

Womanist Sermons

WOMANIST SERMONS ARE A distinctive part of The Gathering: A Womanist Church. Sermons preached at The Gathering incorporate womanist theology and womanist biblical hermeneutics, informed by Black women's experiences of struggle, resistance to oppression, survival, and community building. In their interpretation of preaching texts, Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session and Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp, the co-pastors of The Gathering, draw from their experiences and from the stories of other Black women.

This chapter illustrates womanist preaching with sermons of the co-pastors, delivered at The Gathering.

Growing Forward (Acts 8:26-32)

Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp

In July of 2017, Rev. Y,⁶³ Dr. Irie, and I met at a Starbucks to discuss creating a new worship experience here in Dallas. We prayed about it and said we would see where the Spirit leads us. I still am not sure exactly what God is doing, but I know that God is doing something here at The Gathering. And to be honest, I'm in awe of whatever it is that God is doing because every week people show up here. Every week people tune in on Facebook from around the world. And I'm not exaggerating, because in addition to people we know who are watching throughout this country, we have an online Gatherer who watches from Ireland. I believe the Spirit is in fact moving and God is definitely doing something in and through The Gathering. As I sat and reflected on The Gathering and the gatherers, this particular text came to mind.

We decided some time ago to preach from the book of Acts for the month of April. Acts has so much going on as we begin to see the early church take form. We see that the followers of the Way are focused on the Spirit, prayer, being inclusive, caring for all in the community. While at the same time living with the tension of what it means to be a community with different people and moving parts. I believe we also see what it can look like when the community starts to grow and expand.

In Acts 8, we have the story of Phillip meeting an Ethiopian eunuch traveling back home. I have heard many preach about the importance of baptism and spreading the good news about Jesus from this passage, and I think these are ways to interpret this passage. I see that and some other things. What does it mean for one of the first expansions of the church to be done through a Black queer worshiper? I know we do not often talk about that part of this passage, but let's look at the text.

"An Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace" (Acts 8:27 CEB). This is the CEB translation, but y'all know I go to the Greek because sometimes things are translated differently. Some things are lost in translation, and honestly, I just have to read it for myself. So, I went to the Greek and it read that he was (*aithiops*), which is translated "Ethiopian" and literally means "scorched face" or "burnt faced." Now we all know when something is scorched or burnt, it is darker and usually Black. When you burn your toast, what color is it? As a (*aithiops*), he was a person with Black skin.

And this Black man, the text says, was a eunuch. What we need to understand is that in this context a person could be a eunuch by nature, force, or by choice. Eunuchs did not fit easily in gender identity categories because their gender was considered ambiguous, and as a result they were marginalized by their society. Yet, because they were not viewed as "manly," they were allowed in the private space of women as well as the public space of men. And since they could not have children, we often think that they could not engage in sexual activity, but that is not true. I know you cannot believe I am up here talking about sex in my sermon. I am and we need to do it more often, but not today. My point is the social locations of eunuchs were fluid, and Dr. Pamela Lightsey says, "To identify as queer is to assert a type of fluidity in life, particularly sexually."⁶⁴ So, I see the eunuch as queer.

A lot of times we are so busy looking at what is happening that we are not looking at the person it's happening to. But being Black and queer was only part of who he was.

We also know the eunuch was a worshiper because he came to Jerusalem to worship. But he was not just a regular dude; he had some power because he was over the treasury for the queen. So, we have this Black queer worshiping court official who worked for a woman, the Queen or Kandake of Ethiopia. This eunuch was likely extremely educated because he had a scroll to read; people didn't just have a lot of scrolls because they were expensive, and most people could not read in this society. Yet, here he is reading a text written in a language that is likely not in his first language. He is just one of the many examples of

educated Black people way back in history, that some folks try to act like didn't exist. This educated Black queer worshiper gives us one of the first examples of talking back to the text. The eunuch is reading, and he has questions.

I love that the Ethiopian eunuch talked back to the text; he had questions and rightfully so. I believe as we grow individually and as a community, we must explore our questions. But I also wonder, what if Philip had let the eunuch ask more questions instead of telling him what it means? Philip told him how he interpreted the text, what it meant to him. I do not believe we allow people space to grow by simply telling them this is what you have to believe. It seems that many times there are people who want to create miniature versions of themselves. They want the people to believe only the way they believe and do only what they want them to do. People cannot grow into who God is calling them to be if we are forcing them to be like us. I'm suggesting that in order for people to grow and for us to grow we have to allow them the space and opportunity to think for themselves about what following Jesus means in their lived experience.

If you received the "Into the Word" email this week, you read more of the passage than I read today and if you haven't read the whole passage, please go back and read it. As the passage continues, Philip tells him the good news about Jesus, and then the Black queer eunuch wants to be baptized. The more I sat with that, the more I realized that this has become the primary way for churches to evangelize and grow their churches. How many times have we been in a church and people are told the good news about Jesus and then told all you have to do is walk down the aisle and get baptized? I know I have heard it said many times before, but really that's only a partial truth. There is work and some hard days after you walk down the aisle. I believe far too often we fail to tell people what Jesus means in their lives after they've heard the good news, come down the aisle, and gotten baptized. Too often our churches are more concerned about growing the numbers of people in the pews than about helping the people in them grow. In this model, we just tell people about Jesus. It's not enough to tell people about Jesus. What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it mean to follow a radical Jesus whose intentional disruptions of systematic oppression led to his state-sanctioned execution? So how do we help people to walk and grow in that and what it means?

