

God's.Presence.Now
Isaiah 25:1-9
October 5, 2020

A phrase that frequently comes to mind these days is from Zora Neale Hurston, one of the most significant Black authors of the first half of the 20th century. It is from her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. "I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots."

Sorrow's kitchen seems like an apt metaphor for these days. With over one million deaths worldwide from Covid-19, the pot of grief is overflowing with salty tears. The side effects of the pandemic, including job loss, food insecurity, domestic abuse, and mental health crises create a stew of chaos harming the lives of millions. The partisan divide in our nation is a tempest brewing with animosity, bitterness, and vicious attacks. Hurston herself licked the pot of racial injustice, which continues at a high pitch today. Wildfires ravage God's creation, wreaking havoc on creatures and human life, filling a pot with soot and ashes. The odors of mourning, anxiety, fear, anger, and cinders linger in Sorrow's kitchen.

We wonder, "Where is God in the midst of all this turmoil?" One of our civic leaders expressed what many others are likely thinking: "It's like God has no sympathy, no empathy for Sonoma County."ⁱ

The people whom the prophet Isaiah addresses experienced similar destruction of their homeland and displacement to a foreign land. All this disruption is a reversal of the promises of God. The people often felt abandoned by God. But their devastation was not the will of God; it was the consequence of their own actions and the inhumanity of people. That is true in our time as well. The pandemic is not the work of God. Economic injustice and systemic racism are not the work of God. Wildfires are not the curse of God. They come from a combination of the natural forces of nature, the intervention in those natural forces by human consumption, and the harmful actions of humankind.

Isaiah declares that God will work against those forces that ruthlessly attack God's good creation. God has not abandoned God's people. No, God is at work, not alone, but through God's change agents like us, to restore creation and to reverse the damage done. Biblical Scholar Walter Bruggemann says, "God will not quit until God has arrived at God's good intention. There is a purpose at work in, with, under, and beyond our best resolves. That holy purpose is tenacious, steadfast, and relentless, that we and all of God's creation will come to wellbeing."ⁱⁱ

The wonderful image the prophet uses to describe God's will is a banquet table, set with a feast of gourmet food for all peoples. At God's table, the hungry are fed. In God's presence, the needy are satisfied. With God as host, the marginalized are honored guests. In God's house, the door is open to all.

Among the many losses of this year have been celebrations, including weddings. Tyler and Melanie were among many couples who canceled their wedding reception. Although they were offered a full refund on their venue and the food for the reception, they chose to donate the food to Laura's Home, a shelter for women and children in need in Ohio. They didn't just send the food truck to cater the meal. After their small ceremony in August, in tuxedo,

wedding gown and masks, they appeared at Laura's Home kitchen to serve the meal to their guests. After serving, as at a typical reception, they went to all the tables to greet the guests who celebrated their special day with them.ⁱⁱⁱ

This wedding banquet is a beautiful image of the will of God and the presence of God in our midst. On this World Communion Sunday, God's banquet table reminds us that God desires the flourishing of human life. It is never God's intention for Sorrow's kitchen to be a way of life. God's vision of the abundant life is a glorious wedding feast at Laura's Home where there's a place at the table for all!

Bruggemann speaks of God's steadfast love as tenacious solidarity. God is persistent in advocating for, never against, God's people. God is one with us in pain, in sorrow, in displacement. "God has not for an instant abandoned God's people or God's world, but has been abidingly faithful, even through the devastation. This God has the capacity to restore, recover, and revivify! This is the God of homecoming after displacement. This is the God of Easter who has not quit, not even on that dread Friday or that misery-lasting Saturday."^{iv}

This God is present with us now, encouraging us through the daily struggles of distance learning, upholding us through the discomfort of evacuation, reviving our strength moment by moment.

I experienced God's presence on Monday afternoon when I saw Mark and Lindsay just after they had seen the heap of ashes that was their family home. Mark said, "We were missionaries in Africa and built things from scratch. We've remodeled our home. We will rebuild our home, just as many others have." A remarkable affirmation of faith even while standing in Sorrow's kitchen.

When I double-checked the quote from Hurston, I discovered her next sentence. "I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands." From Sorrow's kitchen to a mountain wrapped in rainbows heralding the promise of a new day, a harp of soothing music, a symbol of victory in hand – signs of God's presence.

God is a God of restoration, recovery, and resurrection. God is steadfast in love, tenacious in solidarity with God's people. Although in moments of devastation we may feel abandoned, God is forever faithful, present with us to sustain, to fortify, and to resurrect. Thanks be to the God of life and new life!

God of all creation, You indeed are present now, one with us in Jesus the Christ. We praise you for your solidarity with all creation, including human beings. You wove a tapestry of diversity and delight that you might enjoy the multitude of cultures and countries around the world. Grow in us a deeper appreciation for this beautiful multi-faceted world. We pray for the health of people around the globe and for cooperation between nations and cultures.

We give thanks for your tenacious solidarity with us. We need your powerful presence among us, O God. Be present with all who suffer from disease, malnourishment, or abuse. Direct our energies toward the healing of people in all nations. Guide us in caring for this precious and fragile planet on which You planted us. Lead us in unifying efforts that benefit our common humanity.

We seek your sustenance for those scarred by fire damage in our community, county, and state. Embrace all who have lost homes and loved ones, tenderly caressing them in their

sorrow. We pray for those who have lost homes. We lift to you those who were formerly homeless who found refuge at Los Guillicos, but now find themselves displaced once again. Abide with all who are traumatized by fire, soothing haunting wounds of the past as well as fresh scars of the present. Grant hope to those who remain evacuated, far from the familiar comfort of home. Refresh their patience. We give thanks for friends, relatives and others who are graciously offering hospitality to evacuees.

Restore the strength of firefighters, first responders, health care professionals, civic leaders, who pour out energy, compassion, and skill for the welfare of all. May your tears of sorrow become rain that douses the fires and embers.

Revive your church, O God, with a fresh boost of your Spirit's mighty energy. Keep us radiant even in the face of strife. Keep us faithful even when we want to give up. Keep us shining with the grace of Jesus, in whose loving name we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Susan Gorin, "Three killed in Shasta County's Zogg fire; thousands flee," *Press Democrat*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/three-killed-in-shasta-countys-zogg-fire-thousands-flee/>.

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, "Until the Dancing Begins Again," *Journal for Preachers*, Traverse City, Michigan, March 31, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bride-groom-donate-wedding-food-to-shelter-for-women-and-children-cancel-reception-due-to-covid-19/>

^{iv} Ibid, Brueggemann.

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