

“Same as it ever was, but for how long?”

These past few months have felt like one of those TV shows set in a dystopian future. That world resembles ours in many ways, but there is a nagging suspicion that something is not quite right. The clothes are slightly different. There is something about music that is similar but slightly out of tune. Perhaps it rains a little too much or not enough. The world is familiar but essentially different.

We go to the Post Office, but no one lingers to chat anymore. We go for coffee after picking up the mail, but the coffee shop is empty; no one is hanging out. The shelves in the supermarket are nearly empty as if there were a blizzard predicted, but the weather is warm. The early morning and late afternoon line of traffic is nearly nonexistent. The world looks the same, but it is different.

“You may ask yourself/How did I get here?”¹ David Byrne sang in 1980. The writer of Psalm 13 asks the same question but 3,000 years before The Talking Heads. He not only wants to know how we got here, but how long will this go on?

It is the age old lament of people under an affliction. Few, if any, people understand how we got to this place of distress that is our present circumstance. We think the pandemic may have started in a “wet market” in Wuhan China, but what does a wet market (whatever that is) have to do with us? And how exactly does a virus “jump” from one species to another? We are like the psalmist who says, “How long shall I have perplexity of my mind and grief in my heart?” We are confused about what is happening.

The instructions given by various government entities are at times contradictory. We are frustrated that science is not moving as rapidly as we want. We expect immediate results because being inconvenienced is not acceptable. Being told by the government what to do is alien to us, even if the intention is to keep the population well and to care for each other. Ask those who are over age 80 and they will tell you that during World War II the populace listened to the government and pulled together.

Perhaps when the enemy has an army, navy and air force it is easier to see the threat. We band together because we do not want our enemy to say “I have prevailed over him.” But viruses do not have faces, governments, or military forces. They do not speak. They do not spread propaganda. Viruses attack in silence. We see the results but they mystify us. There is no foe to

¹ “Once in a Lifetime” by Brian Eno / Christopher Frantz / David Byrne / Jerry Harrison / Tina Weymouth. Lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Group, 1980.

strike when one of us falls from COVID-19. The battlefield is the ER and ICU. We wonder “How long, O LORD?”

We are also faced with the scourge of racial injustice. In this case we know the enemy. As Walt Kelly wrote, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” We do not want to look in the mirror and recognize that, in ways large or small, by outward acts of complacency, or indifference, we have encouraged or allowed racism to remain prevalent in our country. Many lament, “How long, O LORD?”

We wonder why God’s face is hidden from us. But we should not be surprised when we have ignored God’s commandments for so long. We have not welcomed people in Jesus’ name because they did not look like us. We have not shared a cup of water with someone, because we decided they could not be a disciple.

Our selfishness holds us down. Our desire to be unique and exceptional undergirds all our actions. Our need to build ourselves up by putting others down hasn’t changed in many millenia. We desire stasis, to keep things the “same as it ever was.” Yet when the tables turn against us we ask, “How long, O LORD?”—today, yesterday and three thousand years ago. The Lord has dealt with us richly for we have earned our perplexity and confusion through disobedience and foolishly making freedom a license for selfishness.

Only when we can keep six feet apart because it keeps others safe; only when we can accept limits on our personal freedom for the good of all; only when we can see that the common good as a personal good; only when we are outraged when a black man is callously choked to death or a black woman shot to death in her bed, do we have the right to lament “how long.” Only when we set self aside, wants aside, conceit aside, and spite aside replacing them with love and respect for one another as beloved children of God will our laments rise above our inequities to the holy seat of judgement. As long as it is “the same as it ever was” our country and our society will be broken and we will be condemned to such blights. Only when we learn to live in humility and love our neighbors as ourselves will we be able to claim the rewards that Jesus promises.

The Good News is that all is not lost. Jesus instructs. The Holy Spirit advocates. God forgives. We are able to repent and return to the Lord. When we do so and “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”² then our hearts will once again be joyful in God’s saving help and mercy.

² Amos 5:24