While I think the model drawn from this passage can be problematic, I also think looking at this passage can help us growing forward. Because one thing I know is that The Gathering does not fit that church model. As Dr. Melva Sampson said on our Womanist Wednesdays broadcast this past week, The Gathering is an innovative disruptor. The design of The Gathering with three women sharing in responsibility and leadership is a disruption to the hierarchal system of traditional church. And she is right. I think if we did not follow that model in our inception, we can't follow that model in our growing forward. So, what does that mean for us?

I believe there are some things that are helpful looking at Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, and there are some things we might need to do differently. Philip followed the Spirit of God and went to reach out to a marginalized person. I believe that being followers of a radical Jesus calls us to do that as well. "Where all are welcome" cannot just be a slogan; it has to be something we live. I see that one of the first expansions of the church was done through a Black queer body. I believe the passage shows how the church is to be inclusive. For us to be followers of the radical Jesus we must be radically inclusive. When we started The Gathering, we said one of our missional priorities is LGBTQIA equality. We recognized that God has created each and every one of us differently and yet loves us all. And the church should be the place that all God's children can come together. Unfortunately, instead of welcoming all God's children, people have abused and condemned Her children. That cannot be the case here for us. We must make sure this is a space that is safe and welcoming to all, and we must continue to follow the Spirit of God and reach out to people who have been marginalized, pushed aside, and hurt in our society, because that is what this radical Jesus did and that is one way we follow.

Another thing I think we must do differently from Philip in this passage is that we must walk with those who we tell about Jesus or come seeking to learn about and follow this radical Jesus. The eunuch got baptized and never saw Philip again. I understand that the text says the Spirit took Philip away and the eunuch went on rejoicing. I also recognize there are situations where you may not be able to walk with someone for whatever reason. And I believe in our community when we can, we need to stay with people. Don't just tell somebody about Jesus and then don't walk with them on their journey to follow Jesus. In order for us to grow individually and as a community we must walk this journey together, supporting one another and holding each other accountable. People should not have to try to grow on their journey alone. I'm not saying that people cannot grow on this journey alone; I just think growth is better within the community.

OK, those who know me know I'm not really the gardening type. I want to be, but it's just that I have a Black thumb and not because of the melanin in my skin. I'm really bad with trying to keep plants and things alive. It's not for lack of trying or not trying to learn either. I will read and it still does not quite work out with me. But one of the things I read is about companion plants. It's the idea that some plants grow better when they are near other plants than they do alone. This can also be true with food. Native Americans use this idea in their planting with what they call "Three Sisters." They plant corn, beans, and squash together and they grow better because they support each other. The beans provide nitrogen for the corn, the corn provides

support for the beans, and the squash becomes a living mulch that suppresses the weeds. Clearly these three items can grow separately, but together they grow even better because of how they support each other as they grow. We are the same way. Yes, we can grow if we walk on this journey by ourselves, but how much better can we grow together? Exploring our questions together? Reaching out to people together? Walking this journey together?

Today is six months since the first worship service at The Gathering. How do we grow forward? We grow forward together as we continue to become what God is calling us into. We grow forward by not separating our faith from what we live, which means we must care about the whole person and our community. We must develop our whole selves as followers of a radical Jesus. This means we tend to our spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, and financial parts of ourselves and those in the community. We must let the Spirit guide us, walk together, and follow this radical Jesus.

Delilah: You Don't Own Me (Judges 16:45)

Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session

Play song "You Don't Own Me."⁶⁵

"You Don't Own Me" is a song of a woman's resistance to gender stereotypes. It's a woman's song of staking claim to herself as an embodied human being who refuses to be trivialized or trifled with. She sings of taking herself back from any person or ideology that attempts to diminish her right to choose how she wants to live and who she wants to love. She will not be placed in a box of male expectation or fantasy. She does not need male companionship to make her whole, complete, or to feel worthy. Through her lyrics she rejects any kind of treatment deemed harmful to her sense of wholeness. So, she sings loud and self-assured, "You Don't Own Me."

Black Women Owned

The singer characterizes herself as an independent woman with freedom to move about society, self-actualize, and choose from a host of compelling options how to live her life. The woman who sings this remake, Grace Sewell, is white—just like the original singer, Lesley Gore, in 1963. Hearing Kyla Jade, a Black woman who was a contestant on "The Voice," sing the same song, "You Don't Own Me," took on an entirely different meaning for me. When you have the opportunity, listen to Kyla's rendition on YouTube. The difference between the song sung by Grace and Kyla clarifies what is meant when we say, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender." Same song, different social and cultural ramifications.

Both Women Sing of Ownership

Ownership is lack of independence, mobility, and freedom. We own cars, houses, land, and books. We restrict and approve their use; we own horses, cattle, cats, and dogs; we determine where they live, what and when they eat. These are our possessions—possessions because they are not human beings. We own things. People are not things.

Women are not things to be owned. Black women are not commodities. However, the way this world is set up—its institutions, systems, and economic structures—it appears Black women are still at risk of being owned. You do know there are ways to own human beings other than physical enslavement?

