

How long will You forget me, Lord? Forever? How long will You hide your face from me? How long will I be left to my own wits, agony filling my heart? Daily? How long will my enemy keep defeating me? Look at me! Answer me, Lord my God! Restore sight to my eyes! Otherwise, I'll sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, "I won!" My foes will rejoice over my downfall. But I have trusted in Your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in Your salvation. Yes, I will sing to the Lord because the Lord has been good to me. Psalm 13

Our theme this Lent is from the prophet Amos, and his words are on the front of the bulletin in the circle: "Let justice flow down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." When Jesus was baptized in the water of the Jordan River, and He came up out of the water, He saw God's presence, and He heard God's pleasure in Him. In the waters of our baptism we are meant to experience God's presence and God's pleasure in us. Because many of us were baptized as young children, that experience has faded or been lost to us, and we've forgotten that in these sacred waters we have met the Living God, who confirmed God's presence with us, and God's pleasure in us. We need to be reminded of that... as Jesus needed to be reminded during the 40 days He was in the wilderness, fasting, praying, and being tempted by the devil. Immediately after Jesus was baptized, the devil drove Him into the wilderness where He stayed for 40 days. This is the season of Lent, 40 days, which are meant to remind us of the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness, fasting, praying, and being tempted. During Lent we try to live more intentionally and mindfully; more like Jesus. If you look at the blue insert in the bulletin, you'll see a picture of chocolate-covered marshmallow "peeps" and some ways to observe a meaningful Lent: Apologize to someone. Do an unexpected act of kindness. Serve people in need. Visit the lonely. Be mindful of God in the world around you. Pray. Listen. Read something spiritual. Give up a bad habit. Give up anything that stands between your soul and God. Be grateful. These are many ways to follow Jesus in the ways of holiness, love, justice, and righteousness... these are some suggestions of how to start.

In the waters of baptism Jesus was confirmed as God's own, God's beloved, and then Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, and then His public ministry began. There's a rhythm to the baptized life that we see in Jesus' life: He was confirmed as God's own, the Beloved; then He faced testing, which He countered with prayer and fasting; and then His ministry began. It's good for us to return to the waters of baptism - not to be re-baptized - but to remember that we have been named and claimed as God's beloved and that here we have encountered the fullness of God; God the Father, Jesus the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, the Sustainer. When we remember our baptism we learn again the rhythm of the baptized life: in these waters we were named and claimed; we have faced testing and temptation and learned to trust God and to pray; and we were given a purpose -to love and serve others.

I'd like you turn to page 34 in the United Methodist hymnal, and I'm going to ask you again the promises, that are made at your baptism. Please listen deeply to the questions before you answer. "On behalf of the whole church, I ask you: do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your own sin?" [*When you're ready, please answer "I do."*] Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? [*When you're ready, answer "I do."*] Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, and put your whole trust in His grace, and promise to serve Him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races? [*When you're ready, answer "I do."*]

These baptism promises echo our theme this Lent, words from God delivered by the prophet Amos, that as God's people we are to reject the evil powers of this world... and resist injustice and oppression wherever we encounter them. Listen again to Amos, who prophesied to a people who had forgotten what it was to be enslaved, sojourners, foreigners, and exiled, who became indifferent to the cries of the poor and the powerless, and instead were and concerned only with their own prosperity and well-being. [The Lord said] "I hate, I utterly loathe your festivals; I take no pleasure in your solemn assemblies. If you offer Me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; nor will I consider the peace offerings of your cattle. Spare Me the noise of your songs! I don't want to hear the strumming of your lutes! Instead, let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

We gather as the church to worship God, to sing and pray, to hear and meditate on God's word... and these are all a part of a holy life, a life of following Jesus. But it sounds as if what pleases God more is how we live when we leave here: that we care about the suffering of the poor and the powerless... that we stand against injustice and oppression.... and that we don't only care about our own needs, our own happiness, and success. It's clear, not only from the prophet Amos, but also from Jesus, that God's heart breaks for the poor, the powerless, and the unloved. We aren't to ignore their cries for help, for justice, for shalom, which is God's blessings of peace and abundance meant for all people on earth.

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the needs of the world's people. Choose your heartbreak: the millions of people who live in refugee camps ... parents who take desperate measures to find a safe homeland for their children... racism and hate-crimes on the rise... poverty and homelessness... hungry children even in our own communities... lives shattered by addiction and mental illness.... the cries of the needy come to us from every angle, every news source; 24/7 we can see their faces and hear their anguish. Human suffering breaks God's heart, and it must break our hearts too, for we are all part of the same family; we are all God's children; God longs to name and claim each one of us. There is a rhythm of the baptized life, and we recall it and choose it again and again: that we were named and claimed by God, we have been tested and strengthened, and we are called by God to lives of love and service.

