

“Heart of Wax”**Rev. Maeve Hammond****Psalm 22:1-15 | Hebrews 4:12-16****13 October 2024**

So, we find ourselves in one of the harder psalms to read, Psalm 22. It's about isolation, hopelessness, loss, loneliness, told in very sensory and somatic language. It's one of the harder psalms to read, but it's also, from my perspective and from conversations with others, one of the more relatable psalms that speaks to a universal condition. Isn't that interesting? When we're down, angry, or frustrated, we may connect much more to Psalm 22 than one of the more uplifting psalms of praise. Psalm 22 is a beautifully-written but grotesquely-presented representation of what grief and separation does to the body. Let's hear the fourteenth verse again: "I am like water draining away; my bones are all disjointed; my heart is like wax melting inside of me." I remember taking a course on the Psalms with one of my professors and mentors, Dr. Karl Plank, and feeling "stuck" in class as we read this verse. I had never heard hard feelings described this way. Have you ever had an emotion so strong that you can physically feel it in your body—taking root in your lungs and chest, your head, or in your gut? When I read this verse this line, "my heart is like wax melting inside of me," I picture the psalter as a house of wax which has just been lit: destroyed and unable to be rebuilt.

The lectionary paired Psalm 22, a psalm of lament—the largest category of psalms in the book—with a short, five-verse passage from Hebrews that doesn't seem to have much to do with meltdown-type of feelings. Hebrews 4, in contrast, feels logical, steadfast, cut-and-dry, and confident. The imagery of these passages are very different: melted wax collapsing in on itself versus a sharp and sure sword, like something from the King Arthur tales. Even their historical settings are different. The psalms were

written hundreds of years before Jesus. So, why did the lectionary put these two texts together?

Despite these differences, I'd like to invite you to consider the possibility that these texts are, in fact, speaking to each other. We also know that Jesus quotes Psalm 22, this passage we've been studying today, as he dies on the cross in the Gospel of Matthew and Gospel of Mark: "My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?" In our Second Wednesday Bible Study last week, we read over this text, and one of our "theologians" (as I like to call us) pointed out that Psalm 22's psalmist's enemies mock them like Jesus's enemies mocked him before his death. It's not uncommon to find parallels and references from one book to another, from one century or millenia to another.

What else is similar about these two texts? Although they're historically different, their audience actually shares some commonalities. The psalmist laments because they're afraid. They're being persecuted. They feel separated from hope. The threat of empire and war encroaches upon their very being, their religious, social, and cultural identities. Does any of this sound familiar? The story of the psalmist may sound like those of the early-Christian or Christ-following communities in the Roman empire. In fact, some Bible scholars believe that the Letter to the Hebrews was written for Jewish Christians who lived in Jerusalem, who were, like the psalmist, anxious and afraid of attacks on their identities.

With this context, I'd like us now to zoom in and narrow our focus to two particular sections of these texts. We already know the first one well by now: from Psalm 22:14, "I am like water draining away; my bones are all disjointed; my heart is like

wax melting inside of me.” And, let’s pair that with the opening verses from the New Testament passage. From Hebrews 4:12-13, the epistler (a fancy word for letter-writer) says, “12 God’s word is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It pierces so deeply that it divides even soul and spirit, bone and marrow, and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 Nothing is concealed from God; all lies bare and exposed before the eyes of the One to whom we have to render an account.”

The psalmist lays out all of their despair and anger and gives it all to God. If we read the lectionary texts in order, the Hebrews epistler seems to respond to the psalmist. What does the epistler say? “God already knows.” God has already seen the hurt, the rejection, the loneliness. “Nothing is concealed from God; all lies bare and exposed.”

Here’s what I think is at the core of each of these passages: there is nothing too painful, too scary, too angry, or too sad that we can hide from God. God can see through us, through every little piece of us that we try to conceal. God can tolerate, even encourage, our heart melting like wax—our gripes, our worries, our anxieties, our grief ready to combust, explode, and meltdown. God’s wisdom can turn us inside-out and tear us apart in the best way possible, dividing soul and spirit, bone and marrow, thought and intention to find out who we really are, mess and all. And, guess what? God still loves us anyways. God already knows us and wants to keep knowing us. God still wants us to be part of our family. God doesn’t want us to give up. God doesn’t want us to hide. God doesn’t expect perfection. Maybe, actually, we can benefit from having a softer, more malleable, more meltable heart.