Here's what I mean. Black women in the United States who work full time, year-round are typically paid just 63 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.⁶⁶ More than four million family households in the United States are headed by Black women⁶⁷—and nearly one in three of those households live below the poverty level.⁶⁸ This means that more than 1.3 million family households headed by Black women live in poverty. Contrary to popular and stereotypical beliefs, these disparities are not due to the laziness and lack of drive by Black women. The economic disparity and inequity experienced by Black women is largely due to systemic and structural racism. Yes, there are countless organizations and nonprofits that address the immediate survival needs of Black women and their children. But according to Dr. Keri Day, author of *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*, such well-intentioned charity does nothing to "address the larger systemic concerns that [cause Black women] to lose confidence in an economic system that exacerbates their cycle of poverty."⁶⁹ Which is why I'm excited about the ministry The Gathering is doing with Dallas Black Clergy, a group of Dallas pastors fighting for structural and systemic change in Dallas. Change that will directly impact the lives of Black women and all people who are poor and marginalized. People entitled to a living wage, paid sick leave, affordable housing, and freedom to move around Dallas without reminders of white supremacy and the enslavement of African peoples by confederate monuments,

honoring those who fought for the enslavement of their ancestors. We reject ownership of Black women and all people. We resist the ownership of ideals, aspirations, hopes, and dreams of entire people.

Our preaching text describes a woman with ideals, aspirations, and dreams, a woman who defied ownership.

Surviving Independently

The book of Judges describes Delilah as an independent, freethinking, single woman, with her own crib and financial resources. There's no mention of parents, a husband, siblings, girlfriends, or an extended family. We don't know her occupation or how she made money to maintain her independence. She appears in Judges as a woman alone. A precarious place for a woman in that ancient time. With no male figures to protect her, she was a woman vulnerable. Yet, somehow, she managed. Somehow each day she put food on her table, paid her taxes, and maintained a home. She managed alone.

Some of us know about making it without a spouse or partner. Some of us know about piecing together an income. We work a little over here, and a little over there, to make rent, pay utilities and car note, and eat. Delilah was an independent woman who pieced together a living for herself in a patriarchal society—where male desire, ideology, preferences, and perspectives were centered and normative. In patriarchal societies the lives of women, children, slaves/servants, and warriors are owned by the patriarchs, whose interests they served.⁷⁰

Because Delilah was a woman with no father or husband to control what she did with her body,
where she took it,
what she thought,
how she reasoned, or
how she made decisions,

and because she was able to provide for herself, Delilah was able to survive to some degree outside the patriarchy. But maybe, just maybe, Delilah wanted more than survival.

Survival is what we do in the meantime. Survival is existing; survival is doing what it takes to not die. I believe Delilah wanted more for herself than to merely exist.

Independent and Dangerous

Dr. Wil Gafney in "Womanist Midrash of Delilah: Don't Hate the Playa Hate the Game" characterizes Delilah as "a true playa for real."⁷¹ With the money she would receive from the five lords, which in today's economy may have exceeded a million dollars—some scholars suggest it could have been as much as a billion dollars—Delilah would've been able to not just survive but thrive. A small price to pay for handing over a man she barely knew, didn't love, and who had been bad news already for two other women and the community. Read the text.

Dr. Gafney describes Delilah as a self-possessed, self-maintained woman who was bad news to patriarchy. Gafney says, "An independent woman with her own resources is dangerous, particularly to patriarchy."⁷²

When a woman is in control of her own body and her financial resources, like Delilah, she is presumed dangerous and must be controlled. After all, a woman's body was believed to have the power to "bring down the strongest of men."

Early church fathers, like Tertullian and Augustine, taught the church the dangers of women and our bodies—characterizing us as "the devil's gateway" and "temptress." A woman's body therefore had to be controlled. But no one controlled Delilah's body. Which is why I'm fascinated by Delilah's narrative. When I think of present-day Delilahs, women responsible and in charge of their own bodies and financial resources, I think of Rihanna, Alicia Keys, Pink, Angela Bassett, Oprah, Queen Latifah, India Arie, Gabby Sidibe, and Laverne Cox. But I also think of women of the past: Harriet Tubman, Harriet Baker, Julia Foote, Ella Baker, Sojourner Truth, Madam C. J. Walker, Shirley Chisholm, Ida B. Wells, Jarena Lee, Pauli Murray, and Katherine Johnson.

These women resisted ownership. Some resisted physical ownership and others ideological ownership—understanding that when the mind is free, possibilities are limitless.

Just Ask Jesus

Jesus resisted, refused, and rejected ownership. Perhaps you remember his words, "I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again" (John 10:17–18).

Jesus resisted every power and principality designed to own the human mind, body, and spirit. He resisted. Jesus told the powers, “You Don’t Own Me.”

Say Her Name (Judges 11:30-34)

Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp

On July 10, 2015, Sandra Bland was traveling in Waller County, Texas, and saw a police officer following behind her so she switched lanes to let him by. DPS Trooper Brian Encinia then pulled her over for changing lanes without signaling. He was initially rather friendly with her, but when he decided he did not like her attitude, things began to change. And when she refuses his request to put out her cigarette, he tells her to get out the car. The following minutes of their encounter are troubling. At one point he threatens to light her up with the taser. At another point she screams; he slams her head on the ground and she says she has epilepsy to which he responds, “good.” She is then arrested for supposedly resisting arrest. She ends up in jail on \$5,000 bond. Three days later she was found dead in her jail cell. “How did switching lanes with no signal turn into all of this, I don’t even know,” she says. When the lives of Black girls and women are taken, we are left asking questions like this or trying to figure out why did this happen? But sometimes we don’t even hear the story. Sandra’s story is one that many of us now know because people spoke up and began to ask what happened to Sandra Bland? So, we know her name. But there are too many women whose lives have been taken, and we don’t even know their names.

