

Theresa Lungu:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Theresa Lungu:

Welcome to Morning Prayers. Our speaker today is Suzannah Omonuk. She's a third-year divinity student and the author of The Story of Venus. Please, rise, as you are able, and join me in the responsive reading number 47 from the Black Sota Book. "Clap your hands, all peoples. Shout to God in loud songs of joy."

Congregation:

"For the Lord, the Most High, is terrible, a great king over all the earth."

Theresa Lungu:

"He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet."

Congregation:

"He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves."

Theresa Lungu:

"God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet."

Congregation:

"Sing praises to God, sing praises. Sing praises to our King, sing praises."

Theresa Lungu:

"For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm."

Congregation:

"God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne."

Theresa Lungu:

"The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; He is highly exalted."

Choir:

(singing)

Suzannah Omonuk:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Suzannah Omonuk:

And peace be upon you all. The reading today is taken from Proverbs 18:10. It is a bit of a short one, so I'll read it twice. "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe. The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe."

Before I begin, I must acknowledge that taking a pulpit on Black History Month carries with it a complex array of thought and feeling. I simultaneously cradle in my heart a profound gratitude to be free and alive in the same country where I mourn for Tyre Nichols and others like him whose lives are cut short by police brutality. For all those who are grieving this harm and all others, ashe and amen. I pray for comfort. And indeed, I pray also for the strength to continue praying for comfort.

I selected Proverbs 18:10 as our scripture for the sermon in large part because I come from a praying people. We're always knocking at the doors of heaven. Our heritage and our legacy have been primarily decided by our ability to call upon the name of God in times of trouble and tribulation. Whenever we shut our eyes in agony, we're also shutting them in prayer.

Therefore, it is worrying, and quite frankly nauseating, when oppressive institutions and systems, especially those of a religious nature, misuse and abuse the name of God; twisting it to rationalize the very injustices the vulnerable are seeking deliverance from. As such, to alter, malign or misrepresent the name and character of the divine is to demolish, to rubble what has been given as refuge and sanctuary for the oppressed.

Ironically, it's most often the downtrodden who know divinity most intimately. Yes, the stories which are imprinted with rejection and mistreatment and neglect. Magic uses the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. And even in our favorite Bible stories, the weak and the fragile bring to shame the might of giants. All who have met God did so by fire and wilderness. Only after a person has faced captivity and triumphs can they laugh in the face of brutality.

Even so, we could never deny how costly it is to hope. It is ghastly to survive. It is crushing to wake up again and again in a pool of blood the same color as your skin, to find that while you had your eyes closed in rest and relief, evil came to caress the bruises on your body and beat your bones into submission. Then, what is left to do but feebly reach for the name of a God you don't even know is really listening? Still, it is sacred to call for help. We've done this our whole lives, like our parents before us and their parents before them. It is holy to hold out a trembling hand and wait in vain for rescue.

So, with all that said, by the name of Jehovah Shalom, the God of peace, precious children can no longer be made into the collateral damage of a manic arms race wrought of enormous evil, self-seeking power and delusions of political or national grandeur. Friends, in the name of the Father of the fatherless, you may neither deny nor desecrate the dignity of the refugees and orphans who arrive at the doorstep of your land, with feet and spirits broken from everything they endured in the journey. And in the name of the God of love, we dare not colonize the soils or enslave the souls of those who would have welcomed us in with kindness.

It is impossible to swear by the name of Jehovah Rapha, the God who heals, and then deny care or cure to the poor on the basis of prejudice, or the prioritization of profit-making. And in the name of Jehovah El Roi, the God who sees all, we may by no means conceal abuse and hide away perversion behind the doors of a confession box, or justify exploitation and subjugation by distorting the logos of the Most High, as revealed in sacred scripture. We may do no such thing.

Because by invoking the name of the Great Creator, you and I make a vow to neither question the humanity within any being, nor cast doubt on their inherent worth and innate value by discrediting them on account of their race, ethnicity, gender or sexual identity. It is strictly forbidden. To break this vow is to blaspheme the holiness of their Creator and yours, acting in hatred towards the same deity you purport to love. This diabolic deception bears with it severe consequences, not just for the aggrieved party, but for your own soul as well. And even while you may not find this behavior in your own self, I implore you to take it seriously when you encounter it in others. It is a threat to all of us.

So as I close out, let me say this. If you have known the cruelty of ostracization, and in some ways, we all have, if you have known or seen the doors of a church, or a school, or office shut against you because of some changeable or unchangeable feature of your identity, know this; you are the song of the One who calls out from the wilderness. Prayer. Roar. Yell for rescuers often as you need it. The ground is thirsty for water. Your voice is the arrival of rainfall. Liberation is on the way and we shall take it by storm. Thank you.

Theresa Lungu:

I invite everyone to stand, if you are able, and join me in prayer.

Creator of all people, in our amazing diversity of size, shape, color, and giftedness, guide us by Your grace to recognize the beauty and fitness of all whom You have made in Your own image. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Theresa Lungu:

Please, let us recite the Lord's Prayer.

"Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."

Congregation:

Amen.

Theresa Lungu:

And let us sing the hymn I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord, number 271, in the Crimson Harvard Hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

Theresa Lungu:

As we go forth into this day, may our hearts and minds be open to celebrate similarities and differences among our sisters and brothers. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

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