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Now Is the Time: God Hears Our Groans Exodus 2:23-25

Good morning Chapel Hill. Two weeks ago, if you had said that “corona” would all but disappear from the headlines...no one would have believed you. But then we saw a video of a rogue cop with his knee on the neck of a handcuffed man who was crying out, “I cannot breathe.” His cries went unheeded...and we watched that man die.

And once again, our nation is plunged into a racial firestorm. A literal firestorm in most cities, as thugs hijack peaceful protests. Violence, fanned by the media that feeds on violence, has once again silenced the voices of those who must be heard; who are trying to tell us that the black American experience is not the same as the white experience.

So...pandemic...racial unrest...violence...where is God in all of this? Does he hear us? Does he care? Those are the same questions asked thousands of years ago by the people of Israel. Exodus is the story of a people who begged God for rescue...and wondered if he was still listening. Here’s the first part of our story from Exodus 1.

Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore, they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens....But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. THIS IS THE WORD, etc.

In the early days of COVID, we heard stories about passengers trapped on cruise ships. But did you know that there are STILL 100,000 employees stranded on those ships? 100,000! They saw this as a way out of poverty. Hard work, long hours, no privacy... but worth for a chance at a better life. But now...those ships have become their prisons. And though they cry out to be sent home, their cries have fallen on deaf ears.

The people of Israel ended up in Egypt for the same reasons. They were struck by a terrible famine and needed work and food. Egypt was their lifeboat. God raised one of their own, a man named Joseph, to a place of great power and he invited his family to come and find safety and provision.

Unfortunately, the Israelites overstayed their welcome...by about 350 years. The Egyptians had come to depend upon them for their labor...and to fear them because of their number. So, we are told, "...they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves."

"Ruthlessly...made them work as slaves!" I've been watching a Netflix series called "Grant;" the story of Ulysses S. Grant, PIC the commander of the Union forces during the Civil War. It includes a lot of RAW pictures from the time and has been a graphic reminder to me of the greatest malignancy upon our American soul: slavery. The Declaration of Independence says that "all men are created equal," yet our nation was built upon the scarred backs of Africans who had been kidnapped from their land, transported across the Atlantic in unspeakable conditions and sold into bondage.

Israel ended up enslaved in Egypt...but not in the same way. They came to Egypt as honored guests...but sold THEMSELVES into slavery. What do I mean? Well...they forgot who they were! Israel already had a land...the Promised Land...given to them by Yahweh. They were the chosen people of God! He had called them into a covenant with himself; set them apart for a life distinct from the world. That's who they were!

Then came Egypt. A nice cushy place. Comfortable and delightful; and they became complacent. They forgot their Promised Land. They forgot their God. And slowly they were absorbed into Egyptian culture. Their slavery was of their own making.

How many have heard of the Borg? If you're a Star Trek fan, you have. They were the worst enemy of all in Star Trek world. The Borg was a culture that swallowed up everything in its path. Once they got hold of you, you were assimilated. Their motto? "Resistance is Futile."

There is a Borg-like quality to every dominant culture. No matter how hard you try to remain distinct, it sucks you in. This happened to the Israelites in Egypt. And we have proof. For instance, listen to what God said about his people in Ezekiel 20: "... they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me. None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt." The people of Israel ended up worshipping Egyptian gods. Assimilation!

Here's more proof: After Moses led them OUT, he ordered every male circumcised. Circumcision was like Jewish baptism; it was THE sign of their covenant with Yahweh and performed on every 8-day-old boy. But over the centuries, they just stopped doing it.

Somewhere along the way, God's chosen people allowed themselves to be assimilated into Egyptian culture...and suddenly found themselves chained to that culture.

One of the disturbing revelations for me in this season of crisis is the degree to which the Christian church has become assimilated into the American culture. What IS it, in this challenging time, that distinguishes us from the unchurched, unbelieving American neighbors on either side of us?

We proclaim devotion to the resurrected Christ...but are terrified at the prospect of death. COVID terrifies us! We are confused about how to respond in this moment but continue to neglect the study of God's word. We deplore the racial division in this country, and yet, as Dr. King once observed, Sunday mornings in America are still the most segregated hour of the week.

We rail against the virus or against the government or both, but our prayer habits are little changed. At a time when we ought to be on our knees daily before God, seeking his face... we choose instead to whine to each other and fight on Facebook.

