

Lift Every Voice and Sing
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
June 24, 2012

Lamentations 3:19-26

- ¹⁹ The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
- ²⁰ My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.
- ²¹ But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
- ²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
- ²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
- ²⁴ “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”
- ²⁵ The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
- ²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

Psalm 90

- ¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
- ² Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
- ³ You turn us back to dust,
and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”
- ⁴ For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
- ⁵ You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
- ⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.
- ⁷ For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
- ⁸ You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
- ⁹ For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.
- ¹⁰ The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
- ¹¹ Who considers the power of your anger?

Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
12 So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
13 Turn, O LORD! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
16 Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
17 Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

“Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring.” Every voice meant 500 school children of the segregated Stanton School at an event honoring the birthday of President Lincoln. Of the birth of the hymn, the lyricist, James Weldon Johnson, later wrote, “A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln’s birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercises. I wrote the words and he wrote the music. Our New York publisher, Edward B. Marks, made mimeographed copies for us, and the song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored school children.”¹

James Weldon Johnson was, at that time, principal of the Stanton School, where he himself had attended, and his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, was a music teacher, yet that isn’t all. J. Rosamond Johnson was a classically trained pianist and vocalist, studying at the New England Conservatory and then in London. James Weldon Johnson, a schoolteacher before becoming principal, was also a lawyer, having become the first African-American lawyer in Florida just two years earlier. The summer before the two had traveled to New York to try their hand at becoming musically published and they met with success with their first song. The summer after, the brothers returned to New York for good and established names for themselves on Broadway, working with Bob Cole as their partner.

As they moved on, their little school hymn was a forgotten project to them. Not so in Jacksonville. “The song made such an impression on the music teachers that it stayed in the choral programs of the choirs that sang it. From Jacksonville it spread, like a folk song, in handwritten and typed copies to black churches and schools throughout the South. Within twenty or so years, it had become the traditional opening song for school assemblies, graduation ceremonies, and NAACP meetings across the

¹ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175885>

nation.”² It had become, unofficially and overwhelmingly, the Black National Anthem, and it remains so ‘til this day.

In my research on the hymn, once I learned about its anthemic status, I sought out performances on YouTube that might give witness to the emotion and power I understood the song to carry. Indeed, I watched and listened to tremendous performances by choirs and glee clubs from schools like Morehouse and Howard and Livingstone, from children and from celebrated African-American recording artists of our day. I was prepared for the moving performances. I was not prepared for what I saw repeatedly in the audiences of these concerts. As soon as the song was recognized, every African-American attendee stood with respect. A respect like that of old, when people knew what to do with their hearts and their hands and their hats when the Star-Spangled Banner begins.

“Reflecting further upon his historic collaboration, Johnson [wrote] that he and his brother Rosamond ‘have often marveled at the results that have followed what we considered an incidental effort, an effort made under stress and with no intention other than to meet the needs of a particular moment.’”³ NAACP member Rabbi Stephen Wise wrote that, “[t]he ‘National Anthem’ by J. Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson...is the noblest anthem I have ever heard...a great upwelling of prayer from the soul of a race long wronged but with faith unbroken.”⁴ NAACP co-founder Mary White Ovington saw the song as reaching even more broadly and said it was a “noble national anthem” with “nothing in it that is not suitable to many groups in the nation.”⁵

This hymn is one of hope, honesty, and humility and there is always a people who needs those reminders in that combination. From stanza one, “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us, sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.” This hope had begun thirty-seven years earlier when President Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Like Moses working for the good of God’s people by freeing the enslaved Israelites from Egypt, Lincoln was likened to him by an African American soldier who said, “Lincoln was indeed our Moses. He gave us our freedom.”⁶ Lincoln, as God’s agent, gave reason that hopeful rejoicing should rise high as the listening skies and resound as loud as the rolling sea.

Psalms 90 is yet another place to find hope, honesty, and humility and the assurance that “only God is God” gives reason for hope. “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to

² David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Spreadin’ Rhythm Around* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998) pp. 102-103.

³ www.atlantamusicfestival.org/2011-atlanta-music-festival/lift-every-voice-and-sing-history

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jala/2629860.0025.103?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

everlasting you are God.” Such an opening is not uncommon in the psalms and could seem like merely buttering up to God. It may well be, but it also serves as a reminder to the author and the reader alike of God’s constancy. The author continues extolling God’s power before coming to the words of honesty: “For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.”

While the psalm speaks of a personal honesty of one’s life, the hymn speaks to a greater, more universal truth. “Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died... We have come over a way that with tears has been watered, we have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered.” Through the trials, though, hope remains: “out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.” The message of despair tempered by hope is the same as that of our lesson from Lamentations. “The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” It is not wrong to acknowledge those truths that bow us down; it is also right to let hope in God and hope through God be neighborly with those truths, letting hope and honesty exist not in spite of one another but in partnership with one another.

And it is that hope in God which rightly humbles us. The psalmist says, “Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all of our days. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands - O prosper the work of our hands!” We would be wise to never assume credit or independence or power or salvation where it belongs to God. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”⁷

The hymn says it this way:

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,

⁷ Psalm 24:1

Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand.
True to our God,
True to our native land.

In our relationship with God, it is right to have hope. In our relationship with God, it is right to be honest. In our relationship with God, it is right to be humble. The Johnson brothers had no idea that their little song would touch so many people, that it would catch on, or that it would become meaningful and speak across races and generations in strength, in unity, and in praise of God. We lift up our hearts, and it is right to give our thanks and praise to God, by lifting our voices in song. Let us stand now with hope, honesty, and humility to sing “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” hymn 563. “Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies, let it resound loud as the rolling sea.”