



How Long, O Lord?

TEXT
Psalm 13

June 7, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

How long, O Lord? It is a plea that comes from a weary place, from a place struggling to hold it together, from a place that says enough is enough. How long?

How long will we be away from the sanctuary? How long will over 40 million be unemployed? How long will the death toll from COVID-19 increase and families not even be able to gather for funeral services? How long will it be before we can get back to normal?

Coronavirus deaths have surpassed 100,000 in the United States. As we reached that horrible milestone, *The New York Times* listed 1,000 names, and a sentence about each one.

Gerald Morales, 91, Louisiana, an encyclopedic memory and knowledge of old Hollywood.

Eugene Zahas, 78, Oakland, hosted dinners.

Basseyy Offiong, 25, saw his friends at their worst, but brought out their best.

One thousand names — just one percent of those who succumbed to this disease in our land that took their breath away. Yet sadly, it is not the only disease we are facing.

We have learned the name George Floyd because, with his hands cuffed behind his back, police knelt on his neck, casually. Were it an event, we would know nothing about it. But George Floyd is just one person who has succumbed to this disease of systemic racism that has infected our land from the first settlers who disembarked on our sandy shores until this very hour.

Brianna Taylor, a black EMT in Louisville, Kentucky, was shot in her own home as police stormed the wrong address.

Ahmaud Arbery was followed by armed men and murdered as he jogged in their neighborhood. You know these stories.

George Floyd said, “I can’t breathe,” and when he stopped breathing, cities all across the country began to look like 1968 — because not enough has changed since 1968. We are hearing a desperate cry: “How long, O Lord?” It is a plea that comes from a place of weariness, a place of struggling to hold it all together, a place that says enough is enough. How long?

There has been violence and there has been vandalism and looting, which only makes bad

things worse. Fires have been set. These destructive acts help nothing. But we can’t allow such acts to distract us from the real question of our nation. Most of the protest has been peaceful. And most of the police presence at these protests has been restrained. An increasing number of police chiefs, including local voices, are saying this was wrong. It is time for that.

But rage has erupted not simply because George Floyd couldn’t breathe, but because people of color in America can never breathe easily. They fear the pointed knee of presumed supremacy might erase them from the face of the earth at any misstep, at any miscalculation, at any misunderstanding.

There is a sense among people of color and people of good will that enough is enough.

On the other side of the rage, on the other side of the fatigue, on the other side of the exasperation is a question: Can we be better? How long, O Lord?

My friend J. Herbert Nelson is the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and he is African American. He says we are witnessing the continued march of hatred. Ten years ago, George Zimmerman pursued and shot Trayvon Martin. Zim-

merman then auctioned off the gun used to kill this 17-year-old kid, calling it a “piece of American history.” Evidently, someone thought having a gun used to shoot a black teenager was worth \$100,000.

J. Herbert is right: There is hatred in the land. White supremacists are emerging from the shadows with new boldness, increased numbers and no sense of shame.

But that’s not you. We are repulsed by claims of white supremacy. Our temptation is different. Because we do not hate or spew vile words or snicker at racist jokes, we can assume we are removed from this struggle. But we are not.

It is so hard to know what to do, and at times we can feel helpless, but we are not. We need to grow in our understanding of what it means to live as a person of color in this country.

Our distance and a sense of helplessness can leave us apathetic. I don’t know what was in his mind, but as I watched Derek Chauvin kneel on George Floyd’s neck, I didn’t see hatred. I saw apathy. Mr. Floyd didn’t matter.

As a white man I can go through my week unaffected by these forces; no person of color can do that. The hatred of the white supremacists can’t be allowed to thrive because of apathy. White supremacy must be marginalized.

I’m learning from my friends at NEXT Church the reality of privilege that I have. I’m a white guy in a world that moves us to

the front of the line. This is what I mean.

I was driving home after a Session meeting one evening, and right on Mission Road I was afforded the opportunity to meet one of the fine officers of the police department.

Turns out the little stickers for your license plate ... it doesn’t count if you have them in your glove box. They actually have to be on the plate.

He asked for my license and registration and then returned to his car for what seemed like a half hour. I thought he was playing Sudoku or something. Meanwhile, what seemed like the whole of Johnson County, including most of the Village Church Session, drives by seeing the pastor pulled over with flashing lights. It was embarrassing.

Another time I was taking a jog. It’s not my exercise of preference, largely because exercise is not my preference. I noticed some students, probably from Shawnee Mission East High School, driving passed me. They slowed down and rolled down the window. I assumed they looked at this grey-headed guy and thought, “He’s moving pretty good. We will encourage him.” But one of them asked, “Mister, are you all right?”

I don’t think he’s going to heaven.

But here’s the thing. I was embarrassed to be pulled over by the police, but I wasn’t afraid. I was amused by the care, even if insulting, by these young whippersnappers who still have spring in their step, but I wasn’t afraid.

The fact that I can go through my day, largely assuming the world has room for me, is a privilege that is not granted to every American. Every friend of color that I have says they cannot breathe easily for fear that simply being who they are makes others suspicious.

I’ve probably been preaching a little over nine minutes now. That’s about how long George Floyd had a knee on his neck.

How long?

How long will we battle this disease that all too often proves deadly? How long until America becomes the nation we want her to be?

I have found myself many times over the last 12 weeks wondering, “When are we going to get back to normal?” This week I have recognized that wish is privilege. We need to recognize that just because something may be common, doesn’t make it normal. The truth is we have normalized too many of the wrong things. Normal is not back, but it could be ahead of us. How long?

You know the psalm ends *I will sing to the Lord ... of love and salvation*.

It’s pretty common in the Bible that when folks are at their lowest place — a place of weariness, a place of struggling to hold on, a place of enough is enough — they name the truth, and then they sing praise to God.

It is not naiveté, it is not wishful thinking. It is a song of protest that rises up to the very ears of God, who is our hope.

COVID-19 is a new virus that makes it difficult to breathe, and it can hit anyone. But systemic racism is a very old virus that has made it difficult for people of color to breathe easily.

How long until all of God's children can walk through their day, trusting that they belong in this world?

How long until the breath that God breathed into us all will no longer be threatened by hatred and apathy?

How long until all of God's children can breathe freedom and breathe justice?

I don't know, but the first step is we all have to be able to breathe. And then with that breath, maybe all of God's children will sing praise to God's steadfast love ... and the source of our salvation.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.