

I am the Dream and the Hope

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

May 7, 2023

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

My Message title comes from a line from a poem by Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise." This quote came to Bible scholar, Dr. Angela N. Parker, as she wrote the commentary on this farewell discourse of Jesus in John's Gospel that Tracey read this morning.

Angelou, who grew up in the in the American South, was involved in the civil rights movement, and she experienced extreme racism and sexism as a Black woman. That experience of prejudice and her defiance against such systems pours out of her poem.¹ It was interesting for me to learn that Nelson Mandela, who spent decades in prison because of his defiance against Apartheid, had this poem read during his Inauguration as President of South Africa. Here are just a few stanzas:

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.²

I'm going to state the obvious here: I am not a person of colour. I am not a woman. I *am* a person of privilege, so I read with humility and an open heart and mind this commentary by a Black Bible scholar, and I find her argument persuasive, the connection she makes between the Gospel and the experience of many people of colour today.

You see, the historical reality of the community within which John's Gospel was written, was that they lived a good century after Jesus had lived and walked the earth. That community of faithful lived long after Jesus felt separated from their synagogue that was destroyed. Because their worship place was gone, and because of the oppressive Roman Empire, the Jewish faithful who followed Jesus' teachings must have experienced loneliness and despair about their place in the world. These words of comfort from Jesus, Angela N. Parker suggests, ring with the same inspiration that gave hope to people of colour living under the yoke of slavery.

¹ Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" Speaks to the Experience of Black Women. www.oprahdaily.com July 20, 2022.

² Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" from *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*. Copyright © 1978 by Maya Angelou.

Philip and Thomas, distressed about Jesus saying he will be leaving them soon, want to know, “Where are you going, Jesus?!” They want, in essence, a road map, as if it is a place that he is going.

So, the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel reading have such comfort and assurance, but this passage has also been used for such harm, co-opted by some to suggest that the way to God is narrow.

I am the way and the truth and the life,
No one comes to the Father except through me. ³

Some scholars invite us to reflect a bit before imposing a simplistic interpretation of this. To people in slavery times in the United States and Canada, or who are still facing systems of racism, sexism, or prejudice of any kind, there is a need for words of comfort and assurance.

To the listeners of Jesus, these words certainly were. Not part of today’s reading, but part of the narrative in this chapter from John’s Gospel, Jesus says: “I know God, and you are my friends, you know me. So you, my friends, also know God.’ Salvation is less a theological hoop to jump through, more, it is Jesus stating a reality of Grace. You know me, so know that you are in a relationship with God, whom I call Father.

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As an educated man who enjoys great privilege, I find this image of empowerment gives me hope, it is an invitation not only to those experiencing injustice, but also people like me who are likely benefactors of the same unjust system. I wonder if we all, experiencing privilege, each of us in our unique way, maybe rather than feeling defensive hearing this voice of empowerment, maybe we might hear it as opportunity. I don’t like these systems that give me privilege, how do I challenge the system and stand with those harmed by that system? Injustice disconnects us, isolates us, severs relationships. Time and again, the Bible calls to Right those relationships again.

And I suspect that we all would welcome an opportunity to change the system: to dismantle racism in all its evil forms; to be in better relationship with those who have historically been excluded, ignored, put down.

God’s dream, God’s *kin-dom*, echoes again and again through the voices of those pushed to the margins. Jesus and his community are shunned by mainstream religious leaders of their time and end up living and teaching in the fringes, perhaps like people who speak from an experience and authority of having experienced great injustice in our time. May we hear those voices, and if we feel a bit defensive, may we realize that we *all* experience injustice, exclusion, loneliness, hurtful words, broken relationships, and grief. But, it is in that place of need, where a deep intimate relationship with Jesus and God likely begins. Amen.

³ John chapter 14, verse 6 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)