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The past few weeks, I've been taking a course called Animating Antiracism in Faith Formation. Developed for the United Church of Christ by Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training, this six-week course seeks to frame antiracism and explore how it challenges the church to reckon with its investment in white dominance and systemic racism. Throughout Animating Antiracism, the cohort, facilitators, and I have engaged in conversations about the white-dominant theologies and beliefs we have been taught, that we have inherited, and that we still see and/or perpetuate in our work as ministers. The work of this course intends to melt our hearts a little more each time we meet. Let me explain what that means.

The creators of Animating Antiracism strongly believe that being antiracist isn't just checking off boxes on a list of "shoulds," like, I *should* read this book I saw in the New York Times, or I *should* attend this panel discussion, or, I *should* learn the right language to speak about racism. It's not quite like that. Crossroads believes that antiracism is a *way of being*—this is where a more malleable heart is needed. They believe we must melt our heart and create a new way of being in our ideology and our behavior that guides our innermost beliefs and outermost interactions with the world.

Antiracism, they say, is a way of being that systematically undoes these mindsets: dominance, perfection, individualization, competition, scarcity, disposability, and secrecy. Do any of these sound familiar? Crossroads says these mindsets have mistakenly been taught as the "keys to success" in the United States. But, they don't actually keep us safer, connect us deeper, or help us get closer to our authentic selves. Here's what they actually do: they serve to keep power concentrated where power

already is—in the dominant social group. These mindsets hurt everyone and actively perpetuate varied, complicated, and all-too-common supremacy in our institutions, our relationships, and ourselves. They say there is only one right way to live, to believe, and to act. They discourage messiness, nuance, holding multiple truths and realities at once, and asking for help. The mindsets of supremacy actually discourage us from being who God already knows us to be.

Dominance, perfection, individualization, competition, scarcity, disposability, and secrecy: the sins of supremacist thinking. Do you struggle with one of these more than the others? I know I personally have the hardest time with perfection. I want to know when and how to say and do the right thing. I worry if I'm moral or ethical enough. I sometimes stop myself from stretching myself out of my comfort zone or taking risks because I'm afraid I'll fail, and my veneer of competence and strength will shatter. I can be quick to correct others and try to persuade them to my perspective, which, of course, is the right one (joking). My fear of imperfection has led me in the past to isolate myself, push away hard feelings, hide from discomfort, even when—especially when—I feel as drained and disjointed and melted as the psalmist and as in need of God's living and active word as the epistler. *That's why* I need this course. *That's why* I want to practice the messy work of melting and reshaping my heart into one that reflects the values I actually want to live out – not the values that supremacist culture has taught me.

I believe these texts are telling us that God wants us to embrace the mess. And, when the mess gets overwhelming or too much for us to handle, I believe God wants us to, as Hebrews says, “confidently approach the throne of grace” whenever we need it. That's why it's there. God wants us to find our authentic selves, to feel everything we

feel, to do hard things like subverting and rejecting supremacist thinking, to do brave and Kingdom-seeking things like asking for help and committing ourselves to an antiracist way of being that touches every part of our lives.

One way we can start exploring our commitment to a heart-melting way of being is to honor Indigenous Peoples' Day—not just for this weekend, but for the long term. Think about the ways supremacist culture has told you narratives about ownership, who belongs in or on a certain land, migration, racism. Think about the ways this culture has impacted your country, state, city. What are some of the ways you could melt your heart, chip away at these narratives, undo supremacist ideology and behavior? Beyond your everyday life, try for yourself to consider what would mean if you try deconstructing and decolonizing your *theology*—when you worship or meditate on God, what are ways you can ask God to intervene and melt your heart and take away the learned sins of supremacy?

In honor of Indigenous Peoples' Weekend, I invite you to listen to this reflection on peace from Steven Charleston, author, retired American Episcopal bishop, and citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. You can find this reflection in a few different places, but I found it in one of his newer books, called *Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage*.

AN OFFERING OF PEACE. I have achieved few things in my life worth noting, but one thing I have achieved is important—not because of what it reflects about me, but because of what it may offer to you. I am a person at peace, at peace within myself, at peace with the world around me. All my faults are intact and fully apparent, but deep in my spirit's core, I am a calm soul. What does that mean? According to the ancient tradition, it means that I have something I can share.

The peace I feel is not something I am to keep, but give away. So, please receive the one true thing of value that I can give: this offering of peace for your life.

May God grant us the peace of mercy. May we confidently approach the throne of grace in radical love and hospitality towards others and ourselves. May our way of being change here, now, for the better and for God. Amen.