



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

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Text: Mark 15:33-41

Singing about Some Kind of Tomorrow

When America talks about the legacy of slavery in this land, we often don't do it very well. Students learn about the Mayflower, but not about the White Lion, the first ship carrying enslaved Africans that landed on Virginia's coast in 1619, one year before the Mayflower. There is in America a 400-year-old undemocratic assumption that some people deserve more power than others. Talking about this is hard. Which is why we are so indebted to both the songs about this hard truth from the African American tradition of spirituals and the modern words about this hard truth, such as in Toni Morrison's exceptional novel Beloved.

A few years ago, the New York Times named Beloved the best novel written in the last quarter of the 20th century. Published in 1987, it won a Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and Morrison herself won a Nobel Prize in 1993. It is a beautiful, hard novel about a slave woman named Sethe who escaped with her children from a Kentucky plantation. But when slave hunters cornered her family in a barn, Sethe refuses to let her children go back into slavery. She tries to kill her boys and succeeds in killing her toddler girl. This violent act was based on a real incident from 1856 involving a runaway slave named Margaret Garner. When cornered by slave hunters, Garner killed her two-year-old daughter, insisting it was "better to be put out of the world than live in slavery." In Morrison's novel, the trauma of that murder stays with Sethe; so much so that while trying to start a new life in Cincinnati, she is visited by a ghostly young girl named Beloved – a literal haunting by the child Sethe had murdered years before who now ends up taking residence in her home.

Music plays an important role in this novel. Characters in the novel remember life in slavery on the plantation as a time when they used to sing about freedom with "yearning fashioning every note." Paul D. was Sethe's partner. He tried to escape the plantation and ended up in prison, an experience about which he admitted he never told a soul, but he did sing about it sometimes. When the runaway slaves do manage to start a new life in the free state of Ohio, they would sometimes gather in a clearing in the woods. These gatherings were reminiscent of the "camp meetings" sometimes allowed back on the plantation – times when they could gather to pray, dance, weep, and sing.

The slaves' spirituals expressed sorrow, like when they sang "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long ways from home." Their music used biblical images to push back on their oppression, as when they'd sing "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt-land; tell ol' Pharaoh, let my people go." They would sing about being bound for the

promised land of Canaan, knowing full well Canaan referred to freedom up north. They sang about that “Deep River” and how their home was over Jordan – a reference to the Ohio River that served as a boundary between slave and free states. They would encourage one another to “Steal Away to Jesus,” to seek out the escape routes of the Underground Railroad singing “Get on Board this Gospel Train;” and they’d teach one another how to get to the promised land by singing “Follow the drinking gourd” with its reference to the Big Dipper that always pointed to the North star.

James Cone, a noted theologian of Black Liberation Theology, wrote a book about spirituals and how these songs encouraged slaves who, despite being considered non-persons by their masters, knew they were still children of God – how they had a “somebodyness” guaranteed by the sovereign Lord of the universe. Spirituals offered a message of comfort, assuring a tired, enslaved people that there truly is “a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.” And they also provided a message of hope, that the day was coming when we would know true freedom and real joy, captured in the spiritual “Oh, I can’t sit down, go way, don’t bother me; I can’t sit down. I just got to heaven and I can’t sit down.”¹

Cone also explores how the African American spirituals combine language about God and about Jesus Christ – that God the Father and God the Son were two ways of talking about the reality of the divine presence in the midst of the slave community.² It was there in the spiritual Cynthia just sang – “I want Jesus to walk with me.” And the reason that presence was so important was because it meant God in Christ cares for the poor, the suffering, and the enslaved in this world. It meant they were not alone. It meant that when they were rejected, whipped, beaten, and destroyed, their suffering was something experienced by Jesus as well and suddenly they were right there by Jesus’ side. *Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble; were you there when they crucified my Lord?* And, as we’ll talk about more in a moment, if the cross did not end God’s salvation plans, then slavery and suffering and death could not be the end of God’s drama for their lives as well.

No one likes to suffer, yet no one gets through this life without suffering of some sort. We don’t like to talk about it. We avoid the subject. We want Hallmark movie endings and inspirational sermons that assure us that all will be well. But I’ve learned over the years that every person in the pew has a wound on their hearts that still hurts – a loss, a disappointment, a violation, a literal pain from some disease or ailment, or a person-shaped hole in their hearts due to the death of a loved one. This pain need not define who we are, but it does no good to pretend the pain isn’t there somewhere.

In Morrison’s novel Beloved, the trauma of slavery and death manifest itself in the haunting figure of a lost child whose return brought no comfort to Sethe. It drove her to madness until finally the other women in town had to be summoned to save her. They gathered outside Sethe’s house and do you know what they did? They sang. Some had

their eyes closed; some were looking to heaven. Morrison described the wave of sound they produced as if it were deep water that broke over Sethe and caused her to tremble like the newly baptized.³ A final crisis unfolds in the book; an irrational fear of a slave hunter causes Sethe to run into the crowd of women – where she is stopped from doing any more violence, where she is pulled free from the spell of Beloved, and where the song they were singing brought healing to her at last.

In the book's final pages, Sethe is reunited with Paul D. He found her tired and world-weary, but still the woman he'd loved. Paul leaned over and said to her, "Sethe, me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow." Some kind of tomorrow. It's a phrase that captures how all of us, children of the Mayflower, children of the White Lion, are held together by the complementary stories of Good Friday and Easter morning.

Friends, there's a reason we need to hear Good Friday sermons before we listen to Easter morning sermons. The words used to describe Jesus' arrest and crucifixion are hard to hear. It has always seemed strange to the world that we profess a suffering Savior, and that for centuries our churches displayed crucifixes of a bleeding and tortured body nailed to the cross. But we do this not to elevate suffering – not to place Jesus' experience in a category different from everything else that happens here on earth. No, we tell the story for two reasons. We tell the passion story, first, because it acknowledges that in this world there is great pain. There are losses and tragedies; there is suffering inflicted on us and our neighbors. There are weapons of war and handguns of street violence and malicious decisions to bomb Ukrainian hospitals or explode Lebanese cellphones. But the power of Christ's story is that in his suffering we see aspects of the suffering all around us. They exist side by side, and in that solidarity, we find something that, in the words of Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer, helps us "keep on keepin' on."

Finding ourselves near the cross has a second benefit, because Jesus' story didn't end on Good Friday. Yes, there's the darkness of that hard day and the hollow grayness of the day that followed. Like Paul D. and Sethe, we too can feel like we've got more yesterday than anybody. Yet it's in that moment a voice says to us "you need some kind of tomorrow." It's in that moment the gospel narrator moves from describing the weeping at the tomb to pointing at the early rays of an Easter sunrise illuminating a rolled away stone. It's in that moment that the preacher quotes Psalm 30, saying "weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

We all need "some kind of tomorrow." Like the choir of women who sang Sethe to wholeness, we need a song that breaks over us like baptismal waters, that enfolds us like a parents' loving embrace. Fortunately, in the words of our faith and in the spirituals of our common tradition, we have the songs we need. For a hurting world, we have an Easter story to tell, a faithful song to sing, and a worshiping community into

which all are welcome. This is what offers us “some kind of tomorrow,” and when by God’s grace it moves in our hearts, we can’t help but sing. For that, thanks be to God.

¹ Cf. James Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, Orbis Books, 1972.

² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³ Toni Morrison, Beloved, Vintage Books, 1987, p. 308.