October 11, 2026
Dr. Taure Brown preaching

A Root Out of Dry Ground

Scripture: Isaiah 53:1–6 and Mark 8:34–35.

Opening

Good morning, Belmont. Thank you Pastor Purdue for the invitation, and thank you for welcoming me into your pulpit this morning.

This month you have been asking a big question: what does God call us to in public life? What does faithfulness look like not just in our prayers, but in our policies and our practice?

As I prepared my comments, I went digging in Rev. Lawon's archives. I found his notes for a sermon he preached in 1974, honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

They are typed on thin paper, all in capital letters. There are typos. There are words crossed out and words written in by hand. And at the top of the first page is the title: "A Root Out of Dry Ground."

That phrase comes from the reading we heard this morning. Isaiah 53, verse 2: "For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground."

I have not been able to shake that image. And this morning I want to suggest that God is calling the church to be a root out of dry ground right now. I also want us to be honest about what that will cost.

To understand the root, we first have to understand the ground.

Most scholars believe these chapters of Isaiah were spoken to a people in exile. Babylon had conquered Jerusalem. The Temple was rubble. Families had been marched hundreds of miles from home, and they were living as captives in someone else's empire.

You can hear their despair all through these chapters. "My way is hid from the Lord," they say. "The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me." They had stopped expecting anything to change.

Rev. Lawson summed up their condition in one line I cannot forget. He wrote that they were "people in whom hope unborn had died."

Not hope that was lost. Hope that never even got the chance to be born.

I wonder if that sounds familiar.

We live in a time when neighbors see each other as enemies. When people distrust every leader and every institution, including, if we are honest, the church. When young people have stopped expecting the future to be better than the present. When the suffering of others scrolls past us on our phones, and we keep scrolling.

I am not here to tell you which party to blame. The point is that dry ground is not only a political condition. It is a spiritual one. It is what happens when a people stops believing that anything new can grow.

That was the ground Isaiah stood on. I believe it is the ground we are standing on too.

But here is the good news. Dry ground is exactly where God likes to work.

Into that exile, the prophet speaks of a servant who will grow up "as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground."

As Christians, we rightly see Jesus in this servant. The one despised and rejected. The one wounded for our transgressions. But Isaiah also does something we often miss. Again and again in these chapters, God calls a whole people "my servant." Not just one person. A community.

Which means this is not only a passage to admire. It is a calling to accept.

And notice something about roots. A root is not a flower. Nobody plants a garden to admire the roots. Roots grow underground, out of sight. They do the unglamorous work of holding the soil together and feeding everything that grows above them.

Isaiah says the servant had "no form nor comeliness." People looked right at him and "esteemed him not." Even the prophet who wrote these words is hidden from us. We do not know his name. In his notes, Rev. Lawson typed that we have this prophet's sermons. Then he took a pen and corrected himself. We have only *pieces* of his sermons.

The most important work God does in dry ground often looks like nothing at all.

Let me tell you about a root right here in Nashville.

In 1959, a young Methodist minister named James Lawson began holding workshops in the basement of Clark Memorial Methodist Church. A handful of college students came. Diane Nash. John Lewis. Bernard Lafayette. C.T. Vivian. And others whose names most of us will never know.

Week after week, they studied the teachings of Jesus and the methods of Gandhi. And they practiced. They took turns sitting at pretend lunch counters while others shouted at them, blew smoke in their faces, and pulled them off their stools. They practiced not hitting back.

Nobody wrote headlines about those workshops. Nobody esteemed them. It was a root growing underground.

Then in February of 1960, that root broke through the surface. Those students walked downtown and sat at the lunch counters. By that May, Nashville had begun desegregating its lunch counters, one of the first major cities in the South to do so. And the students trained in that basement went on to shape the Freedom Rides, Birmingham, Selma, and a movement that changed this nation.

It all grew from a root in dry ground. In a Methodist church basement.

So what does this have to do with Civil Christianity?

We sometimes imagine the church's public role as simply picking the right side of every policy debate. That matters. But Isaiah does not end with a policy platform. Isaiah ends with God saying, "I create new

heavens and a new earth." A world where no one weeps, where people enjoy the work of their own hands, where no one will hurt or destroy.

Notice who does the creating. God does. We do not build the kingdom by our own strength. But we are called to be its root. A seed of the new society, here and now. A place where a dry and suspicious world can see, in miniature, what God intends for all of it.

John Wesley taught that there is no holiness but social holiness. Our faith was never meant to stay inside these walls. When this congregation feeds the hungry, welcomes the stranger, tells the truth, and loves across the lines that divide this city, it is not just doing charity. It is showing the world that something new can still grow.

