

Friday, April 18: I Dreamed a Dream (Good Friday)

Written by Matt Benton, Lead Pastor, Messiah United Methodist Church, Springfield, VA

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0c5Y1J8ihMN8vvQ3bsoxlZ?si=3d1ee94fef9d48dc>

*I dreamed a dream in time gone by
When hope was high and life worth living
I dreamed that love would never die
I dreamed that God would be forgiving*

In 1962 Fannie Lou Hamer was 44 years old. She'd been working in the cotton fields as a sharecropper for 37 years. One August night she attended a church service where she was informed of her right to vote and was challenged to go down to the county courthouse to register.

She travelled with a group by bus to the county seat. When they arrived, the rest of the group remained on the bus, too scared to go in. Fannie Lou Hamer was the first off the bus in the circuit court's office. However, her first time she failed the literacy test and her application was denied.

On the way home, the bus that was transporting the group was pulled over and the bus driver arrested for driving a bus that too closely resembled a school bus. The rest of the group was left on the side of the road waiting. Wondering if they too would be arrested, or worse. In the middle of that anxiety and worry, Fanny Lou Hamer started singing hymns.

*But the tigers come at night
With their voices soft as thunder
As they tear your hope apart
As they turn your dream to shame*

While Fannie Lou was making her way home from the courthouse, the county clerk called the owner of the plantation where Fannie Lou and her family had worked for nearly two decades. The clerk reported Fannie Lou's attempt to register to vote. When Fannie Lou arrived back at home, the plantation owner was waiting for her. He told her she had two options: withdraw her application to vote or leave the plantation, her home, and his employment for good.

Fannie Lou left her husband and their adopted daughters and went to stay with friends. The next day she went back to the county courthouse but was denied the test. So she went back again. And on her third attempt she passed the test and was registered to vote. She continued to be involved in the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi.

In 1963, on the way back from a Civil Rights Conference, she and the group she was traveling with were stopped by the police and everyone was arrested. While in the county jail, Fannie Lou and other members of her group would be beaten and tortured by police officers.

After other members of her group were beaten, police officers led her into a large room. There, two black men from the jail were told to beat Fannie Lou or face a beating themselves. Fannie Lou was held down while the men beat her with a makeshift blackjack until they exhausted themselves. Then the police officers took their turn. Fannie Lou suffered kidney damage that would never heal and had a blood clot over her left eye that nearly blinded her permanently. She was led back to her jail cell where she hurt so badly she couldn't sit down.

*I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed*

While she was laying in that prison cell, body still broken from the beating, she began to sing.

*"Paul and Silas was bound in jail, let my people go.
Had no money for to go their bail, let my people go.
Paul and Silas began to shout, let my people go.
Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go."*

Charles Marsh notes, "Her songs of freedom gave voice to her suffering and the suffering she shared with her friends. Their singing did not remove their suffering or the particularities of their humiliation; rather it embraced the suffering, named it, and emplotted it in a cosmic story of hope and deliverance."

That cosmic story is the story of Christ crucified. Christ mocked and beaten, tortured and killed for the sins of the world, for your sins and mine. There was a dream that was this world, there was a dream that was creation and humanity; but on Good Friday all we are left with is a hellscape of violence and death. For God so loved the world, he gave us his one and only son; look what we've done.

Now life has killed the dream I dreamed...

Even still, the spark of hope that caused Fannie Lou Hamer to sing on that prison floor still rages against the darkness. That light, though faint, still shines. That light is grace, an invitation to wonder could there be more than violence and judgement? Could there still be a new word? Might the story, might the song, go on?