Which brings us to the passage for today. One that’s referred to as “Jephthah’s daughter,” because we don’t know her name and some of us have never heard her story. This particular passage is one that is difficult. Honestly, we can add this to the list of things I said I would never do but ended up doing. When I first read this passage, I said I would never preach this passage. But if we don’t, who will? I have been in the church pretty much my entire life. My mother had me in church every Sunday, Wednesdays, and the revivals, and I never heard a sermon on this text. But to be fair, it’s not just this text but many texts in the Bible that are never preached, particularly those about women. There are 205 named women in the Bible, not to mention the unnamed women like this one. If we do not bring up these passages and stories, who will?

This passage is so problematic for me. We have Jephthah pushed out of his home by his brothers because he was the outside child born to a prostitute. His brothers decide they do not want to share their inheritance with him because he was beneath them. So, he leaves and later when the brothers find themselves in trouble and the Ammonites are coming for them, they decide to go back and get the brother who knows how to fight.

Jephthah’s no fool though; he’s not going to fight for these brothers who didn’t want him around earlier for nothing. He negotiates what he wants. He tells them that if he fights and wins, then he is the leader and over all of them, and they agree. When he decides he is ready to go to war, he makes this vow to God that whoever comes out of his house to meet him will be offered to God as a burnt sacrifice.

That right there is the problem for me. You see nowhere in the text does it say God asked Jephthah for a burnt offering or for anything. But while dealing with his own insecurities and ambitions, Jephthah made his vow to God and I believe Jephthah did not care that he was most likely offering a woman in his family. You see in this culture when men returned home from war victoriously, women would run out to meet them playing hand drums and dancing. This was how the celebration began. So, when Jephthah was coming home victoriously from war, who did he think was going to come out of the house to meet him?

Jephthah only had one child, his daughter, and she was offered up. How many times have women been offered for sacrifice due to the insecurities or ambitions of a man? Many times, like this daughter, a man she knows and loves. How many times have Black and brown women’s lives been offered up for a sacrifice? And let’s not forget Jephthah was the leader at this point; he was the one in control. He is part of the governing powers. How many times have those with the governing powers of the state sacrificed the lives of Black and brown women?

But here Jephthah offered to God a sacrifice that God did not ask for. But you know, it’s easy for us to be hard on Jephthah, but do we sometimes do the same thing? Do we offer things that God is not asking for? Can we get caught up in our own ambition and insecurities? Sometimes we forget that obedience is better than sacrifice. Let me be clear, Jephthah still does not get a pass. Because you see, the text says when he comes home victoriously, his daughter is the first one who comes out dancing and he immediately starts blaming her. “Oh daughter, you have caused me trouble.” Really? She’s coming out the house dancing as is the custom, but it’s her fault. Victim blaming. Isn’t that how it always is? The first thing that happens when a woman is assaulted, raped, and/or murdered is the blame immediately shifts to her. What did she do? Why was she getting smart with the police officer? Why didn’t she just be quiet? What was she wearing? Doesn’t she have a criminal record? Anything to make it her fault. It’s always her fault, let them tell it. Well, I can’t let them tell it no more.

Because there are some who suggest that the daughter was willing to be sacrificed. I have even seen some say that she should have protested and maybe even appealed to religious authorities to stop her father. Maybe. But I also have to ask, “Do we always protest when our own bodies are being sacrificed?” Maybe we aren’t killed in one instance, but sometimes we are being sacrificed to a slow death that we do not stop. You’re looking like you don’t know what I’m talking about. Many of you who know me know that I lost my mother to breast cancer in 1999. Yes, cancer was the ultimate cause of death, but my mother did not go to the doctor when she knew she was sick. She was too busy taking care of this person, handling that issue, helping with this, that she continued to slowly sacrifice her own body without protest. I am a firm believer that too many of us do the same. Too often women especially agree to do more and more for everybody at the sacrifice of their own bodies and lives. So, it’s hard for me to say, “well, the daughter should have protested,” because maybe we should too. “No” is not a four-letter word. You don’t have to do everything people ask you to do, especially at the detriment to your life. Sometimes we have to choose ourselves.

The daughter didn’t seem to have much choice in this story, but she made one choice we do know and that was to spend her last days with her friends. She asked her father for two months to be with her friends. Biblical scholar Renita Weems says that this woman’s story does not end at her death. The story ends with her friends vowing to keep her memory alive and that is the good news. Her death or the one who killed her does not get the last word.⁷³

I believe that when our sisters are taken away from us, we cannot allow their deaths to be the end of the story. And we cannot let others hijack the narrative about their life or death. So, they will not make this her fault because we are going to tell her story. We are going to say her name. Her story will not go unheard because we are going to say her name. When their version of what happened doesn’t seem right, we will speak up, ask questions because we are going to say her name. Her memory will be kept alive because we are going to say her name. We will not forget her because we are going to say her name. We will rejoice in the lives of our sisters and honor them because we are going to say her name.

At this time we are going to call the names of Black women who have been taken from us by state or intimate partner violence. We will call the names of women and ring a bell. When the bell rings, please say, “Say Her Name.”