We claim to believe that prayer changes things, yet I do not sense that the American Church has been driven to its knees before the Lord, crying out to him in repentance for our idolatry, begging for his guidance, his wisdom, his courage, his peace. And if THIS won't do it...if global pandemic and violent racial unrest won't drive us to prayer...what will?

I don't know how long it took, but finally the people of Israel lifted their voices to the Lord: 2:23

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God.

We are not told when, in that 350-year period, Israel FINALLY turned to God in prayer. The first 100 years probably went fine. But as they assimilated...after they forfeited liberty for slavery... FINALLY they turned back to God. They "groaned;" they "cried out" for "rescue from slavery." But...was it too late? Had God turned his back on his faithless people? After all this time, would God even hear their cries?

When I married Cyndi in 1989, I owned a home. It was fine for a bachelor but too small for a family. So, with the help of a bunch of Chapel Hill members, we added an extra 2000 square feet...starting with a basement. We dug a huge hole about ten feet deep right next to the house.

One morning, while I was sitting in my chair, working on my sermon, Cyndi was outside spraying the job site for carpenter ants. She was walking backwards as she did so ...and stepped right off into that huge hole, falling to the ground ten feet below! She just lay there, afraid to move after taking such a horrible fall. And she began crying out to me. I was sitting right above her... but somehow I didn't hear a thing.

Finally, after her cries for help went unanswered...Cyndi gingerly moved parts of her body to see if she'd been injured. Amazingly...she had not; at least not seriously. So she got up, climbed the ladder out of the hole, limped into the house...stood in front of me and said..."Mark, I fell in the hole! I've been screaming for you.... and you didn't do anything!" All I could say was, "I'm so sorry; I didn't hear you!"

Israel cried out. With the boot of Egyptian oppression upon their necks they cried out to God for mercy. "We can't breathe!" they cried out. The question was...would God hear them? Would God rescue them? Or...was God just done with them? The answer comes in the next verse:

And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

Did you hear the four strong verbs in that short verse? God heard... God remembered... God saw...and God knew. That last one is interesting. The Hebrew doesn't tell us WHAT God knew. God knew their pain? God knew their fears? God knew their longings? God knew their frustration, or anger, or heartbreak, or disappointment? YES. God knew all of that.

God still knows all of that. Whatever the cries of your hearts, beloved, God hears... God knows. God even hears our groans. Sometimes, we don't know what to pray. We are at a loss for words. All we can do is groan. And God translates! God hears! God knows. And... God will act. That's what the word "remember" means. Not like God forgot his people like a set of keys...and suddenly remembered where they were. No, this word "remember" means that God was ready to ACT upon his covenant. He had made promises...he had not forgotten them...and now, activated by the prayers of his people, God was ready to act.

God didn't deliver Israel because they were a good people. They were not. God delivered Israel because he is a good God. Israel didn't remember their covenant with God; but God remembered his covenant with Israel. Even after centuries of disobedience, when the people finally lifted their groans to the Lord, he heard...and remembered...and set them free.

It is the nature of our God to save us when we don't deserve to be saved. It is the story of Exodus. And it is story of Jesus. Jesus didn't save us because we deserved it. Jesus saved us because we needed saving.

That's a promise for those of you who are groaning in pain right now. God DOES hear, God DOES remember, God DOES see, God DOES know...and God will act. I promise. He promises. So keep right on groaning until God makes things right.

But for those of you who are not crying out to God...could I ask this: If these circumstances are not going to drive you to your knees, what in the world ever will? If global pandemic, job loss and relational upheaval won't make you cry out to God, will you ever? If racial injustice won't make you groan to the Lord, will you ever? If peaceful protests hijacked by hooligans...if wicked anarchy that destroys lives and livelihood... if treasonous interests that incite all manner of violence...if the streets of our nation aflame won't drive you to your knees before the Lord, whatever in the world will? What will it take?

The best thing that has come out of this experience for me is this: my wife and I are praying together, on our knees, every morning...uniting our cries to God for mercy, healing, direction, peace and courage. Praying for you! I beg you to join us. If this is a short-lived crisis, God help us! We need to cry out to the Lord. If this lasts for years, God help us! We need to cry out to the Lord. If this is judgment upon God's people because we have been assimilated into the dominant culture...then God help us! We need to cry out to the Lord.

Either way, we must cry out. And God will hear and remember and act. So, are you...on your knees...every...single...day? If not, why not? If ever there was a time to pray...this is that

moment. So...listen to the heart of your pastor. Get on your knees and cry out to the Lord for your family, your church, your state, your nation, your world. In fact... I ask you get on your knees right now. With me.