

How Long, O Lord? A Lament for Our Time
Sunday, April 6, 2025, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Jonathan Timothy Stoner

The Cry of Lament

"How long, O Lord? How long, O Lord? How long, O Lord?"

Lately, I've found myself looking heavenward, asking this question over and over. Maybe you have too. This cry is not new—it echoes through scripture and history, from the psalmist's desperate plea (Psalm 13:1) to the prophets' cries for deliverance, to Jesus' anguish on the cross (Mark 15:34). It is the lament of the faithful in every generation, including ours.

In a world drowning in injustice, we ask: How long?

How long until cruelty ends and justice flows like a river? How long must the innocent suffer while the powerful act with impunity? These questions weigh heavily, as oppression looms like an unmovable mountain and hope flickers like a candle in the wind.

But lament is not the absence of faith—it is faith in its most honest form. To cry out, "How long, O Lord?" is to place our hope in the God who parts seas, restores the exiled, fills weary mouths with laughter, and calls the dead back to life. It is to believe that this same God hears our cries—that suffering is seen, injustice is not eternal, and the One who lifts up the lowly and brings down the proud is not silent.

This cry echoes in my heart as I remember Gladys and Nelson Gonzalez—deported to Colombia after 35 years of raising daughters, paying taxes, and checking in faithfully with ICE. I think of Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia—a union worker and father of three U.S. citizen children—torn from his Maryland home despite a court order protecting him from deportation. And I think of Andry José Hernández Romero—a 23-year-old Venezuelan gay man seeking asylum in the U.S.—deported to a Salvadoran prison, his only "crime" tattoos that read "mom" and "dad," misinterpreted as gang symbols. These stories are not isolated. They reveal a system that devalues human life, punishes the vulnerable, and tears families apart.

How long, O Lord? How long will we watch families shattered by policies devoid of compassion? How long will power be wielded for vengeance instead of justice? How long will truth be silenced while the empire claims victory?

Yet even now, we are called to remember God's promises of justice, mercy, and hope. We remember Mary, the Mother of Jesus, a powerless young woman under Roman occupation, who proclaimed the Magnificat—a vision of a world where the lowly are lifted up, and the powerful cast down. Her song was not just a dream but a challenge—a call to align with God's justice, here and now.

But empire does not yield easily. As Frederick Douglass once said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." Oppression persists not just through brute force, but through systemic violence that mangles bodies, crushes souls, and damages psyches. What is the spiritual cost of such violence in our world?

The Spiritual Cost of Violence

In this past Sunday's *The White Lotus*, a Buddhist monk shared a truth that is both ancient and urgently relevant:

"Remember this: Every one of us has the capacity to kill. Buddhist scripture condemns violence in every form. Violence, aggression, and anger stem from the same source: fear. The only good faith response is to sit with your feelings. Violence does spiritual harm to both the victim and the perpetrator. Buddhists believe in always practicing nonviolence."

It's easy to condemn overt violence—the wars, the murders, the brutality we see. But what about the quieter forms of violence? The policies criminalizing Black, brown, and poor communities, the rhetoric erasing LGBTQ+ individuals, the systems perpetuating generational suffering? These too are forms of violence—less visible but equally damaging.

At its core, violence is fear made manifest—fear of the other, fear of losing power, fear of scarcity. Both Jesus and Buddhism teach that nonviolence is not passive; it's an active resistance to fear, rooted in love. It's a spiritual practice that affirms our deep interconnectedness—what Buddhists call interbeing. If we truly belong to one another, violence doesn't just wound the body—it fractures the soul. It separates us from God, each other, and our truest selves. Every act of violence, no matter how justified by the world's standards, exacts a spiritual cost.

The cross is the ultimate testimony to this truth. In the face of cruelty, fear, and betrayal, Jesus did not retaliate. He absorbed the full weight of violence and responded not with vengeance, but with love: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). This is the scandal of grace: it defies the world's logic of retribution and domination. It does not seek to overpower, but to transform.

To be crucified with Christ, as Paul writes in Galatians 2:20, is to die to the self ruled by fear and the compulsion to harm others. It's to awaken to a new way of being that refuses to meet violence with more violence. This is the only path that leads to true life.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us, "The way we love God is to love neighbors in their fullness. Such love will well up in all who respond to God's salvation." This love stretches beyond comfort zones, biases, and even enemies. It calls us to resist fear, dismantle division, and join in God's work of justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Jesus embodied this radical love, teaching us to love lavishly—even toward those who oppose us. He warned that unchecked anger leads to spiritual death (Matthew 5:21-22). Hatred is

corrosive; it seeps into our souls and fractures our communities. And often, it leads to friendly fire—where our bitterness, outrage, and repulsion towards those we oppose inevitably ricochets back wounding those closest to us.