But roots in dry ground do not grow without cost.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus has just told his disciples that he will be rejected by the authorities and killed. Peter pulls him aside and rebukes him. And Jesus turns to the crowd and says, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

We use that phrase a lot in church. Someone gets a hard diagnosis, and we say, "That's my cross to bear." And God is surely with us in our illnesses and our hardships. But Jesus is pointing to something more.

The people listening to Jesus knew exactly what a cross was. It was how Rome executed people it considered a threat to its order. A cross

was not a misfortune that happened to you. It was the price of defying the powers.

Rev. Lawson put it plainly in his notes. The cross is something you can pick up or refuse to pick up. It is when you decide to obey God first, and then deliberately accept the risk, sacrifice, and struggle that come with it.

That distinction matters, especially for anyone who has ever been told by the church to quietly endure their own mistreatment. Jesus is not asking the oppressed to accept oppression and call it a cross. The cross is the risk you choose when you stand up against suffering, for yourself and for your neighbor.

Let me tell you when I first felt that call.

It was my senior year of college. I was home visiting my parents for the weekend, and I saw a video. It showed the killing of a sixteen-year-old boy in Chicago named Derrion Albert.

I didn't know Derrion. I had only been to Chicago once in my life. But I wept. I cried so hard it surprised me. Because I had seen things like that happen in my own hometown. Derrion's story wasn't unique. The only thing unique about it was that someone caught it on video.

And in that moment, I knew God was calling me. I had to do everything in my power to stop this kind of violence in our communities.

Now, I would love to tell you I answered that call right away. I didn't. My friends were thinking about their careers and graduate school. Being "the activist" was not a popular thing to be. So like a lot of people, I tried to ignore it.

But the call does not go away. So I started learning everything I could about what causes community violence. And anyone who has truly studied it knows you cannot talk about violence without talking about poverty. About education. About the criminal justice system, about housing, about health care.

The more I studied the institutions that reproduce that suffering, the more I understood that speaking about them would come at a cost. My analysis was not always popular, because it asked people to question things we have been taught to believe. When Troy Davis was executed, I said publicly that I stand against the death penalty. Not everyone wanted to hear that.

There is risk in taking a stand. There is risk in refusing to be neutral in the face of human suffering. And in these times, that risk feels more intense than ever.

But that is what the cross is.

So let me be specific. Because a cross that stays abstract is no cross at all.

The church must take up the cross of dismantling racism. Not just the racism in our hearts, but the racism built into our systems. In who gets

the loan and who gets denied. In which schools get resources. In who gets stopped, and who gets the benefit of the doubt. And yes, in our own churches.

The church must take up the cross of standing with our immigrant neighbors. Scripture could not be clearer: "The stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself." And Jesus said, "I was a stranger, and ye took me in."

That does not mean simply offering our thoughts and prayers. Prayer matters. But a prayer that never costs us anything is not a cross. It means putting our money on the line. Putting our vehicles on the line. Putting our food on the line. And when it comes to it, putting our bodies on the line.

And the church must take up the cross of challenging an economic system that exploits the many and enriches the few. Hear the prophet Amos: "Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

None of these crosses are easy. None of them are safe. That is how you know they are crosses.

We love Easter morning. But we cannot get to the empty tomb without walking the road to Jerusalem.

In the spring of 1968, sanitation workers in Memphis went on strike for a living wage and their basic dignity. They carried signs that said,

"I AM A MAN." Rev. Lawson was there, and he called Dr. King to come stand with them.

Many voices told King to stay away from Memphis. It was too dangerous. But in his notes, Rev. Lawson wrote this: just as Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, "I saw Martin set his face towards Memphis."

He heard the call. He denied himself. He took up the cross.

People sometimes ask me what it means to lead an institute named for James Lawson. It means everything. It means I have a place to live out my calling. Every day I get the chance to join the struggle to dismantle injustice and build the beloved community. Every day I get to show people that there is a better way. That we don't have to live like this. That we can fight with a force more powerful than violence. Rev. Lawson and Dr. King called it soul force.

Belmont, the ground is dry. You can feel it. But dry ground is where God does God's best work.

So here is my invitation. Take up the cross with whatever God has placed in your hands. If you have money, give it where it changes lives, like organizations supporting families who have been torn apart by immigration enforcement. If you have a car, give someone a ride. If you have a table, set another place. And if all you have is your voice, then use it. Speak boldly against the injustice you see.

It may not look like much. Roots never do. Neither did a basement full of college students in 1959. Neither did a carpenter from Nazareth.

But hear the word of the Lord, from earlier in this same book of Isaiah: "Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert."

May we be a root out of dry ground. May we be a seed of the new heaven and the new earth that God is bringing. And may we have the courage to take up the cross and follow.

Amen.