

Darkness hidden is Wisdom Lost

Micah 6:1-8, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

There is an old African proverb (with many variations around the continent): “Until lions start writing down their stories the hunters will always be glorified.” This wise proverb states a seemingly obvious truth that has only recently been brought to the forefront of historical discussion: if the oppressed are not given the opportunity to tell their story, our history will always focus on the oppressor. His-story is almost always the story of the hunter (the oppressor); the story is “his.” We are forced to rely on the hunter’s words, because we do not know what happened to the lion in the jungle. (Alydia Smith, United Church of Canada website).

What was life like before the hunters found them? What was life like hiding from the hunters, hurting because of the hunters and mourning – due to the hunters. Celebrating *Black History Month* is one way that we attempt to get a fuller picture and understanding of our narrative as *the whole people of God*, a people that includes both lions and hunters.

This sermon will include words from people of colour from yesterday and today and I am honoured to share their wisdom.

M. Shawn Copeland, a Professor of theology at Boston College and newest voice witnessing to the African American Religious Experience calls the wisdom lost “dark and hidden wisdom.” Her book *Knowing Christ Crucified* (Orbis Books, 2018) tells of the enslaved peoples of North America who came from free and diverse nations on the continent of Africa and their encounter with Jesus Christ.

Here is some of their dark and hidden wisdom: The enslaved people knew in their bruised bodies the power of prayer and openness to the Divine. From the intense and bewildering terror of the dimly lit holds of slave ships during the Middle Passage and the violence of enslavement, these women and men came to apprehend, experience, and surrender to absolute dependence on God. This is their gift of dark wisdom to all who encounter opaque joy wrapped around the “magisterial sorrow” of the spirituals. (Copeland, 34)

Today’s Scripture, written by Paul, a man of brown skin, deep faith and disturbing inclusive theology.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. *1 Corinthians 1:18-31*.

He notes that God chose foolishness as a way to reach every human! God chose to be poor, powerless, human, itinerant in life, tortured to death and still more powerful than any wisdom of anyone.

And yet that foolish wisdom was again twisted throughout the centuries. All the beautiful ways God comes to us in the dark of night, the cloud of unknowing and the peoples of darker skin shades, these were whited out by the concept – one only ever “made up” and never proven: skin shade and culture were to be graded on one culture’s measuring stick and if you were not “civilized” enough, pale enough and wealthy enough...you were not deserving of respect, freedom, or even life.

As the prophet Micah cried out:

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with the people and God will content with Israel. O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! (*Micah 6: 1-4*)

What would God accuse us of today?

“I have freed you from dirty water and given you sanitation, I have freed you from debt labour and the need to have slaves. And yet, you fools have not shared these gifts with the world but hoarded them according to skin shades!!”

I am known in my friends’ circles as being afraid of blood. Unless taken in small amounts by a caring nurse I faint and am “disgusted” by the sight of it. So I was always uncomfortable with the spirituals that praised Jesus’ blood pouring out as a sign of freedom, salvation and God’s ever present love in the midst of suffering.

I thus avoided the deep and world changing spirituals created by children of God, enslaved and whipped, hung and de-humanized. The writer James Cone calls me out like Micah calling out his people: how dare you think that Jesus’ story can be separated from children of God, enslaved and whipped, hung and de-humanized – that is exactly who Jesus was!!

In privileged faith circles we can use blood and pain as metaphors so easily. James Cone calls this “spiritualizing the cross,” in his book *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (Orbis Books, 2011). Heaven forbid, we use the cross as actual reality of pains, torture and deaths in our own cultures’ histories.

A symbol of death and defeat, God turned it into a sign of liberation and new life. The cross is the most empowering symbol of God's loving solidarity with the "least of these," the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices. Christians must face the cross as the terrible tragedy it was and discover in it, through faith and repentance, the liberating joy of eternal salvation.

But we cannot find liberating joy in the cross by spiritualizing it, by taking away its message of justice in the midst of powerlessness, suffering, and death. The cross, as a locus of divine revelation, is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power. The religious authorities of Jesus' time were threatened by his teachings about the reign of God's justice and love, and the state authorities executed him as an insurrectionist--one who "perverts the nation" and "stirs up the people" (Lk 23:2,5). Even Jesus' disciples misunderstood his teachings that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected," "mocked and flogged and crucified" (Mk 8:31; Mt 20:19). They slept through his agony in the Garden (Mk 14:32), and deserted him when he was arrested, tortured, and crucified. One disciple betrayed him and another denied him, because a suffering Messiah was not the one they expected. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21). This reversal of expectations and conventional values is the unmistakable theme of the gospel. (Cone, 156-157).

The cross may be foolish but it is reality.

The resurrection may be foolish but it too is reality!

Voices of people of all colours will be raised and

Wisdom can be found in all peoples, seasons and at any time during a lifetime, a daytime, a nighttime.

Next week, we will discern the many light images and their wonder! Alone any metaphor is too limited for our God is abundant in all things. Blacks, browns and grays – yellows, oranges and whites – it is when all God's good gifts are celebrated and all human failures remembered that we can live the Gospel, know the Grace of God. I close today with words from Mitchell Anderson a member of the English River First Nation and a soon to be ordained minister in the United Church of Canada (whose reflections are included in Alydia Smith's 2017 collection for the United Church's *Why I Believe*).

I love Jesus. His followers, though, I'm not always so sure about. We're a confusing and strange bunch. We squabble among ourselves. We push our own agendas. We spiral around in passive aggressive drama. We're a mess.

And of course, we've always been a mess. Jesus' first disciples were caught up in their own petty power struggles and pet projects. They fought, they got it wrong, they totally missed the point of what Jesus was pointing toward. And so do we.

As someone who spends a lot of time in the institutional expressions of the church, I see the best and the worst of what we can do. I see how by working together we proclaim the arrival of the kin-dom in word and deed, how we confess the lordship of Jesus in and over all of creation, how we lift up holy people empowered to serve

God's mission in the world. And I notice how we bicker with one another, how we put our own pet projects and personal agendas in the place of the gospel. As far as pettiness goes, church politics are second only to hockey politics.

And so, as flawed as we are, as often as we get it wrong, I find this only more beautiful: that we are the fallen and broken ones whom God chooses to join God's redemptive work in the world. We're not chosen because we're the wisest, or because we're the most patient or the kindest. We're chosen to join God's redemptive project in our brokenness because God is reconciling all things—even the foolish and simple people like me who are part of the messy but beautiful Body of Christ.

God who overcomes the powerful and confounds the wise by things that are weak and foolish, use us, as messy and flawed as we are, to serve your will as you reconcile all things to yourself in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.