The Buddhist monk's words—that violence wounds both victim and perpetrator—echo Jesus' teaching. The church and state conspired to crucify Jesus, believing violence could secure control. But they could not extinguish God's inexhaustible love. His message of justice and mercy directly challenged oppressive systems, exposing the moral rot within Roman society. In attempting to silence him, they only revealed their own spiritual bankruptcy.

The great paradox: violence promises control, but in the end, it deepens wounds—even in those who wield it.

What Does This Mean for Us?

At All Saints Pasadena, resistance is not just about what we oppose—it's about how we show up. We do not fight with fists or fear. We fight with mercy, with presence, and with the steady fire of love. We move with open hands, hearts, and eyes to the suffering around us. Jesus flips the script: blessing the poor, comforting the mourners, lifting the humble, honoring the peacemakers. True power does not crush—it heals. It listens. It breaks bread. It lays down pride for the sake of the forgotten.

Ours is the way of nonviolent resistance—a path where grief becomes fuel, hope becomes action, and love refuses to bow. Fierce, but not cruel. Bold, but not bitter. Grounded, but not grandstanding. This is the path Jesus walked—and invites us to follow. A revolution of love that remakes the world, starting with us.

Pressing On Toward the Goal: The Power of Faith in Christ

This life of transformation is not achieved by sheer will but through faith in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes to the Philippians of the radical change that comes when we encounter Christ. What once mattered to him pales compared to knowing Christ, and he presses on toward the goal—not by his own strength, but by God's grace.

Paul's call to "press on" is for all who follow Christ. We are invited to participate in the new thing God is doing—to live lives shaped by justice, mercy, and peace. Just as Mary of Bethany poured out her costly perfume in an act of devotion, we too are called to pour out our lives for God's Kingdom. And when we do, our presence in the world carries the unmistakable fragrance of Christ.

It is like the lingering scent of a beloved family member's cologne after a warm embrace. That familiar fragrance remains long after they've walked away, a reminder of their love and presence. In the same way, when we abide in Christ—through prayer, acts of compassion, and the pursuit of justice—his presence clings to us. As we move through the world, people breathe

in the fragrance of Christ, even if they can't name it. It is the aroma of grace, love, and abundant life.

This journey demands sacrifice and perseverance, but we are not alone. We fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who endured the cross for the joy set before him. With confidence, we know we are active participants in God's mission to bring justice, healing, and restoration to the world.

The Work of Justice Without Losing Our Souls

The scriptures remind us that the church is not a static institution, but a movement—the Body of Christ in action. This movement, which began over 2,000 years ago, calls us to stand with the oppressed: to march, vote, advocate, and challenge systems of harm. But we must be careful not to become the mirror image of the injustice we fight. Our resistance must not only involve our hands and voices, but also pure hearts and steadfast spirits.

What does this look like? It means recognizing the humanity even in those who perpetuate harm, knowing that they too are shaped by fear, wounds, and brokenness. It means loving our enemies—not by excusing evil, but by refusing to let hatred define us. It means believing in the possibility of redemption, even when it seems impossible. After all, nothing is impossible with God.

Consider Paul's backstory. Once known as Saul, he zealously persecuted followers of Jesus—until he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Saul became Paul, not just a keeper of the faith, but a proclaimer of Christ's sacrificial love, spreading the gospel until his final breath. Paul's story shows us that no one is beyond the reach of God's transforming love. Even the most hardened hearts, when touched by Christ, can be softened and made new.

And so, we cry out: How long, O Lord?

We cry out for the weary, the oppressed, the brokenhearted—for Gladys, Nelson, Kilmar, Andry, and countless other families torn apart by the destructive and inhumane immigration policies of this current administration; for our Palestinian siblings, trapped in Gaza's rubble, never knowing when the next bomb will fall; for Venezuelan men unjustly imprisoned in El Salvador; for refugees, displaced persons, the deported, and the dehumanized.

But we do not cry out in despair. We cry out in hope, like the prophet Isaiah. We know that God is not done. God is always doing something new! Now it springs forth—can you not see it? God is making a road in the desert and setting rivers to flow in the wasteland. Even in the worst of times, God is at work—turning the world upside down, lifting the lowly, scattering the proud in their conceit. That is what God does. That is what God has always done.

So we cry out: How long, O Lord?

Until the walls fall. Until justice rolls like a river. Until mercy floods the earth. Until peace reigns—not as a fragile truce, but as the very breath of creation.

Until that day, we will hold on to the vision of Mary, the Mother of Jesus—trusting that the mighty will be cast down, and the humble lifted up. We will hold on to the faith that the arc of the universe bends toward justice—not by magic, but through our hands and by God’s grace.

So come, Lord Jesus. Come, Justice. Come, Mercy. Come, Peace.

And let it be so. Amen.