs of those who are oppressed and disenfranchised. We shouldn't use our book learning as an excuse not to listen. We must listen so that we know how best to help. We must listen so that we know where we are causing hurt. And we must listen to some people we don't even know yet. We must listen, because if we

don't, we will never be challenged to leave our comfort in pursuit of the Kingdom of Heaven. But we can't let our imperfect understanding keep us from action within our own circles of influence.

And in this time when we are more isolated than usual, we don't have to travel far and wide to find people who need to hear about Christ's radical justice. Jesus asks us to work on the hearts of our family members, our neighbors, those who look like us, have similar privilege as us, whose lives mirror our own.

But even so, Jesus doesn't expect them to immediately accept the good news of God's love for all people, of Jesus' vision for a kingdom of peace here on earth. Indeed, Jesus said to his disciples, "They will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles." So, the disciples' people weren't all going to listen, but the derision and even suffering they would receive from their people would be a testimony to the Jewish people *and* to the Gentiles. In this way, even the disciples' failure could have purpose and could create hope for those who witnessed it.

And Jesus didn't tell the disciples to wait for a time in the future when they were more prepared. Jesus didn't tell the disciples to wait until they were asked for help. Jesus "saw the crowds" and "had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.'" Can I—can you—be accounted among the few laborers?

Are we reaching out to our loved ones with Christ's hand of peace? Are we asking them to embrace a world where Black Lives Matter, where people in the LGBTQ community carry the image of God, where, like Sarah in Eleanor Wilner's poem, we repent of our selfish choices and become willing to give up the power that we gained by trampling the powerless? Are we asking

others like us to enter the fray alongside the image-bearers of God who are black and brown, transgender and gay, those who don't always say the right things or look the right way?

Are we failing?

The good news is this, though, from this morning's Romans passage: "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." It isn't as if I have to save the world in order to gain God's favor and love. While I am weak, God is busy saving me. Lutheran pastor and activist Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it this way in her book *Pastrix*:

God's grace is a gift that is freely given. We don't earn a thing when it comes to God's love, and we only try to live in response to the gift. No one is climbing the spiritual ladder. We don't continually improve until we are so spiritual we no longer need God. We die and are made new, but that's different from spiritual self-improvement. We are simultaneously sinner and saint, 100 percent of both, all the time.

We respond to Jesus' call that we speak his good news of love and justice for the oppressed not because we're trying to gain favor but because we believe in this love. We've seen it firsthand. While we are weak, God is loving us to death. While we are weak, Jesus is giving up everything for us. While we are weak, we are also worthy.

We can pray the Psalm this morning—"I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people"—this we can pray out of thankfulness for the love God gives us in the midst of our failure. We can live as a sacrifice because we are already saved.

Does that mean it's easy? Does that mean that the people we love will listen and turn to holy justice and Christ's peace? Does it even mean we'll succeed in moving from our yearning for healing into any kind of real healing?

Hagar and her son were not ultimately saved because Sarah and Isaac had a change of heart and found a way to reconcile with them. But God loved all of them in the midst of their pain, in the midst of their weakness. Even as they were weak, God was proving God's great love for them.

Everything keeps burning, and the people we're oppressing keep crying from their broken souls. And even as we break, Christ is busy mending us. Even as we hurt others, God is showing us how to love. We are not freed from pain, but we can move toward hope because our failings don't have to be the last word. God is still speaking, if we can listen. And as we learn better how to listen to Jesus' plan for a healed and good world, how to listen to our hurting brothers and sisters, we can also learn better how to speak love and truth to those who are causing harm. May our actions for justice and healing not only be frantic flailings of great lament for the burning world, but also thankfulness that God is teaching us a better way, and loving us in our weakness.