Eleanor Bumpurs

Shelly Frey

Kayla Moore

Miriam Carey

Michelle Cusseaux

Alberta Spruill

Tanisha Anderson

Rekia Boyd

Kyam Livingston

Yvette Smith

Darnisha Harris

Malissa Williams

Shantel Davis

Shereese Francis

Aiyana Stanley-Jones

Tarika Wilson

Kendra James

Sandra Bland

Kindra Chapman

Charleena Lyles

Women taken by intimate partner violence

Karen Smith

Shanna Desmond

Shaquenda Walker
Quanta Nashall Chandler
Shanice Williams
Dr. Sherilyn Gordon-Burroughs
Alicia Trotter

Do You See Us? (Luke 7:36-47)

Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session

Several years ago, while I was teaching a class with women leaving the life of dancing in strip clubs and prostitution, Stacey, one of the women in the class, said something I have never forgotten. Interrupting my class, she said to me, “This is the first time I’ve ever felt seen.” Her words pierced my heart. It had never dawned on me what it meant to be seen. I thought certainly she had been seen. Every day and night she caught the gaze of men and women eyeing her body as she danced and glided up and down the stripper pole. Of course, she had been seen. Or had she?

Watched but Not Seen

To see is to perceive with the eyes. It is to recognize and to understand. Stacey had not been seen. She had not been understood; she had only been viewed as a commodity and not as a woman with strengths and gifts that could glorify God and transform the world. What she had been was watched. There is a difference between being watched and being seen. The woman in our text had been watched. To watch is to observe, to view, and to stare at. It typically doesn’t involve acquiring knowledge of the object we are watching. People watch our Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts. When some of us go to high-end stores like Neiman Marcus or Bergdorf Goodman or Tiffany’s, we are watched. When we’re watched, our imaginations conjure up scenarios about who a person is and is not. When we watch, we stereotype; when we watch, we misjudge; when we watch, we misrepresent one another.

Watching Is Dangerous

Watching can be dangerous. I believe Jesus understood this. When we watch, we can only make assumptions based on limited and/or false information. Watching activates implicit bias because there is little or no information about who or what we’re watching. All we have to go on is what we’ve heard about who or what we’re watching. We have no firsthand experiential knowledge.

All people seemed to know about the woman in the text was that she was a certain kind of woman, a sinner. The text doesn’t say what her sins were. It doesn’t give any specifics. Perhaps because no one knew. No one took the time to have a conversation with this woman. But they watched her. Watching is dangerous for the one being watched.

Women are watched and raped. Transgender persons are watched and brutalized. Sandra Bland was watched as she failed to signal a lane change. Tamir Rice was watched as he played in the park with a toy gun. Philando Castile was watched as he reached into his pocket to retrieve his ID. Alton Sterling was watched as he sold CDs outside of a supermarket. Sean Bell was watched as he sat in his car before his bachelor party. Renisha McBride was watched while calling for help after an accident. All of these precious human beings were watched and not seen.

Jesus calls out the Pharisee, Simon the Leper, who had probably become one of Jesus’ followers after being healed of leprosy. Jesus calls him out for watching rather than seeing.

Religious and Blind

It is possible to be religious and still not see. We can go to church, pray, and read our Bibles and be blind. Just this week I read a post that asked, “Can you be an Elder in the church on Sunday and a racist the rest of the week?” I’ll add this, “Can you be an Elder on Sunday and a misogynist the rest of the week? Can you be a movie star with a top-rated show where you have an adopted Black child and be a racist in real life.” Yes, you can. It’s easy when we’re blind and unable to see.

This text makes it clear that one can even be a follower of Jesus Christ and blind. Simon, one of Jesus’ disciples, was blind to this woman’s true identity and worth. He does not see her as someone who is intrinsically the same as him—worthy of dining

with Jesus. No, she was a woman and a sinner; therefore, she was beneath him. She was less than. She was not deserving of a place at the dinner table. Simon's failure to SEE her impacted the opportunities made available to her. We give the benefit of the doubt to those we see. Second chances are for people we see. Big churches are given to people we SEE. Just because someone is religious doesn't mean they see.

Intentional Blindness

Then there are people who don't want their eyes opened. There are people who don't want to see, especially not to the plight of the racially oppressed. Some people are afflicted with intentional blindness. Some people only want to see certain kinds of oppressed people. We'll see the sex-trafficked child in Asia, but not the slick talking fifteen-year-old Black girl in the hood who, after being raped most of her life, shoots the next man who tries to rape her. Our seeing is selective. And I get it. Seeing is painful and uncomfortable. But women like the one in our text, and women like Stacey, need us to see them. Because life has kicked their behinds, they can't see themselves as worthy of respect and dignity. And so, they need to see themselves through our eyes until they can see themselves correctly. Our seeing helps them see. Therefore, we must reject intentional blindness.

God Sees

The good news in this text is that Jesus does see the woman. Jesus sees her clearly. Jesus sees how the community has marginalized her; Jesus sees how she's been misrepresented; Jesus sees her heart and her desire to be close to him; Jesus sees her need for advocacy and he provides it. The good news in this text is that because Jesus sees her, the playing field is level. Jesus exposed her faith and Simon's lack of faith. Jesus amplified her hospitality and confronts Simon's lack of hospitality. Jesus publicly elevated this woman with the bad reputation. Jesus' response to Peter let this woman know, "I See You." Not only did Jesus see this woman, but God sees us. In the Bible we read, "For [God's] eyes are upon the ways of mortals, and [God] sees all [our] steps" (Job 34:21). God sees us. The Bible says, "For the eyes of [God] range throughout the entire earth, to strengthen those whose heart is true to [God]" (2 Chronicles 16:9). God sees us. And because God Sees Us, may we learn to see one another.

