

The Song Must Never Die (Summer Saints 2021: Harper Lee)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 25, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

*How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy. (Psalm 137:1-6, NRSV)*

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’ The crowd joined in attacking them and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword

and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night, he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.
(Acts 16:16-34, NRSV)

We've been on quite a journey with our Summer Saints, with a look last week at missionary William Henry Sheppard and his adventures in the Congo. This week, we come back to one who lived a relatively much quieter life in small-town Alabama – but one who nevertheless had a profound and memorable impact on the world, and left us, in her own way, a *sermon* which has endured, and which still needs to be heard today, now as much as ever.

Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama, the youngest of four children of lawyer Amasa Coleman Lee and his wife Frances Cunningham Finch. As a child, she attended elementary school and high school just a few blocks from her house on Alabama Avenue.

She then attended Huntingdon College in Montgomery (1944–45), and then studied law at the University of Alabama (1945–49). While attending those schools, she wrote for campus literary magazines: The *Huntress* at Huntingdon and the humor magazine *Rammer Jammer* at Alabama.

At both places, Lee wrote short stories and other works about racial injustice, a rarely mentioned topic on such campuses at the time. In 1950, she moved to New York City, where she worked as a clerk for British Overseas Airways, and while doing that, she began writing a collection of essays and short stories about people in Monroeville. Hoping to be published, she presented her writing in 1957 to a literary agent recommended by her childhood friend and fellow Monroevillian Truman Capote. She was soon advised by an editor at J.B. Lippincott, which bought her manuscripts, to quit the airline and concentrate on writing.

Donations from friends allowed her to write uninterruptedly for a year. After finishing a first draft for a novel and turning it in, she was met with enthusiasm from her publisher, who recognized “the spark of the true writer” flashing in every line, though her work was deemed not yet ready for publication. It was, as she would describe it later, “more a series of anecdotes than a fully conceived novel.” During the following two and a half years, the publisher led Lee from one draft to the next until the book finally achieved its finished form.

After a few rejected titles, it was finally given the one we all know – *To Kill a Mockingbird* – and was published on July 11, 1960. The editorial team at Lippincott warned Lee that she would probably sell only a few thousand copies. Later, she would recall her hopes when it came out:

I never expected any sort of success with "Mockingbird." ... I was hoping for a quick and merciful death at the hands of the reviewers but, at the same time, I sort of hoped someone would like it enough to give me encouragement. Public encouragement. I hoped for a little, as I said, but I got rather a whole lot, and in some ways, this was just about as frightening as the quick, merciful death I'd expected.

Instead of a "quick and merciful death," Readers Digest Condensed Books chose the book for reprinting in part, which gave it a wide readership right away, and she won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction the following year.

There are few books written in the last century that could justly be seen as instant classics soon after publication. But without a doubt, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of them. It was almost immediately recognized as one of the great works of 20th century American literature, and within two years was adapted into a Hollywood classic, starring Gregory Peck as small-town lawyer Atticus Finch.

The story, in both novel and movie, is of course about Atticus and his two children, Scout and Jem, roughly Harper herself and her older brother. Their friend Dill is unmistakably Truman Capote. The character Tom Robinson – a black man whom Atticus defends in court against false accusations of raping a white woman – appears to be based on a composite of two actual men, victims of grave injustices. The novel is told from Scout's point of view and reflects the innocence of children growing up in the early 1930s in Alabama, but its treatment of southern life, race, law and justice, compassion and courage would prove to be unforgettable and still disturbingly relevant to our own times.

As suggested a moment ago, Lee was just about as nervous at the prospect of being *successful* as she was of being rejected, and she recoiled from the life of celebrity that she could have had. She was always a guarded and very private person and so largely stopped granting interviews in 1964, and fortunately for her, her wishes were respected, and she was protected by the residents of Monroeville, where she lived most of her life, though she did also maintain an apartment in New York City for many years.

A little later in life, she returned to Monroeville for good and moved in with her sister, Alice Finch Lee. She'd eat breakfast each morning at the same fast-food place and could be spotted picking up Alice from work. Alice was 15 years older than Harper and practiced law until she was 100 years old, working at the firm founded by their father.

