

“What’s Going On?!”

August 16, 2020

Matthew 23: 37-39

Amos 5: 10-15

Welcome to worship today! We are continuing our Songs of Protest series, and today will look at Marvin Gaye’s song “What’s Going On,” and how it connects to our scriptures for today, taken from Matthew 23 and Amos chapter 5. I encourage you to read the entire chapters to understand more of what Amos and Jesus are trying to teach us, from God. Perhaps some of you have read the book or seen the play, “The Radium Girls?” This is the true story of young women who painted watch faces and other dials with radium, so they would glow in the dark. The author Kate Moore researched and wrote their stories in 2017, focusing on the young women working for the Radium Dial companies in Orange New Jersey, and Ottawa, Illinois, from 1917-1937.

As I read the book over the past two weeks, it was heartbreaking to read how the practice of ‘pointing’ the brush tips with their lips, led to the illness and death of most of these young girls. Radium is a radioactive isotope that “lives” for at least 1500 years, it is estimated. At first no one knew of its danger, and then most business people ignored its danger, and finally the companies invested in radium lied to the public and employees, telling them radium posed no danger. When several painters became ill and a few had died, in both cities, the women left alive had to fight long court battles to get justice for their suffering, and regulation and restrictions for those who would work with radium in the future. They protested, lamented, and gave their lives, so that we could live and work better. I think we all can think of some personal situations, experiences, to lament...

Certainly we all have some societal experiences to lament now in these days! In this year alone, we have buried 167,000+ family members, nurses, doctors, firefighters, ambulance drivers, hospital technicians and housekeepers; these were our friends, our neighbors, our children and our parents...And we had minimal if any opportunity to be with them in their sickness, or to mourn their loss with family and friends in a funeral or memorial service. The National Council of Churches, including leadership of our UMC held an online memorial service in May that I watched.

I read the seemingly endless scrolling of names (and the list was incomplete even then), with tears streaming down my face). And I wondered how long, O Lord, how long will this pandemic go on? How long will we continue to lose these precious people? As the list of the unemployed grows beyond 2 million, we may soon have endless lists of homeless...

This past spring as our people of color continued to be shot and killed, our communities began to realize this grief and loss could no longer go unmourned, and unmarked by protest and lament. People of faith and people in grief and anger began to rally to say no more, and to mourn the suffering, the targeting, and the killing of men and women of color, presumed guilty and killed before proven innocent. We lament these injustices, and ask the Lord, how long, O Lord, how long will our communities of color suffer the mistreatment and murder of some, by persons tasked with protecting us all?!

And now this summer, we are in the season of storms, and from one coast to the other and all around the world, all nature, and our communities are suffering fires and floods, punishing winds and tornadoes. We are watching trees and crops, homes and businesses as they are destroyed, and people, wildlife, and livestock, are suffering and dying. Our ecosystem is suffering, damaged and out of balance. Our resources are exploited beyond a quick recovery, and we wonder, how long O Lord, how long, will we and all nature suffer from the effects of our greed and exploitation and abuse of the earth's resources: the water, the air, the land and our fellow creatures?!

Marvin Gaye watched his world in the late 1960's struggle with racism and prejudice. He heard from his brother who served about the endless war in VietNam killing and maiming a generation of our young men as well as Vietnamese civilians, and he watched ecological disasters becoming evident around the world even then, and he sank into depression. He had been a rising star of Motown, crooning love songs that thrilled us all. When one of his duet partners died, he refused to sing for a while. Then his colleague Obie Benson offered him the start of a song about the San Francisco People's Park protest on Bloody Thursday, in May of 1969.

That protest song pulled Marvin out of depression, and inspired him to write more music to protest and lament the state of the world and its suffering around him. He rewrote the words and music of that song, lamenting, "What's Going On," which some have called more of a prayer than a protest. In this song, Marvin calls us to listen to one another, and to stop our fighting, hating, judging and brutality, so that we can hear and understand each other and love one another in our communities.

Marvin then wrote other songs for his new album of the same name, What's Going On, lamenting the suffering and poverty of families in ghettos, the suffering of drug and alcohol addiction, the violence and brutality of police, the degradation of our natural environment. Those songs, "Inner City Blues," "Save the Children" and "Mercy Mercy Me" marked Marvin's turning to use his music to give a message. He became a prophet of the 60s with that album. Marvin wanted his music to influence people, communities, and the nation become better.

Dr Walter Brueggeman, Hebrew Scriptures scholar and theologian, in his study book “Embracing the prophets in contemporary culture”, notes that both Old and New Testaments contain prophecy. Gospel writers, Jesus, and Paul even, reference the prophets of the Old Testament, and they also lift up the sorrow, anger, warning, directions and promises of God in their own contexts. These protests, or laments, and prophecies are given to help guide and direct our personal and social decisions so that we can live better together as communities, and in God’s now and forever kingdom.

Brueggeman says that as the consequences of our poor choices begin to sink in, prophets warn us to “Go with God, or our lives won’t last.” God is our refuge and strength and help. They also invite us to lament what we are losing: our health, our families, our lifestyle, our community...to grieve for all that is and will be lost, because of our poor choices. Then, they remind us to face and deal with what is happening, or we will stay stuck in grief/anger/depression. We need to accept and cope with our loss, so that we can move on through our grief, to whatever life offers beyond that loss.

Lastly, prophets help us to speak honestly about the loss, to cut through our denial, depression, fear, and anxiety, to help us let go of what is gone, so that we can move through our sadness to the new thing that God will do. Amos was speaking to a society in Israel too long comfortable in their culture and traditions, whose wealthy and religious leaders were comfortable in their power over the poor and needy. But God in verses 21-24 of this chapter reminds them that their words of faith mean nothing, when their deeds of evil and injustice belie their faith and belie their commitment to God’s justice. God tells Israel, (and us!) I hate your festivals, I do not delight in your solemn assemblies, I do not accept your offerings, and I will not listen to your songs!—but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream! Then perhaps God will save a remnant, Amos writes.

Amos is the first of the prophets recorded in the Old Testament. Many others followed in his footsteps, sharing God’s words of lament, warning, and possible blessing, with the people of Israel and Judah. Amos’ warning of Israel’s doom comes to pass some 20-40 years later when Israel falls to Assyria, and a remnant are taken into exile.

In our text from Matthew for today, Jesus has come to Jerusalem as the Passover holiday approaches. As he looks over the city on this day, he laments the lack of faith in Jerusalem, and the suffering that was going on, and is coming. He has just finished listing for his disciples (earlier in this chapter) the many ways Jerusalem’s leaders are ignoring and undermining justice in the city.

He may as well be quoting Amos and so many other prophets, as he lists the neglect of justice, mercy, truth; the heavy burdens put on the poor, the greed, self indulgence and pride of those in power. He tells the disciples the leaders are beautiful on the outside, but they are corrupt on the inside. Jesus names the sadness he feels and God feels, for all that has been lost and will be lost, because the people are not following God's Way of righteousness, truth, and justice. Jesus has been teaching them to turn to God, and now mourns their refusal to let him care for them. He tells them that their rejection of him is leaving them alone and lost without God, until they can accept God's messenger who will come in the future.

So who are some of the prophets and messengers today who are channeling God's words of warning, who are calling us back to God's Way of Peace, and Love, and Justice? Are we listening to them? What do we need to lament? What wrongs do we need to acknowledge, grieve and correct, to be able to turn to the right and see the new, better way God wants to open up for us? What's going on today?

Marvin Gaye, with his songs of prophecy, lament and protest, paved the way for singers such as Stevie Wonder to write and sing songs of love and justice, and to be supported and produced by Motown. In song, in art, in science, in theatre and books, in meals, in sports, at work and at school even, we have opportunities to name the fear, anxiety, injustice, suffering that we see and experience around us, and to help others do so, too. Marvin had a gift of music. What is your gift? How can you join the prophets and messengers of today, to sing or share God's songs of protest, to lament the error of our ways, and help us to turn, and seek God's forgiveness and see a better future? To let justice and righteousness roll down and flow on....

Because, I believe **we** are the ones we have been waiting for, and our time is **now** to mourn the needless losses of this pandemic, the endless and needless deaths, to mourn the loss of jobs, to mourn the loss of homes, to mourn the loss of life to needless violence, to mourn the loss of habitat and liveable environment...

the time is now to name the harm, and then to stop it.

The time is now to grieve the harm, confess our guilt, and then to start making things right.

The time is now to choose God's way of life, and LOVE of neighbor, and then to LIVE in that LOVE, for real, in DEED/s.

Words without deeds are pointless, cheap and useless.

Amos and Jesus remind us that God is waiting for our deeds, to be able to bless and multiply our efforts.

Perhaps you have a messenger in your house: a son or daughter who are reminding you to stop using plastic bags, who are asking you to give school supplies to needy children, who are asking you to cook and serve a meal at Hesed House with them. Some of you may have youth who have taken you on a mission trip to Appalachia, or to Haiti, or children who have asked to have their birthday party at Feed My Starving children; some of you may be listening to Malala, to Greta Thunberg: our young people are calling to us, pointing to What's Going On...

Our young and our old, our dead and our brothers and sisters and cousins and co-workers are calling **us** to **wake up**, and say, What's Going On? To protest the pain and suffering and death in our world, to grieve our losses, and then to rise up, and make things right.

Let us, join with our prophets Marvin, Amos and Jesus: let us sing and paint and cook: with songs of protest, with art that depicts what is wrong, with meals where we can lament the wrong that is going on.

And then, let us get busy, putting things to right with our Savior Jesus Christ, so that God's kingdom can bless and heal our world, in these days and for all generations. Amen!