

Black History Month: A Sermon

by Brother Reginald Crenshaw

Let us Pray:

Make us part of your new world, O God. Create in us brave hearts to make changes in ourselves and to invite change in others. Open our hearts to receive gifts from those who are different, open our eyes to see you present within their lives, open our ears to hear their stories and open our mouths to be a voice for those who suffer in silence. May your church be a place of open arms and an open mind, embracing all those for whom you came, Jesus Christ?

We pray this in your name.

Amen.

Good morning Church and may Jesus' peace stand in your hearts this day, this season of Lent. Amen.

Today we can, as a result of the readings from Galatians and the Gospel bring together a new and different conversation. We are the people of God and our work as the baptized is to create through this celebration of Black History and the UN Declaration of the Rights of People of African Descent (2015-2024), a way to reflect on how our lives ought to be lived as a community of faith united with Jesus Christ.

The UN declaration explained its purpose this way, "that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected." As people of faith, we know every part of humanity is a reflection, an embodied wisdom and the power of God, and yet all of our collective humanity has been diminished and ruptured through the enslavement of African peoples and the colonization and exploitation of those same people's land. We must tell and reclaim the telling of our story so that others understand that we were in the past as well as the present active agents in our struggle for liberation and freedom. We are reminded of the importance of our telling of our story by the famous African writer and novelist, Chinua Achebe who says, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

So let us celebrate together as Galatians invites us today by "seeing the face of God in each other" and by "Seeing the race of God in all people." I would like to begin

with two quotes one from James Baldwin and the other Matthew Frye Jacobson that I consider a reflection and response to the NT Reading and the Gospel reading.

"History...is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely or even principally to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by its many ways, and history is literally present in all we do...And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror, because, therefore one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself."

And the Second: "Racism is fundamentally a theory of history. It is a theory of who is who, of who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what."

This morning's second lesson

And today's Gospel rejects this theory of history and the anthropology that accompanies it. The story of Black people in diaspora is also a story of why this theory of history must be rejected.

There is a song in the Black church, a spiritual, called "Steal Away." It was originally a field song by slaves to indicate there was a departure of the Underground Railroad to freedom. It goes this way, Steal Away, steal away, steal away to Jesus! Steal away steal away home. I ain't got long to stay here. My Lord he calls me by the lightning. The trumpet sounds within my soul. I ain't got long to stay here. This song is an editorial by the slaves on their longing for freedom. And freedom is symbolized by Jesus, the ever-present ally and intimate friend. As the psalm for today says, "Who keeps faith for ever; who executes justice for the oppressed...The Lord sets the prisoners free the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous." This notion of intimacy and friendship and oneness of Christ with each of us is expressed in this morning's Galatians reading: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ."

So when we sing the spirituals and when singing songs like Steal Away God's presence is acknowledged. Therefore, with God's permission slaves engaged in a praxis of resistance to their experience of oppression.

Singing for black folk is an ecstatic and liberating experience. It is an experience in which the Spirit, through Jesus, affirms our humanity and gives support and permission for any liberating action that would alter the reality of oppression. One can hear, indeed feel and experience the power of God expressed in the words you sing today. The power of these old slave songs which eventually developed into Gospel, jazz, the blues, rhythm and blues, hip hop reggae was then and is now shows the power of music in its ability to create, develop and communicate to us as Black people knowledge about and attitudes toward life. So, for Black people in the diaspora especially in North America and the Caribbean our music shapes our religious beliefs helps and assists us in developing rules, stories and other resources that allow us to develop the agency required in our ongoing struggle for liberation and freedom.

So our music expresses our knowledge of the world. It expresses our understanding that oppression must be short-lived because Jesus has declared in our Galatians reading that all oppression must be short-lived. Our music continues to give shape to a worked view and perspective, a concept of self and of society that supports our continual struggle. Music and our institutional church life provides us with the imagination to develop conceptual tools, rituals, worship tradition, theological traditions and social and political practices to resist oppression.

As we enter the final year of the UN declaration declaring the Years 2015-2024 as an International decade for People of African Descent, we must evaluate how we were able to move to a new place from our ancestors. Do we have the hope and desire to live into a new place as African people?

Some questions consider: What do you know and remember about the journey of Black People in Canada? How do the Gospel values outlined in today's readings become part of what we need to remember about our journey in Canada? What is the story we must tell of our life in this country in order for us to sing these words in "Lift Every Voice and sing"? "A song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us; sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us? What do we need to know about our life here in this country so that we can march on till victory is won?