Harper herself would live on quietly in Monroeville until February 2016 when she passed in her sleep at the age of 89. Her funeral was held at the First United Methodist Church there and was attended by close family and friends, with the eulogy given by her friend and Auburn University history professor Wayne Flynt, whom she once confided was one of the very few Auburn people she could stand 😊

But it was the Alabama-born journalist and writer Rick Bragg who perhaps put the coda on Harper Lee's life and work best when he said this,

The reason that book has endured is not just because it had a message of tolerance and a sermon against close-mindedness and cruelty -- which we need today as much as ever -- but it wasn't that. It was the fact that all of that was wrapped into one of the great stories and tales. And if it's not written pretty and with power, then it will not endure. People won't choke down a sermon. Harper Lee gave us a sermon with such beauty, grace, elegance and such southernness, it will endure after she's gone, it will endure after I'm gone, and it will endure after the tiniest baby in the stroller going through the Walmart is gone. It will endure forever. As long as people like a good story that means something, then Harper Lee's going to be with us.

One of the most common questions that readers ask about her famous novel and her perspective as an author is the significance of the title itself: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The one time that the phrase appears, it doesn't have any obvious applicability to the bigger picture – to the main things going on in the story. It is, however, a clue to the author's heart ... a clue to Harper Lee's vision. It appears in one of Scout's reflections on a conversation she and her brother have with their father when her brother begs to be given a rifle:

[Atticus said,] *"I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."* That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it.

"Your father's right," she said. "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

You see, for Lee, the mockingbird is both an actual bird and a *symbol* of sweet innocence, of fragile beauty – an avian singer of a touching song that persists, even long into the night. And *because* it is beautiful, and *because* it evokes joy in the heart, its singing is a blessing. Its singing is, in a very simple but real way, *sacred* and *holy*, enriching our lives – which is why it *must* be cherished and preserved.

Our *scriptures* today speak of a song that *God's people* would sing that both express and *convey* that life ... and of how that song can sometimes be hard to sing ... but also of why it *must* be remembered and must never die.

The psalmist, exiled from home and now a captive in Babylon, raises the lament:

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
[But] How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land? (Psalm 137)*

The exiles had nearly lost hope. Their home had been destroyed and now they were captive in a land a thousand miles away. We today haven’t faced that, but we do all know how wearying it is to continue hoping and believing and working for the right when all around us is so much that is wrong ... when there is so much hate and division and ignorance and disregard for truth ... when the good seems to fail and the lights fade ... when even those we have held up as models and heroes prove to have feet of clay. It’s so easy to hang up the towel and give in, or resign ourselves to the way things are.

But know this: The *mockingbird’s* song continues *long* into the night! Remember Paul and Silas in a Philippian jail – their feet locked into stocks in the deepest, dankest, darkest part of the dungeon ... the most God-forsaken place you could imagine. Remember them, *there* and *then*, praying and *singing hymns* to God! And remember what else the story tells us – that the other prisoners were *listening to them!* No, Paul and Silas would *not* let the song die, even in the midst of the deepest darkness. They would not let it die in them, and they were determined to share its life with others

We know from our own experience how easy it *is* to lose that song ... to lose our courage, our will, our motivation ... and yet, keeping that song *alive* – that song of Hope and Beauty, Love and Compassion, Justice and Truth – is what makes life worth living and is essential to us keeping our humanity in the face of so much inhumanity.

There is still good in this world and it’s worth standing up for. And to do that calls for courage, and courage is no easy thing. At one point in the story, in the context of Tom Robinson’s trial, Atticus tells Scout:

I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what.

But to take that stand of courage is not just about will-power. It’s also about *empathy*, about making the effort to truly *understand* others, even those whose actions and attitudes we *must* resist. It’s about the ability to consider things from another’s point of view ... as Lee puts it, to “climb into [another’s] skin and walk around in it.” Only then can we truly *see* others, and only by truly seeing others can we know *compassion* for them and share it – and so cherish and preserve the Lord’s song. To the glory of God! Amen.