

“Redemption Song”, by Tim Hall - Ash Wednesday - March 6, 2019

[RCL]: Joel 2:1-2,12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Something deep within us calls us out of our warm homes on this bitter, late-winter night, to gather together in prayer and introspection. We don't come here to weep and moan about our lives or to make a spectacle of our fasting. But rather, we gather to remind ourselves, yet again, that we are mortal, and to give thanks to our God in secret, deep down in our souls, for sharing His incredible creation with us, even if just for a finite time.

When I first read and reflected on our reading from Joel, I was moved to think of the darkness he mentions as being more in our own souls and hearts, rather than a darkness that would envelop the whole Kingdom of Israel. I was curious about the historical setting for the book and with a small bit of research learned that scholars are not in total agreement as to when it was written, with some dating it well before the Babylonian exile but more placing it after the Hebrew return to their homeland. So this disparity was all the more reason for me to consider the reading as it was speaking to me.

I thank God that I have never suffered from severe, clinical depression. Sure, I've been depressed, bummed out, down on myself for days at a time, maybe for what I said or how I behaved, or sometimes even for no understandable reason. But this passage from Joel, while it speaks to me, also seems to address a far deeper condition... “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes;” ... from which you feel that there is no escape!

But there is relief. It's found in returning to the Lord. By returning with all your heart. Yes, fast, weep, and mourn, for often that's what we need in the face of incredible sadness, but also rend your heart. Open it to God. And not only to let God in, for he's already with you, but to let God out. Because he is there with you in secret, but you need to go to him in secret... in the deep inner recesses of our hearts is one place we'll find God and he is longing to meet with us there. To help us past our fear and anger and sadness and to lead us out of darkness into light.

I read an interesting story in a Sermons that Work homily written by Whitney Rice for Ash Wednesday. While we don't know exactly when the book of Joel was written we do know that during the presidency of William Jefferson Clinton, starting in 1992 a terrible war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina that lasted for three horrible years. I remember this being particularly upsetting, as only 8 years earlier the XIV Winter Olympic Games were held in Sarajevo, a lovely city that hosted one of the most idyllic Olympics in my memory.

That heartrending war finally ended in December 1995. Whitney Rice goes on to tell how [the fighting between Serbs and Croats had set itself up along ethnic and religious lines and so deepened the divisions between the warring factions that it seemed impossible to imagine any type of peace, much less healing and reconciliation.](#)

[A Franciscan priest began a revolutionary project in early 1996. He recruited singers from across the country, people who were gifted in music. They were not necessarily professionals, but just people who were known in their towns and communities for their voices. He brought them all together, Muslims and Christians, Serbs and Croats, some literally fresh off the battlefield, and asked them to begin singing together.](#)

But not just any songs. He asked them to sing the most traditional and well-known and deeply rooted religious songs of the Bosnian people, both Christian songs and Muslim songs.

He asked them to sing the songs of their enemies.

Some immediately understood the healing potential of the project and plunged into singing all the music, both their own songs and the songs of their enemies. Others' pain was so deep that they could not imagine singing the music that had been the battle cry of people who had shot and shelled and killed their comrades, their loved ones, their families. But even those who could not sing at first stayed in the room and listened, some of them sitting silently with tears of anger on their faces through months of rehearsals before they could voice a single note. But eventually they all sang, and the choir is still together today, still doing their reconciling work.

Today, Ash Wednesday, is the day we come to church to sing the song of our enemy. We come to church to confront our own mortality, to stare sin and death in the face and admit that they are real. We allow the abyss to approach. We quit fighting so hard against our unseen enemies that hurt us as we struggle to deny their reality day after day. We let ourselves be marked by the truth, the sign of the Cross in ash on our foreheads.

It's a terrible risk, what we do today. There is some primal place within us, the same place that tells us as children that if we simply don't look under the bed or in the closet at night, the monsters won't get us, that still operates today with much higher stakes. It makes us afraid to look in the closet of our own souls, afraid to admit our sin, afraid to admit our disappointment and our lack of faith, afraid to admit our hopelessness and our fear of death. We hide that secret place within us even from ourselves, ashamed to admit most of what lives there.

But Jesus goes directly to that place in our gospel today. He tells us, "Whenever you pray... pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." We are asked to come out into the open by going deep inside ourselves. Jesus said the Kingdom of God is within us, and here we're being asked to find that kingdom in the least likely of places, the places we try to hide from God and from ourselves. What are the habits you can't kick that you're most ashamed of? What are the qualities about yourself you hate the most? What are the actions you've taken that you most regret?

We must go to the secret places of ourselves and not just open and slam the door shut again, but stay there and pray to the Father. This, in the desolate place within us that we resist, is where the Father makes his home. And today, Ash Wednesday, we come to church to take the first steps, once again, into the wilderness of sin and death that lead to the Cross and eventually to the resurrection.

"See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" Paul says in our lesson from Second Corinthians. As much as we may realize the life-changing potential of going deep into the secret places within us, it never seems like it's possible right now. We'll pay more attention to our prayer life when the economy is better, when our parents or siblings or children don't need as much attention, when things are less hectic at work.

But that day never comes. If we wait until our voices are ready before we sing the song of our enemy, we will remain silent forever. And the deep grace of looking sin and shame and death in the face will never be available to us. "Now is the acceptable time," Paul says, "now is the day of salvation." And it is clear from the rest of the reading that Paul and his companions certainly didn't have their lives on track when he wrote this letter. They were dealing with torture,

imprisonment, riots, sleepless nights, and hunger. The difference between Paul and his friends and us is that they allowed crisis and upheaval to drive them deeper into God's embrace. While as our tribulations increase, we are all too prone to stay on the outer circle of relationship with God, clinging to some imagined self-sufficiency that we think keeps us afloat.

What made it possible for the Serb-Croat choir to sing the songs of their enemies? What made it possible for Paul and his companions to sing in their prison cells, even as their chains weighed them down? They accepted the full reality of the pain and death that they had walked through, while also realizing that within their deepest hearts lay a place that could never be invaded or imprisoned or harmed. That is the place Jesus was talking about when he spoke of "your Father who is in secret." It is the spark of the Holy Spirit that shines forth within you and can never be dimmed by sin or suffering.

So what enemy's song will you sing today, on this Ash Wednesday? And who do you need to invite to join your choir? Who in your life has harmed you? Who have you hurt? What chance is there that beautiful music of hope and new life and possibility could arise out of the ashes of grief and misunderstanding that mark your past?

That sense of longing you sometimes feel deep inside you—for love, for life, for light—that is the music of God yearning to come through you to bless the world. And the world needs your voice, needs your music, needs your hope. This Lent, let's rend our hearts to let God in and let God out, to confront our inner enemies that keep us from fully recognizing our God-given potential, and to face our own sin, death, mortality with thanksgiving, because we have the blessed assurance that in the end they hold no power over us.

Amen.

Note: [Text in blue](#) was taken from "Singing the Song of Our Enemy" by Whitney Rice and published on [SermonsThatWork.com](#) for Ash Wednesday - March 6, 2019