

“In Sorrow and in Rejoicing”
June 16, 2024

Habakkuk 1:1-3, 2:1-4
Galatians 6:7-10

For some time, I have been able to say that I serve a church that had a famous novelist as one of its members.

Not this church.

Not that famous novelist.

Ann Petry was a member of the First Church of Christ in Saybrook—the Congregational church I served before coming here. If you don’t know Ann Petry’s name and if you haven’t read her novels, you should. She was a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Her novel, *The Street*, was the first book by an African American woman to make over one million dollars.

In that book, which tells of life in Harlem, Ann wrote about freedom and the forces that keep people—Black people in particular—from knowing that freedom. In a couple of paragraphs, she writes of a working-class Black woman, Lutie Johnson, getting off a train:

“...thinking that she never felt really human until she reached Harlem and thus got away from the hostility in the eyes of the white women who stared at her on the downtown streets and in the subway. Escaped from the openly appraising looks of the white men whose eyes...came at her furtively from behind newspapers, or half-concealed under hat brims or partly shielded by their hands...

“These other folks feel the same way, she thought—that once they are freed from the contempt in the eyes of the downtown world, they instantly become individuals. Up here they are no longer creatures labeled simply 'colored' and therefore all alike. She noticed that once the crowd walked the length of the platform and started up the stairs toward the street, it expanded in size. The same people who had made themselves small on the train, even on the platform, suddenly grew so large they could hardly get up the stairs to the street together. She reached the street at the very end of the crowd and stood watching them as they scattered in all directions, laughing and talking to each other.”

Lutie Johnson and those around her were free, but not free.

Lutie Johnson and those around her come back to life, empowered, themselves.

I was thinking about this as we move toward the Juneteenth holiday, which among other things, remembers those who were free, but not free, which is an occasion for rejoicing even as it calls White people into account for, to paraphrase our state motto, *failing* to prize the liberty and maintain the rights of all people.

My guess is that by now you know the outline of the story: While the Civil War ended in April of 1865, it wasn’t until June 19 that news of the end of the war and of the end of slavery reached Texas. In Galveston on that date, Major General Gordon Granger issued “General Order, Number 3,” stating: “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equity of personal

rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves...”

Astonishing words: “absolute equity of personal rights.” The system was destroyed, leaving only *former* masters and *former* enslaved people, a radical change that sought to make real the revolutionary affirmation that *all* people are created equal. As Ann Petry suggested, once freed from contempt they became *individuals*. A radical change offered offered the opportunity—if people of faith would take it—to honor the image of God in all people.

The long-awaited good new had arrived.

Independence, freedom, equality come far too slowly, with great struggle and opposition. But when they come, shouldn’t everyone celebrate? Shouldn’t we all give thanks to God when people are delivered from oppression?

We should mark those occasions in the life of our nation that make all of us better off, celebrating the freedom we have, moving toward greater freedom for all.

When good news comes to us, we celebrate and give thanks.

When good news comes to others, we join with them in celebration and thanksgiving. The deliverance of God in all times, in all places, for all people calls forth our rejoicing.

Even so, as historian Erin Stewart Mauldin says: “Juneteenth is neither the beginning nor the end of something. The end of the Civil War and the ending of slavery didn’t happen overnight and was a lot more like a jagged edge than a clean cut. Depending on how isolated the enslaved were from the U.S. army or networks of information or places they could escape to, bondage did not end in 1865.

“Freedom was not a straight line from the Emancipation Proclamation to Juneteenth to the Civil Rights movement,” Mauldin says. “Individuals had to fight for every piece of freedom they experienced and the struggle for racial justice that started long before the war did not end with emancipation.”ⁱ

As we rejoice, then, we also find ourselves in a kind of impatient sorrow.

With the ancient prophet, we today still cry out: “How long, O Lord?”

And that impatience can be a virtue.

Calling for vigorous and positive action toward civil rights that had long been delayed, Martin Luther King, Jr. famously spoke of the “fierce urgency of now” and told us: “In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there ‘is’ such a thing as being too late.” Impatience can be a virtue.

When it came to civil rights, many have been all too ready to be patient, obviously ignoring the distinction made by Thomas Aquinas when he said: “To bear with patience wrongs done to oneself is a mark of perfection, but to bear with patience wrongs done to someone else is a mark of imperfection and even of actual sin.”

Actual sin. Yes. There are times when patience is only a sign of sin.

Listen, then, to the great Chicago poet, Gwendolyn Brooks:

This is the urgency: Live!

and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.

...know the whirlwind is our commonwealth.

...

Nevertheless, live.

Live and go out.ⁱⁱ

“O God,” the prophet asks, “How long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?”

Independence, freedom, equality come slowly, with struggle, with opposition.

Juneteenth is a part of our larger story as one nation with a difficult past and an often-troubled present, striving to move toward a more perfect union.

As people of faith, we affirm that the God we encounter in scripture is the God who sets people free, who brings release to the captive.

If this is not our reality, it is at certainly our prayer. A Christian from Namibia prayed in this way:

Lord, break the chains of humiliation and death,

just as on that glorious morning

when you were raised.

Let those who weep as they sow the seeds of justice and freedom,

gather the harvest of peace and reconciliation.ⁱⁱⁱ

We pray like this because of the resurrection promise that new life is at hand, that freedom is near.

In faith we affirm that God’s power to set free is far greater than the human ability to imprison and enslave.

When we pray: “How long, O God?” we join that line of men and women who have addressed God in this way: the prophet Habakkuk, the writers of the psalms, Jesus of Nazareth and many others who did not turn away from injustice or despair, but faced it fully and called to God. Prayer is the way for the hurting part of our lives to be fully present to God.

We cry out in the hope that we, too, will discover, perhaps to our surprise, that God is present in suffering, providing strength when we can’t take it, when it seems that the *world* can’t take it, when we can’t make it alone.

So Paul can tell the Galatians—and us—do not be weary in doing good. Keep at it. Our “How long, O God?” is answered by our own efforts, made strong by God’s grace.

In sorrow and in rejoicing, we are called to action.

Lincoln’s words in the middle of the Civil War continue to inform our what we do: We are to be dedicated to the unfinished work—for there is much that is remains to be done.

We are to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us—and that task is great, indeed, there are *many* great tasks facing us today.

These are days in which many fear that government of the people, by the people, and for the people might perish from the earth—or at least from our nation. Let us in these days work toward the reconciliation of people, let us seek understanding and the common good. Let us strengthen our democracy by encouraging and facilitating the simple yet profound act of voting.

We ask, “How long?” And we live in faith.

The good news is that God us honors our troubled spirits, embraces our sinful selves, and loves our finite lives to an eternal extent beyond our imagination.

The faithfulness of God then becomes the foundation of our own faith—our own ability to trust in God and to live in good faith with one another.

We respond to God’s love with a faith that shows compassion and kindness, that seeks the freedom from contempt that still haunts our nation. The faith that is the bond between human beings is the faith that works as we wait for God.

There is much to do.

There is much to celebrate.

Let us celebrate.

Let us act.

ⁱ <https://www.stpetersburg.usf.edu/news/2023/juneteenth-complicated-history-significance-celebration-around-struggle-for-freedom.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Second Sermon on the Warpland.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Zephania Kameeta, in *Bearing Our Sorrows*, pg. 175.