If It Wasn't for the Women (Luke 8:13)

Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp

It is 2018, and it is January and we are all well aware that this is the birthday month of Martin Luther King Jr. This year marks fifty years since his tragic murder in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Festivities have already begun, and there will be all types of activities and services remembering him and the work he did and rightfully so; he did some significant things and made numerous sacrifices. And what I also know is that Martin and others whose names we know could not have done the things they did if not for the work of many others.

Particularly, if it wasn't for the women, the Civil Rights Movement as we know it would not and could not have been. It's not just the Civil Rights Movement, but so many other things. James Brown told us it's a man's world, but it wouldn't be a thing without a woman or girl. That's true, because the world as we know it would not be possible if it wasn't for the women. And far too often, these are the names we never hear. People don't know what they did, people don't know whom they've helped, and we aren't aware of the ways they have paved for so many after them. We cannot continue to allow their work to go unknown. One such woman is Pauli Murray.

Anna Pauline Murray was a poet, writer, lawyer, activist, and the first Black woman to be ordained as an Episcopal priest. She was raised by an aunt and grandparents in North Carolina after the death of her mother and murder of her father. Her aunt always emphasized to her that she must be the "best of the race." And that is exactly what she continued to strive to be.

Working her way through college at Hunter College, she had to quit for a period after the stock market crashed because she did not have even enough money to feed herself. But she pressed on and worked hard because she knew she had to be the best of the race. While at Hunter she stopped calling herself "Pauline" and started using "Pauli," a more gender-neutral name.

Pauli Murray became active in the Civil Rights Movement early. She applied to attend the University of North Carolina for graduate school, but received a letter stating people of her race were not admitted to that university. Never mind that she had white relatives who attended there, had been on the board of trustees, and had even created a scholarship for students there. She was Black and therefore, unacceptable. She wrote President Franklin Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt to inform them of the injustice she was experiencing, which was the beginning of a life-long relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt. Pauli Murray's

pushing the issue paved the way for Floyd McKissick to become the first Black person accepted to UNC Law School. But before Floyd could go to UNC, there had to be Pauli Murray. If it wasn't for the women.

This is not the only area you find Pauli Murray ahead of the class. After seeing injustice after injustice, Pauli Murray decided to go to law school. She was one of the three females at Howard Law School. It was here that she and other students staged sit-ins at restaurants in DC in the 1940s. The forties, twenty years before sit-ins were used by activists in the sixties. But at her time at Howard Law School, Pauli Murray realized that not only was she discriminated against because of her race, but also because of her gender.

At Howard there were opportunities given to the male students that were not offered to the female students. When she graduated at top of her class, she was awarded the Rosenwald Fellowship that should have allowed her to attend Harvard, but Harvard would not accept women in the law school. She wrote a letter to Harvard and said she would gladly change her sex to meet their requirement but was not aware of a way to do that. These experiences made Pauli Murray very much familiar with what she called Jane Crow, but that did not stop her.

Pauli Murray went on to write on equal opportunity in employment. Thurgood Marshall called her book *States' Laws on Race and Color* the Bible for civil rights attorneys. It was her writings that were used to make arguments in *Brown v. Board of Education*. It was her argument that Ruth Bader Ginsburg used to argue at the Supreme Court that the Equal Protection Clause pertains to women. Pauli Murray used her gifts in pursuing what she knew to be right.

While working with others in the movement, such as Ella Baker, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bayard Rustin, she noticed how Black women were doing the work but not allowed in leadership roles and were not part of the national policy-making decisions. The women could do the work but could not lead, and that was a problem. It's still a problem.

Yet long before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality," Pauli Murray made it clear that she could not separate her Black self from her female self, from her worker self. She saw herself as a Black female worker in the all but United States, trying to survive. And like so many others, she had struggles. She struggled with her multiracial identity. She struggled with her identity as a woman who loved other women sexually.

Faced with respectability politics, the pressures of her family to be the best of the race, and a sexist society, she never spoke publicly about her sex life. She did not call herself homosexual or lesbian. Pauli Murray experienced emotional and physical breakdowns which caused her to be hospitalized numerous times as she wrestled with how she felt on the inside versus what the world was telling her. She tried to make sense of her life. Pauli Murray believed she was a male trapped inside a female body. This was the only way she could rationalize her feelings for women and her desire to do jobs typically associated with men.

She did not have the language of transgender available to her, and I do not know if that is how she would identify herself. I know she did love other women sexually, which is more accepted today than back then. There are more preachers now, like all of us here at The Gathering, who do not condemn people for living the way God created them and loving who they love. But there still are not enough of them.

I know that Pauli Murray lived in a world where people were persecuted for being same-gender loving even when they were major contributors. Look at how Bayard Rustin was treated. I believe she dealt with her situation the best way she knew how, trying to be the best of the race, all while doing the work necessary to make things better for all people. She did the work and did not get the recognition she deserved. Much like the women in Luke who travelled with Jesus doing the work.

In Luke 8 we are told that traveling through the cities and villages with Jesus and the twelve were some women. The author names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others. Y'all know me, when I read this, I had questions. There were many others? Were there so many women with Jesus that you can't name them all? It's always interesting to me that when people discuss these women, they tend to focus on the demons or what they were cured from. Folks like to focus on other folks' past instead of the work. I'm not concerned about the demons or infirmities they had, because the passage states they were cured of that. I want to know about how they walked and worked with Jesus.

