

Devotions for the Second Week of Lent -- Sunday, March 17 to Saturday, March 23
Contemplations on Poverty and Desperation

Lament

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor;
Let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.
Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;
Under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.
They sit in ambush in the villages;
In hiding places they murder the innocent.
Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;
They lurk in secret like a lion in its covert;
They lurk that they may seize the poor;
They seize the poor and drag them off in their net.

Psalms 10: 1-2, 7-9

Readings

“Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or lacking clothes, sick or in prison and did not come to your help?” Then he will answer, “In truth I tell you, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.”

Matthew 25: 44-45

“An average of 10-15 family groups shop the clothing room each day.... We regularly provide food for 100 or more households each month.”

Faith in Action Website, www.faithinaction1.org/programs-services

I was sitting in my office at the church that very first year. It was almost Christmas and I was ready to quit. The debt. The grants. The audits. The staff. The poor. The donors. I was a mess, ready to call the bishop to request a circuit – four or five congregations – in the Upper Peninsula, when a knock came at the door. Actually, the person beat on the door as if it were a bass drum.

Because I had gone to the finest seminary in the country, where they taught us about empathy and sympathy, compassion and counseling, “seeing Jesus” in the poor and “entertaining angels unaware,” I yelled just before the birth of Jesus, “Go away, I’m busy.” In fact, I was agitated by the interruption. A Kilimanjaro-pile of paperwork awaited my attention or signature.

The intruder was not fazed. The banging began to sound like a battering ram. Every pound caused the door to shake in its frame, as if the person behind it was saying, “I don’t care how ugly you are, I’m going to stand here and pelt this door until you let me in.” Then, because Boston University equipped its grads with emotional intelligence and an “as you did it unto the least of these” theology, I screamed, “All right then, come in!...”

The door swung open ever so slowly and there on the other side was Carla. Like Tippy Toes, even if I hadn’t recognized her, I would have quickly guessed her occupation. She was every bit the television stereotype. Dressed in spandex tight pants with a loud, low-cut top, a leather coat and thick make-up, Carla was drenched in perfume. It really didn’t matter what she was wearing, though; customers were eager and willing to pay just about any street prostitute \$10 a half hour in the alley behind my church.

Without entering the office, Carla pointed her index finger at my face. “Rev. Fowler, you’ve ... got ... to ... get... her ... off ... my ... corner!”

I looked up. Like one of the emaciated children cowering by the Ghost of Christmas Present, a girl, just 12 years old, was in Carla's clutch. At that moment, despite the excellent education that I had been privileged to receive, I couldn't think of a thing to say. I summoned one of our caseworkers to call her parents and notify the authorities. My eyes followed them as the pre-teen was escorted out of the office. Then, Carla and I sat there alone on opposite sides of my desk. She spoke quietly and I will never forget what she said. "You know, Rev. Fowler, I wasn't so much worried about losing business, but when I looked at that little girl, I saw myself and I knew that the church could save her."

From **This Far by Faith**, by Faith Fowler
(available as e-book or paperback from Amazon)

Reflections

The Psalmist's Lament, on the prior page, speaks of absolute desperation – of imminent danger, of deliberate persecution, of being the target of predatory attacks, of being caged like an animal.

- Think about the relationship between poverty and desperation. How does poverty relate to being under attack, with no one to help?
- Besides poverty, what else can be a cause of such desperation?
- Consider a newcomer to our church – someone who has known desperation, is maybe getting help from Faith in Action for immediate needs, but who wishes to test the notion that "the church can save." What would you want that person's experience to be like, the first time they come?

Hymn

Well if I could I surely would
Stand on the rock where Moses stood
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't you weep.

Mary wore three links of chain
On every link was Jesus' name.
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't you weep.

Moses stood on the Red Sea shore
Smote' the water with a two by four.
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't weep.

Brothers and sisters don't you cry
They'll be good times by and by.
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't weep.

O Mary don't you weep, don't mourn
O Mary don't you weep, don't mourn
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't you weep.

One of these nights bout 12 o'clock
This old world is gonna rock.
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't you weep.

Old Mr. Satan he got mad
Missed that soul that he thought he had.
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't you weep.

God gave Noah the rainbow sign
Said, "No more water but fire next time."
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't weep.

Bruce Springsteen's take on O Mary Don't You Weep, **UMH #134**;
See www.youtube.com/watch?v=tebjsh7f_I .

Prayer

Dear Lord,
I know whose side You are on.
You are on the side of those who have nothing, and who are made to feel like nothing.
Help me to align myself with Your purposes; teach me to apply myself to places of hurt.
In the precious name of Jesus, Amen.