March 16, 2014 (Second Sunday of Lent)
TEXT: Psalm 22: 1-2, 9-11, 19-24
TITLE: I Heard My Mother Say

In the Google search box, I typed the phrase “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” Among the first results that popped up was a video from 1962 of Louis Armstrong singing this old spiritual. He played it once on the trumpet and then sang the words: “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow; nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen: Glory, Hallelujah.” I watched Armstrong’s expressive face and heard again his famous, gravelly voice. And as he sang, there was no hint of irony between the two contrasting sentiments: “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” and “Glory, hallelujah.”

Human suffering and praising God: How can those two things be sung about in the same breath? The theologian James Cone, in his book The Spirituals and the Blues wisely notes that African American spirituals often speak about suffering but they never attack or blame God for these troubles. Cone says there was a simple reason for this: “Spirituals are not protest songs against God because slaves did not consider … their historical condition as being ordained by God or Jesus Christ.”[1] Slavery by definition was a contradiction of God’s will and God’s justice. The suffering that resulted from slavery clearly arose from the ways of earth – not the ways of heaven. So you could sing “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen – Glory, hallelujah” because no matter how real earthly trouble may be, God is still present and a just God will have the final word.

Today we’ll talk about spirituals and suffering, but we’ll consider this topic through the lens of womens’ experiences. We heard Carly sing “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home.” That phrase captures a fundamental experience of slavery – the child snatched away from parents and forced onto slave ships; the horrific Middle Passage voyages that brought 9 to 12 million Africans to the Americas to be sold as property so the ships could be re-loaded with raw goods and complete their terrible triangle journeys back to Europe. The motherless child was both the young child sold out of his or her mother’s arms at the auction block and the adult slave who lived without family – feeling each and every day “a long way from home.”

For slave women, the cruel irony was that their value came both from their work and the number of children they produced – because both enriched their owners. The act of becoming a mother meant the woman had extra value to the slave master, even as it meant the very child she bore might well be sold away – or at least was raised by others as she was quickly sent back out to work in the fields. And it always meant the little one she loved was destined for the same terrible fate she was enduring.

The sin of slavery and the lingering pervasive sin of patriarchy have meant that, throughout history, women’s experiences in this world are both different and less

just than male experiences. I am mindful of the advantages I receive by being white and male – advantages present both in the world and in the church. I am well aware of the economic penalty society levies on women, consistently paying less for equal service. The bias of modern patriarchy was the theme of a recent Internet commercial that showed a handsome young man behind a podium delivering a speech. Above his head appeared the words “boss” and “persuasive.” But when a young woman stood behind that same podium giving the same speech, she was labeled “bossy” and “pushy.” He’s dedicated; she’s selfish – he’s neat; she’s vain. The ad ended with the slogan for women: “Don’t let labels hold you back.”

Sheryl Sandberg has pushed back on the unfair treatment of women. Sandberg is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, and was in the news a lot last year for her book titled Lean In. Some criticized it as suggesting that women (who are already doing so much, juggling home and work on a daily basis) simply need to do more; they just need to work harder and lean into the inner circles of male power. But Sandberg’s book was more nuanced than that. She was calling women to step into their fullest selves and richest potentials, and never to hold back because of fears that others may object to you, label you, or reject you.

Sandberg’s encouragement for women to lean in called to my mind two other images. The first is the maternal role of women who inevitably lean in to care for their children. A cute story is told about a little boy who forgot his lines in a Sunday School play. His mother, sitting in the front row, tried to prompt him by saying his line silently with her lips. But it didn’t work; her son’s memory was a blank. So finally she leaned forward and whispered his line, “I am the light of the world.” The child smiled and with a loud, clear voice announced, “My mother is the light of the world.”

The second image comes from a poem by Presbyterian writer J. Barrie Shepherd, who preached here last year. Shepherd re-tells the gospel story of the woman with a hemorrhage of blood. For twelve years this woman endured a constant menstrual bleeding and thus was labeled as being unclean. She’d endured bindings and bandages, ointments and salves, but nothing had cured her. Then she heard about this healer who was coming to town – a preacher-teacher from Nazareth who renewed hope among the common folk, not just for healing but for justice too. She rushed to see him, but a huge crowd surrounded Jesus. As she managed to maneuver and come up behind him, Shepherd imagines what happened next: “*It took no more than a moment to reach through a gap between his encircling friends and grasp the edge of his free-flowing robe. As I reached, I prayed as I have never prayed before. There was no panic in it, not even any haste, simply a new and supreme confidence that if I could just make contact with this kind and peaceful human being, I would find life again, find it more abundantly.*”[2] She leaned in to Jesus – and in that moment found life, healing and hope.

We heard sung “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” and heard about Louis Armstrong’s juxtaposing “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” with the refrain “Glory, Hallelujah.” How do those sentiments go together, especially in the experience of women – of slaves – or for each of us? The opening words of Psalm 22 give us one answer. It is a powerful psalm of lament beginning, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” It then speaks about the dark night of the soul, of feeling abandoned and distant from God. “*My God, why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? I cry by day and by night, but you do not answer; I find no rest.*” It calls up memories of the past, remembering how God has known us since our birth, since our mothers bore us; and how God has kept us safe as ones nursed and held by our mother’s breasts. If you read the whole psalm, it goes through a long section of naming the sufferings being endured – of being surrounded by foes like roaring lions; of being parched and dried up like a broken clay pot. Finally, after all this, the Psalm-writer says, “*I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you. I will proclaim the Lord to future generations, to a people yet unborn, saying how God has done this.*”

The key here is that the psalmist did not write, “O God, O God, why have you forsaken me?” as if God was abstract, something out there, distant and indifferent to our suffering on earth. No, the psalm begins, “My God, my God” and that makes all the difference in the world. At a time of despair in which God seemed distant and silent, the psalmist clung to a relationship, staking everything on it, saying “My God, my God.”[3] It is that relationship that is the foundation upon which the psalm-writer stands as the strength is summoned up to name the suffering and pain that is all around. It is that same foundation that lays beneath the spirituals, which cry out to God without blaming God. That is why the second verse of Louis Armstrong’s spiritual sang says, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; Glory, hallelujah.” That’s why the song’s two parts fit together.

That’s also why I like Barrie Shepherd’s image of the woman leaning in – seeking fullness of life and true healing – *grasping the edge of his free-flowing robe and praying as she never prayed before; without panic or haste, but with a confidence that if she could make contact with this kind, peaceful human being, she would find life again.* The gospels tell us that Jesus felt her touch, healed her, called her daughter, and sent her off in peace.

The answers to suffering do not come from abstract arguments or heady philosophy about “God this” or “God that.” As the psalms and spiritual writers know, it comes from saying and singing “My God, my God.” It comes from holding onto that robe of Christ when we’re down on the ground and don’t know if we can ever get back up again. It comes from remembering how this deep relationship holds us like a mother’s embrace, so that through it all we can praise the Lord together, in the midst of the congregation.

So often the voice that whispers to us what our next line is, that tells us the good news we so need to hear, is a woman's voice. For that, thanks be to God. It is just like it says in another old spiritual, "I heard my mother say, oh, I heard my mother say; I heard my mother say, 'Give me Jesus.'"

AMEN

[1] James Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, 1972, p. 71.

[2] J. Barrie Shepherd, Faces by the Wayside: Persons Who Encountered Jesus on the Road, 2012, p. 52.

[3] Cf. Patrick Miller, Interpreting the Psalms, 1986, p. 101.