But here's the thing: the Greek says that the women *diakoneo* to Jesus and the twelve. The NRSV translates it as "provided"; other translations say "ministered" or "served them out of their resources." I personally translate it as "ministered to them," but even with that, some say they did "women's work" like shopping, cooking, taking care of things for them out of their own money. Others say it was more ministerial work such as preaching and serving like the twelve. Whichever way you want to interpret it, one thing is clear; these women were doing the work. And they do not get the acknowledgments or titles that the men get. You see, Luke tells us the women were there, although he only names a few; he never calls them apostles or disciples although they walked with Jesus and worked with Jesus just like the twelve.

So, their hard work gets overlooked. Their contributions are overlooked. Their names are not well known. Just like Pauli Murray. The women who walked with Jesus and Pauli Murray are all women of action. They not only hear the word of God; they act on it. These women understand that they are the hands and feet of Jesus. These women do things that go unnoticed but

make a difference.

The work Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and the many other women who walked with Jesus and brought their pocketbooks made it possible for Jesus to travel through cities and towns, healing the sick, raising the dead, and giving people a new life. If it wasn't for the women. The work of Pauli Murray along with many others, some of whom we know their names, many whom we do not, paved the way for us all. If it wasn't for the women.

I believe as a woman who is called by God to preach that I stand here on the shoulders of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Pauli Murray. I know the work of these women changed the world. We all stand on their shoulders because they made a way for us all. We must acknowledge them and their work. I believe that we honor them by doing what we can to make this world a better place as well. We may not have money like the women with Jesus or preach like them. Maybe we can't write a legal argument like Pauli Murray, but we can do something.

When I look at the women in the passage and Pauli Murray, what I notice is none of them tried to do everything; none of them tried to do it alone. The women with Jesus put their coins together; they ministered together. Pauli Murray worked with Ella Baker, King, Eleanor Roosevelt, and many others to make an impact. Their work together made an impact. All of these women knew they were walking with God, in their God-given authority, using their God-given talents. This is how they made a difference for us all. How can we make a difference if we walk with God, in our God-given authority, and use the talents and resources God has given us?

Racism Is Sin (James 2:19 NLT)

Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session

I begin this sermon with a quote from Audre Lorde about truth telling, "What's the worst that could happen to me if I tell this truth? Unlike women in other countries, [my] breaking silence is unlikely to have [me] jailed, 'disappeared' or run off the road at night. [My] speaking out will irritate some people, get [me] called bitchy or hypersensitive and disrupt some dinner parties. And then [my] speaking out will permit other women and [men] to speak, until laws are changed, and lives are saved and the world is altered forever."⁷⁴ The truth is, people would rather us not speak our truth about racism. They would rather we keep silent. Ignore it. Act as if we live in a post-racial society. But the truth is, we do not. Racism is alive and active. Therefore, I must tell this truth. Here and now.

Pray with me. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Amen.

Favoritism and Partiality

In this preaching passage, the Apostle James questions one's ability to have faith in Jesus Christ and simultaneously favor certain individuals or groups over others. The apostle calls the recipients of his letter "brothers and sisters." He writes to church folk. Even church folk favor some people over others.

In the Greek, the word "favor" is actually "favoritism, partiality." It means to have respect of persons, "to lift up the face." To focus on the face of an individual, their appearance, how one looks to be and what one does or does not possess. In other words, in this context "favoritism" is based on external factors—what can be seen, such as wealth, social status, race, gender, and material goods. What James is actually describing here is what's called a "dominance hierarchy."

Dominance Hierarchy

George Lakoff, in his book *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, describes the dominance hierarchy this way: "The Rich over the Poor . . . Our Country over Other Countries . . . Men over Women; Whites over Non-Whites; Straights over Gays; Christians over Non-Christians. In each case, the hierarchy limits the freedom of those lower on the hierarchy by legitimating the power of those higher on the hierarchy."⁷⁵ Lakoff writes, "In the conservative hierarchy, which explains all Republican policy, certain people are considered superior to others."⁷⁶

The Apostle James calls such ways of categorizing people "discrimination," and declares it the result of evil motives. Think about it. What motivations are lurking just beneath the surface of an individual or racial group's psyche to maintain a dominance hierarchy where they hold the top spot? Greed, arrogance, political power? Whatever the reason, the apostle calls it out as evil!

He makes a compelling case that faith in Christ is antithetical to a dominance hierarchy. Why? Because the apostle understood that a dominance hierarchy means injustice for those on the bottom. Such is still the case today.

A dominance hierarchy does not lead to Christlikeness. When we as a society elevate the ideas, perspectives, race, gender, culture, and experiences of one group over others, we do not reflect the God of justice nor do we honor the Christ who came to love and liberate all people. This evening I'm here to make it crystal clear that showing favoritism and partiality is the essence of racism.

Racism is Partiality

Thomas Jefferson, the third president of these yet to be United States of America, favored the ideas, behaviors, social mores, and capitalist economic systems set forth by whites over those of African and Indigenous peoples. He was partial to and elevated white life, white brilliance, white ingenuity, and white supremacist capitalist patriarchy over Black life. In order to justify the abduction, enslavement, and colonization of African and Indigenous peoples, Jefferson turned to scientists. He suggested there were "natural differences" between the races and asked scientists to find those differences. But his scientific project began with the wrong question. These scientists didn't ask, "Are Blacks inferior to whites?" Instead, they asked, "Why are Blacks inferior to whites?"⁷⁷ "If science could prove that Black people were naturally and inherently inferior, there would be no contradiction between America's professed ideals and its actual practices."⁷⁸ America could live conscious free with the brutal, vicious, and inhuman treatment of African peoples by whites.

