



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

Mid Week Lenten Series: March 20, 2019

Sermon Title: "Mighty Be the Power of Peace"

Texts: Psalm 34:4-6, 14 and Luke 4:1-13

Nobel Peace prize winner, Leymah Gbowee and so many others lived through the horrific experiences of Liberia's Civil War. Women were hiding their husbands and sons from soldiers looking to recruit or harm them, walking miles to find food and water for their families, hoping to keep life going so that there would be something left to build on when peace returned. The country was divided by rebel factions and 2003 marked the 14th year of a bloody civil war. Many Liberians were displaced, and up to 250,000 lives were taken. Men were the primary participants of war, but women carried the burden of the impact. Liberian women "had to endure the pain of watching their young sons be forcibly recruited into the army. A few days later these young men would come back into the same village, drugged up, and were made to execute their own family members.

A small group of Liberian women made a decision to "take the destiny of Liberia into their own hands," declaring that "in the past they were silent, but now...war has taught them that the future lies in saying no to violence and yes to peace." Leymah Gbowee, in her book, *Mighty Be Our Powers* tells of leading a delegation of women to put pressure on the warring factions during the peace-talk process. At first the women sat in a daily demonstration outside the posh hotels where the negotiators met, pressuring for progress in the talks. When the talks dragged on with no progress made and violence continuing, Gbowee led a couple hundred women, inside the hotel, where they simply "dropped down, in front of the glass door that was the main entrance to the meeting room" and she passed a message to the lead mediator that the women would interlock their arms and remain seated in the hallway, holding the delegates "hostage" until a peace agreement was reached. When the men tried to leave the hall, the women threatened to rip their clothes off. "In Africa, it's a terrible curse to see a married or elderly woman deliberately bare herself." The women remained sitting outside the negotiating room for days, ensuring that the "atmosphere at the peace talks changed from circuslike to somber." A 14-year war ended weeks later.

Peacemaking seemed like such a crazy idea, and these women seemed to have taken leave of their senses, but look at the outcome.

Leymah Gbowee went on to become one of three female recipients of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. Her memoir opens with these words: "All praise, glory and honor to God for His unfailing love and favor toward me." Later, in a chapel service at Eastern Mennonite Chapel in 2009, she proclaimed: "I didn't get there by myself... or anything I did as an individual, but it was by the grace and mercy of God.... He has held my hands. In the most difficult of times, he has been there. They have this song, "Order my steps in your ways, dear Lord," and every day as I wake up, that is my prayer, because there's no way that anyone can take this journey as a peacebuilder, as an agent of change in your community, without having a sense of faith.... As I continue this journey in this life, I remind myself: All that I am, all that I hope to be, is because of God."

<http://emu.edu/now/podcast/2009/10/23/the-faith-of-a-peacebuilder-leymah-gbowee/>).

This is a tangible, real life expression of faith. Not an abstract idea. An authentic telling of a time of crisis and God's responding, as is Psalm 34, whose caption says, "Praise for Deliverance from Trouble Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away."

There's a back story. Way back in 1 Samuel, King Saul is losing it, determined that he needs to kill David. At one point he hurls a spear across the room hoping to impale David to a wall. David is warned to high tail it, and now once "mighty warrior David" struggles to find safety. He ends up, of all places, in the land of the Philistines. But a younger David once killed the giant, Goliath- A Philistine. So David is terrified. But so is the king, who's sure David's coming is a trap. He needs to get his armies ready to fight. Everyone is scared and only seeing two options- resignation or violence.

Or...David acts mentally unhinged and the king demands his people get this guy out of here! The psalm says David had prayed to God and God answered him. So, we have to assume that God's answer inspired David's action that worked to destabilize the situation. What a prayer! Instead of resignation or fighting, there was a third way.

A way that must have seemed just as outlandish as the Liberian womens' protest. But it brought peace.

Perhaps this gives new meaning to "the peace that surpasses human understanding." That in prayer and being open to the Holy Spirit, people heard God's possibility even when by rights they were too scared to.

Think of the unimaginable struggle that Jesus in the wilderness faced. Fasting and tempted for forty days, but he also prayed. And Luke tells us, that “being full of the Holy Spirit,” in such times, he overcame temptations to upset the world. In each of these stories, there was some wilderness, some place that seems desolate, frightening or traumatizing. Where temptations to resignation and the false sense of power found in violence abound. Imagine the lack of peace that could have happened in each had Jesus succumbed. But as Leymah Gbowee’s book title says, in the Spirit- “mighty be our powers.”

In all that we face, God calls us to seek peace by turning to God in prayer and believing in the power of the Spirit- that all we are or hope to be, comes from the God who desires we know the peace that surpasses understanding and its mighty power.

And so this is our prayer- that we too may we seek such peace and pursue it.