Hear again the message Amos delivered to the people who had forgotten their identity in God (what I'm referring to as the baptized life.) This is from *The Message* translation: "[The Lord says] Justice is a lost cause. Evil is epidemic. Decent people throw up their hands. Protest and rebuke are useless, a waste of breath. But seek good and not evil - and live! Hate evil and love good, then work it out in the public square. Do you know what I want? I want justice - oceans of it. I want fairness - rivers of it." Amos said that God saw justice as a lost cause, evil as epidemic, and good people throwing up their hands in hopelessness. Perhaps we can choose what breaks our hearts, but God's heart breaks over all that is evil and unjust, over all that diminishes and oppresses human life.

Last week we each had a strip of paper, and we wrote our names on the paper, which was hung up on the back wall we're creating of justice rolling down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Last week you were reminded that in the waters of baptism you were named and claimed as God's own, and that love for others begins with love for yourself... accepting the unconditional love God has for you is the first step in loving others. When we truly know that we are loved, we want all people to be loved, and to know the goodness and mercy of God. When we know that we are loved and valued by God, we see the inequality and injustice in the world and our hearts break with God's heart, over the unfairness and suffering it causes.

This morning we've heard Psalm 13, which is a lament. Over half of the Psalms are laments, which were written and expressed to give voice to the suffering and pain of God's people. We can imagine Psalm 13 written in a time of the Israelites' slavery and oppression, or in when they wandered, lost, in the desert, or when they were exiled, strangers in a foreign land, and living in captivity. We too can pray this Psalm as a community, on behalf of all who suffer unfairness and injustice, who are denied basic human rights and human dignity, who feel lost and abandoned, both by God and us. We can pray this Psalm as a lament for our carelessness and callousness towards the suffering of others, and for the ways we, like the people Amos addressed, have forgotten the needs of our brothers and sisters; have forgotten that Jesus bluntly stated that how we love all people is the measure by which we love Him. Let's pray Psalm 13 together, from the bottom of page 2 of the bulletin: "How long will You forget me, Lord? Forever? How long will You hide your face from me? How long will I be left to my own wits, agony filling my heart? Daily? How long will my enemy keep defeating me? Look at me! Answer me, Lord my God! Restore sight to my eyes! Otherwise, I'll sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, "I won!" My foes will rejoice over my downfall. But I have trusted in Your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in Your salvation. Yes, I will sing to the Lord because the Lord has been good to me."

Here is an interesting thing about the lament psalms. They grieve, complain, express human misery - some of the laments are angry and violent - but they always end with an expression of hope and trust in God. There's an element of resurrection in the lament psalms... a reminder that even if it seems (as it did to God in the time of Amos) that justice is a lost cause, evil is rampant, and good people throw up their hands in hopelessness... that God still has the last word in human history, that God is with us

in this hard, messy, wonderful life, and that God is “willing” us (nudging us, warning us, shaping us, using us) to help make “God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” not just a prayer we say but how we live in the ways of love, justice, and righteousness.

May the things that break God’s heart break our hearts. May we sorrow and lament with those who suffer. And may we not be overcome, but be confident that God holds the world. May we continue to believe that God’s desire is that all people are loved and valued, that suffering and brokenness can be redeemed, and that the lines between the sacred and the ordinary fade away as we see in the gift of Jesus that God-is-always-with-us.

One of our baptism promises is to confess Jesus as Savior and to put our whole trust in Him. May we trust Him to lead us out of complacency and hopelessness in the face of evil, oppression and injustice, to hear and respond with passion and urgency to the needs of this world that God so loves. Will you join me in prayer on the bottom of page three of the bulletin?

Pastor: We come before You, God of all that is good, frustrated and angered by injustice, often feeling helpless and powerless in the struggle. Rather than work at what we can for Your reign of love, we just want to throw up our hands in resignation. Forgive us and remind us of the power You give us to name and resist evil in all its forms. Move us closer to compassion and courage to speak up and stand up for what is right and good.

Everyone: Lord, let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Pastor: We lift up prayers for people whose names we know, whose circumstances are close at hand. We lift up other names aloud or in the silence of our hearts of those in the church, of friends and family, of community members...

Everyone: Lord, let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Pastor: We lift up prayers for people whose names we do not know but for whom our hearts break...

Everyone: Lord, let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Pastor: In this silence we open ourselves to pray for all of creation, for the things left unnamed, the hurts of which we are unaware and for the deepest yearning of our hearts...

Silence

The Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen