

A Sermon by the Reverend Mother Crystal J. C. Hardin

Third Sunday After Pentecost (Year A)

Sunday, June 21, 2020

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Psalms 69:8-11, 18-20

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

Those who know that I grew up in the Southern Baptist tradition may be surprised to discover that the first time I heard the beloved American hymn, “His Eye Is On the Sparrow,” was not in a church building, but at the Allegany County Fairgrounds in Cumberland, Maryland. My husband and I were at a Bluegrass Festival, and Sunday morning showcased Gospel music. Surrounded by mountains in the warm air of a summer morning with 500 other folks, I was taken to church, no building (or shoes for that matter) required. I don’t know how I lived so long without knowing this song.

*Why should I feel discouraged,  
Why should the shadows come,  
Why should my heart be lonely,  
And long for heaven and home?*

*When Jesus is my portion,  
My constant friend is He,  
His eye is on the sparrow,  
And I know he watches me.*

Written in 1905 by lyricist Civilla Martin, the theme of this song is, of course, inspired by various words of Scripture, including today’s Gospel.

*“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And . . . you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:29-31).*

The comfort of this promise sits alongside a verse that, at face value, may elicit a different reaction altogether:

Jesus says, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*” (Matt. 10:34).

These words are shocking; perhaps even troubling for many of us. In just a few words, it suggests an unexpected answer to the question: Why did Jesus come? A complex question to be sure, yet, theologian Samuel Wells notes that:

“Peace is the one thing about which there seems a consensus that Jesus came to bring: humanity’s peace with God, with itself, and with the created order—a mixture of reconciliation that sets things right and love that keeps things right.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus as Prince of Peace is a consistent and persistent image. And yet, today’s Gospel suggests that we might have it wrong. At the very least, it poses the question: how do we reconcile the sword and the sparrow?

It is a human question; a question for all time. And it is a question that we are living right now.

This past week marked two important anniversaries: the first, the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre at Mother Emmanuel in Charleston, South Carolina, where 9 black people were murdered by a self-professed white supremacist. The second, Juneteenth, commemorating the day when a Union general read federal orders in Galveston, Texas, that all previously enslaved people in Texas were free. Of course, the Emancipation Proclamation had formerly freed them almost two and a half years earlier, but in Texas that happened in theory rather than in practice.

These anniversaries come in the midst of protest and upheaval in our own backyards as America is once again confronted with racial inequities and questions of individual and systemic racism.

And, of course, they come in the midst of our individual lives, which are far from peaceful, far from perfect, in these pandemic days of course and even on the best days they are marked by suffering and brokenness and not having it altogether together.

Either Jesus did not do a very good job bringing peace; or the peace of God is not our peace—if by peace we mean an absence of disturbance, the cessation of suffering, a true reconciliation here and now of God’s people to God and to one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Wells, “Didn’t Jesus Say He Came Not to Bring Peace, but a Sword?” in *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions About Christian Nonviolence*, eds. Tripp York and Justin Bronson Barringer (Oregon: Cascade, 2012), 156.

If we are looking for peace of the sentimental variety, this is not the faith for us.

Perhaps this is why *His Eye Is On the Sparrow* is a song closely associated with the African American experience and is a song deeply felt by people who have been touched by adversity and grief.

In its invocation of an opening rhetorical question, *Why Should I be Discouraged*, the hymn speaks to metaphorical comforts, like longing for heaven and home, and yet it evidences a peace that exceeds all earthly expectations; the peace of knowing God as a constant friend with an ever watchful eye.

Its theme is inspired by Scripture, but the hymn is rooted in lived experience.

It's author, Civilla Martin, was inspired to write the hymn by a deep friendship with a pair of long suffering friends who revealed that the secret of their boundless hopefulness was the belief that *his eye is on the sparrow*.

Of course, many gifted singers have performed this hymn, and yet no one has done it like Mahalia Jackson, who was known as the Gospel Queen. I recently read several articles on her life and career,<sup>2</sup> and have since watched countless recorded performances, black and white videos that stumble with static but cannot contain the power and vulnerability, of her voice.

One article notes that “Jackson’s early life was hard. She was born in New Orleans in 1911, orphaned at age five, migrated to Chicago at 16, scrubbed floors and cooked for a living.”<sup>3</sup> But, by 1958, at the Newport Jazz Festival, under a midnight sky, she was belting out words that “moved an audience of music lovers to forget jazz that night and cleave to the power and spirit of the gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

*I sing because I'm happy.*

*I sing because I'm free.*

*His eye is on the sparrow.*

*And I know He watches me.*

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<sup>2</sup> Two helped immensely with the writing of this sermon:

<https://www.npr.org/2000/09/03/1081503/his-eye-is-on-the-sparrow> and <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/26/759600078/gospel-queen-on-the-kings-highway>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2000/09/03/1081503/his-eye-is-on-the-sparrow>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Those words in her voice exemplify the experience of sword and sparrow, which are not, as it turns out, diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive. Jackson embodied the freedom that comes in an identity rooted in Christ and a defiant hope that refuses to bend to the world's will. She sings with a hope that knows that on behalf of the sparrow Jesus draws the sword.

Today's Gospel makes mention of the sword, but it is the cross where our focus must be. This is the first mention of the cross in the Gospel of Matthew, and it is the cross to which Jesus now turns. The cross is where God's decisive victory is won through the suffering of his Son. It is in this moment of vulnerability, of powerlessness, that Jesus is at his most powerful, and it is in this act that we know Jesus stands with us in our powerlessness, brokenness, and suffering. It is in this moment that Jesus frees us through his love for us.

For God so loved the world.

Jesus comes not to bring peace as we might expect it, peace of the sentimental variety – cheap and passive –but a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that rests in our identity as children of God.

It is a peace that knows that true reconciliation must come through struggle;

That the sword must be applied to cut evil from the world to bring about healing;

That the powers of this world will resist, but that God has already won.

In the words of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr.

We can talk this morning about the inescapable Christ. . . . He lives today in society; he lives today in our lives; he lives today in the world. And this is our hope. This is what keeps us going. There is something in the cross that is not only an element of tragedy; there is an element of triumph within that cross. So you can go out this morning with new hope, new hope for the future. No matter how dark it gets, realize that God ultimately transforms Good Friday into Easter.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., A Walk Through the Holy Land, Easter Sunday Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, Mar. 29, 1959, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/walk-through-holy-land-easter-sunday-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist>.

Amen.