

KEEPING TIME

Rev. Dianne E. Deming
First Presbyterian Church of Milford
December 1, 2019
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:5-19



Thomas Dorsey was born in 1889 in rural Georgia. He grew up to become a prolific song-writer and an excellent musician. Not to be confused with the swing band leader Tommy Dorsey, Thomas Dorsey is known as “the father of black Gospel music.”

When he was a young man, Thomas Dorsey moved to Chicago and found work as a piano player in churches as well as in clubs and theaters as he struggled to support his family. In August, 1932, Dorsey reluctantly left his pregnant wife, Nettie, in Chicago and traveled to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting in St. Louis. After the first night of the revival, Dorsey received a telegram that simply stated, “Your wife just died.”

Dorsey raced home to learn that his wife had given birth to a son before passing away. Dorsey recounts:

I swung between grief and joy. Yet that night, the baby died. I buried Nettie and our little boy together, in the same casket. Then I fell apart. For days I closeted myself. I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve him anymore...I was lost in grief.

Both of this morning's Scripture readings address times of grief and despair for the faith community. The Israelites hear God's Word through the prophet Jeremiah while in exile, driven from their beloved Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar's army, the temple destroyed, and God's people forced to dwell in faraway Babylon.

Of the exiled Jews, John Calvin wrote:

As they were exposed to slaughter...the children of God saw thousands of deaths, so that it could not be but the terror almost drove them to despair, and in their exile they saw that they were far removed from their own country without any hope of return.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus foretells of a time when the second temple would be utterly destroyed, so that “not one stone will be left upon

another.” Jesus tells his followers about all of the devastating events which will come before the temple’s destruction—earthquakes and famine, plagues and insurrection—but before all that, persecutions. Of whom? Of you! Jesus gets personal and says to his listeners, “They will arrest and persecute you!”

The thing is, Luke recorded these words, not when Jesus said them, but more than half a century later, 10-30 years after the Romans did indeed destroy the temple and carry its treasures back to Rome. The center of their universe destroyed. Again. So the first readers of Luke’s Gospel knew first-hand the grief and despair brought on by the tragic events which Jesus described.

So what does any of this have to do with me sitting here in Milford, Delaware, in 2019, or with the First Sunday of Advent?

Gary W. Charles writes:

The season of Advent is puzzling for many Christians. The stories read during this season are, by and large, not childhood favorites. (If one is disciplined enough to observe the true nature of Advent as a season of preparation and waiting without jumping ahead to the anticipated birth), then the stories heard during this season before Christmas have no star in the east guiding devout magi, no touching moment when Mary ponders these things in her heart.

The stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams. They are told from the vista where sin still reigns supreme and hope has gone on vacation. Many prefer the major notes of joy and gladness in the Christmas stories to the minor keys of Advent.

The soundtracks of our lives are not always sung in keys that are melodious and pleasing to the ear. Each verse does not resolve into the perfect, satisfying chord that lets one know there is a happy ending. We, like those who first read Jeremiah and Luke, are sometimes besieged by grief and despair. And for an increasing number of people, life in a minor key becomes overwhelming.

The World Health Organization has indicated that at least 800,000 people around the world take their own lives every year. In the United States,

47,173 people completed suicide in 2017—a 30% increase since 2001. For every person who completes a suicide, there are 25 more who attempt it. That's about 1,200,000 people in the U.S. alone who attempt suicide every year.

The fastest growing segment of the population in suicide is young adults, aged 15 to 24. The number of 18 to 25-year-olds who say they are unhappy, report major depression or have contemplated suicide in the last year is up 50% over the last 10 years.

Those suffering from grief and despair are all around us—both those who think about ending their own lives and those who have lost someone they care about to suicide.

The Center for Disease Control lists 12 Signs that a person may be suicidal. These 12 Signs are listed on the back of the Sermon Notes page in your bulletin. Not everyone who is suicidal exhibits any of these signs. Sometimes there is simply no warning. But becoming familiar with the Suicide Warning Signs might enable and equip us to help another if the opportunity ever presents itself.

