

**How Long, O Lord**  
**The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Sunday, February 10, 2019**  
**The Rev. Paul McLain**

'How long, O Lord?' In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

One of the questions you get when you're an ordained minister is, 'So, when did you get your call?' One answer I have heard to that question is: 'Well the last call I got was five minutes ago.' Another way to respond is to begin a conversation about how a calling is not exclusive to those of us ordained, and then talk about how all baptized persons are called by God in one way or another. And while both of these responses are true and clever, someone could push back on either one of them and say, 'Yes, but what I want to know is when you got *your* call, *your* first personal life-changing call from God to become a preacher, prophet and pastor?'

Well, in our Old Testament lesson today, Isaiah did not mince words in his vision of when, where, and how he got his call. It was in the year King Uzziah died. And it was in the Temple of the Lord. And it happened this way. A seraph flew down and touched his tongue with a live, burning coal. I'm thankful I didn't get my call that way.

And I imagine James Hal Cone was thankful he didn't get his call that way either. He got his call in 1953 - the year Hank Williams, Sr. and Reverend Maynard Jackson, Sr. died. James Hal was a 16-year old African-American teenager. His call came in Bearden, Arkansas, a poor railroad town 55 miles south of Pine Bluff. And his call bubbled to the surface in large part through music.

Surprisingly, his call didn't just come through the rousing spirituals he heard, and sang, every Sunday morning at Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church. It also came through the guitar sounds of the blues he heard coming from the distant juke joints every Saturday night. He loved it when they played Little Milton who sang:

'If I don't love you baby,  
Grits ain't grocery,  
Eggs ain't poultry,  
And Mona Lisa was a man.'

Then just a few hours later on Sunday morning, James Hal relished the times his mother would lead out in singing her favorite spiritual: *This Little Light of Mine.*

Years later, James Hal would become The Reverend Doctor James H. Cone, distinguished professor of systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and one of the greatest religious thinkers of our age. He wrestled with the thorniest questions of religion and society - where is God in the midst of oppression, war, inequality, and the thorniest question of all, where is God in the midst of suffering?

But one question James Hal never stopped wrestling with was why he felt his call as a 16-year old not just from the spirituals of Sunday morning, but from the blues of Saturday night as well. This became the subject of one of his many books.

He reflected: 'The spirituals and the blues should not be pitted against one another, as if they are alien or radically different. One does not represent good and the other bad, one sacred and the other secular. We don't acknowledge these dualisms. We believe that reality is one. The spirituals and blues record our feelings – our nightmares and our dreams, our disappointments and our hopes. They are two artistic expressions of the same experience.'

And James Hal knew the spirituals and blues both wrestled with the question that the newly commissioned Isaiah asked God near the end of our passage this morning: 'How long, O Lord?' This was not so much a question as it was a pleading – a pleading for God's mercy. Although a fledgling prophet and preacher, Isaiah understood his role was not only to proclaim the word of the Lord to the people. It was also to understand and to live the plight of the people – and to pray and even cry out to heaven on our behalf. The longing in Isaiah's plea, 'How long, O Lord' is to bring a little touch of heaven to earth, especially in the midst of hard times.

God's initial answer was a tough and realistic one. The times of trial and tribulation would continue. When you listen to God's response you'll feel like singing the blues.

God tells Isaiah that there will be a vast emptiness in the midst of the land. The trees will be cut down and burned up. But the stumps will remain. And the scripture ends on this little glimmer of hope: 'The holy seed is its stump.'

As James Cone reflected more on *why* the spirituals and blues called him, he dispelled a couple of misconceptions. Singing spirituals didn't mean giving up on this earthly life and longing for reward in an after-life where slavery and prejudice would no longer exist. There is a deep longing for heaven in the spirituals, and much of that longing is for what we pray in the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, On *earth* as it is in heaven.'

For James, spirituals were both otherworldly and *this*-worldly. He remembered the lines of one he sang many a Sunday at Macedonia AME Church:

'Sometimes I am tossed and driven,  
Sometimes I don't know where to roam,  
I've heard of a city called heaven.  
I've started to make it my home.'

The other misconception he dispelled was that, in the music of the blues, there was no hope. James disagreed and wrote: 'The blues express a belief that things will not be like what they are today. This is why buses, railways, and trains are important images in the blues. Each symbolizes motion and the possibilities of leaving the harsh realities of an oppressive environment. The blues emphasize movement, the possibility of changing the present reality of suffering.'

Dr. James Hal Cone died last April. He was writing up until the end. The title of the last chapter of his last book is: 'I Started Singin' and Shoutin.' Before he died, he revealed that one of the blues songs that called to him from that distant juke box one Saturday night in Bearden went like this:

'My burden's so heavy,  
I can't hardly see,  
Seems like everyone is down on me,  
An' that's all right,  
I don't worry,  
Oh, there will be a better day.'

*Amen.*