The CDC also lists 5 Steps to Help Someone at Risk. The 5 Steps are also listed on the Notes page. Emily Snow is an expert in suicide awareness and prevention. She offers a summary of what we can do if we notice someone seems to be suicidal. Dr. Snow states:

You ask, "Are you going to hurt yourself? Do you feel like harming yourself? Do you feel like life is hopeless?" And, if they say yes, the first thing you want to do is make sure you keep them safe -- lock up your guns, lock up your medications, keep your home safe from items that a person might use to harm him- or herself. Don't leave them alone. Make sure they're with you or a friend or family member until they can get connected to help. That could be a primary care physician. That could be an emergency room. That could be a therapist, if they've already got someone set up. After you get them connected with those services, don't just stop there and think, "Okay, it's all fine"; because, it just doesn't end there. You need to continue to support that person and continue to ask and be there for them... it's okay to talk about suicide, it's okay to talk about feeling hopeless, and it's okay to talk about feeling overwhelmed.

When all we can see and feel is our own pain and despair, it gives us a distorted view of the world and our place in it. Sometimes having another person offer an alternate perspective can break the forward momentum which can lead to tragedy. And then follow up in ensuring a safe environment, being present, connecting with a professional and offering continuing support. Not every suicidal person can be saved from self-destruction. With a little awareness and courage to speak up, however, some can be slowed down enough to realize there is hope.

Kevin Hines is a young man who, at age 19, went to the Golden Gate Bridge prepared to end his own life by jumping. He went there and in his mind he was thinking to himself three things: if somebody will just smile at me, I won't jump; if somebody will look at me and say, "Are you okay?", I won't jump; if somebody will say, "Do you need some help?", I won't jump. He went there hoping somebody would say those things, so that he wouldn't take his life, but he got there...and Kevin says:

Since 1937, over two thousand people have died at the Golden Gate Bridge. I feel lucky to be alive every single day. Of the thousands that have died off the Golden Gate Bridge, I am of the 1 percent who have survived. I vividly remember writing my suicide note. People don't get it. Like, I thought I was a burden to everyone who loved me, because that's what my brain told me, because that's how powerful your brain is. I got off the bus. I walked slowly down the walkway at the Golden Gate Bridge. People rode by me, drove by me, walked by me, and a woman approached me, and she said, "Will you take my picture?" She said, "Thanks," and she walked away. It was that moment I just said, "Nobody cares." Reality was that everybody cared. I just couldn't see it. I ran forward and, using my two hands, I catapulted myself into freefall. What I'm about to say is the exact same thing that 19 Golden Gate Bridge jump survivors have also said. The millisecond my hands left the rail -- it was an instant regret. Today, no matter the pain I'm in, no matter the struggles I experience, I do believe that life is the greatest gift we've ever been given. And, if you're suffering mentally, don't wait like I did, sitting in denial for so long. Because recovery happens. I'm living proof.

Recovery happens. No matter how uncomfortable the minor tunes of our lives feel in our ears, recovery happens. God loves us. God is with us.

There is always hope. This is the message of Advent. God is sending...God sends...God has sent Hope to God's beloved people. Hope is the message of our texts this morning:

14 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

And Jesus said, after reciting a litany of mayhem, *"But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls."*

Finally, to finish the story of Thomas Dorsey, who buried his beloved wife and newborn son in the same casket, he concludes:

Everyone was kind to me, especially a friend, Professor Frye, who seemed to know what I needed. On the following Saturday evening he took me up to Malone's Poro College, a neighborhood music school. It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows. I sat down at the piano, and my hands began to browse over the keys..."

Dorsey remembered an old pentatonic (five-note) melody from his Sunday School days, MAITLAND (The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 424) by George Allen (1812-1877), paired with the text "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone." Arranging this tune and adding his own words, he wrote,

*Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm lone
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home*

May God lead us as we travel the Advent journey together this season.

Amen.