But, how many of you know that when you start with the wrong question, you will always end up with the wrong answer? The question isn't "Why are Black women angry?" It's "What do Black women have to be angry about?"

The question ought not be "Why do women stay in abusive relationships?" but "Why do men devalue and abuse women?" The question isn't "Why are Black and brown people disproportionately shot and killed by police?" but rather "What are we doing about the implicit racial bias of police officers that causes them to fear, shoot, and kill Black and brown people and arrest white people?" When we ask the wrong questions, we'll end up with the wrong answers. The wrong answers are death-dealing for Black and brown bodies. Jefferson began with the wrong question, and the answers to his question embedded racism into the DNA of America.

Racism Is Not

I want to be clear tonight; racism is not merely the dislike of persons of another race. Racism is not white women clutching their purses when a Black man gets on the elevator. Racism is not laughing at racial jokes. Racism isn't conscious hate. Racism isn't believing you're better than another person. Racism isn't prejudice. That's where many of us get it twisted. We all have prejudice. We all make judgments about people before ever getting to know them personally. It's not right, but it's not racism. But, "when a racial group's collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism."⁷⁹

In other words, my white colleague's implicit bias toward me as a Black woman has no power to affect my life or livelihood unless she shares her misguided thoughts about me with her white supervisor who has the same racial biases and the power to demote, fire, or otherwise impact my career advancement and livelihood. When implicit bias, discrimination, and prejudice are institutionalized, they become racism. Racism isn't dislike for someone.

Racism is racial prejudice plus the social and institutional power to dominate, exclude, discriminate against, or abuse certain groups of people based on race.

Ask Questions

So, what can we do? How do we make racial equity a reality? Well, the Apostle James gives us at least one solution. The apostle approached the behavior of those showing partiality with a hermeneutic of suspicion. What do you mean, Pastor? Here it is: James questioned the behavior, actions, and attitudes of those professing faith in Christ and discriminating against others based on a dominance hierarchy.

Check out his questions:

1. First, *he questioned their hypocrisy*. How can you claim to have faith in Jesus Christ *if* you favor some people over others? But, he didn't stop there.
2. Then, *he questioned their knowledge of God*. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? You must really not know God if you don't know that!

3. Finally, James *questioned their spiritual insight, their ability to see life as it really was*. Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear?

James was masterful!

Asking questions is a beautiful and brilliant rhetorical and therapeutic strategy because it causes people to think about their behavior and actions and then make their own conclusions. And if their motives are pure, they will arrive at a righteous answer. But if they are people who only want to know what they already know, if they are not teachable, if they are arrogant, they'll miss it every time.

Church, what would happen if we just begin asking the right questions? Doing so can be a strategy for ending racism one conversation at a time.

Now, let me be clear; I am not suggesting that Black people are the ones to ask these questions of white people. White folk are the ones who need to ask piercing and thought-provoking questions to their family, friends, and co-workers. I am not confused about this. I have learned a costly lesson as a Black woman that "bringing racism to white people's attention is often seen as not nice and being perceived as not nice triggers white fragility."⁸⁰ It is not the responsibility of Black people to end racism. Robin DiAngelo, a white woman and author of *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, contends, "It is white people's responsibility to be less fragile; people of color don't need to twist [ourselves] into knots trying to navigate"⁸¹ white people's fragility and fear.

White People's Faith

Can I keep it real right in here? Sometimes I want to ask white Christians, "Where is your faith?" Because frankly, I'm sick and tired of hearing them talk about how afraid they are of "asking the wrong question" or "saying the wrong thing," which means they do and say nothing to address racism. Sometimes I just want to scream to the top of my lungs, "Stop being cowards! You say you are followers of Christ; where is your faith in the Christ you say you follow?" Didn't Christ say, "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22)? Perhaps my white brothers and sisters who are afraid to enter into conversations about racism, or read books about racism, or challenge family and friends on their racial bias, need to pray for courage. Jesus said he would give it to them.

How long are *whyppipo* (white people) going to allow fear to keep them from doing their part in eliminating this social and institutional evil that has infected the church and society? I suggest: activate your faith and start posing questions to your friends and family.

The Apostle James ends his questioning with a call to love. He writes, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (James 2:8). What of this love? And what does love have to do with eliminating racism? Dr. Cornel West argues, "Justice is what love looks like in public."⁸² Justice is intricately woven into the fabric of love. One cannot love without a concern for doing justice. Dr. King says, "Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love."⁸³ Racism is antithetical to love. But some of us are afraid of this kind of love—a love that acts in the service of justice for all human beings. If that is your truth, if you are afraid to love like this, let me remind you that God did not give you a spirit of fear or cowardice, but rather "a spirit of power and of love" (2 Timothy 1:7). The question is, will you believe it? Will you act on that truth? Because the truth is:

- Love can dismantle racism.
- Love speaks when fear would keep us silent.
- Love motivates us to right action when fear summons us to recoil.
- Love tells the truth when fear provokes dishonest dealings.
- Love pushes us past fear of saying the wrong thing and drives us to read and learn in order that we might have informed conversations on racism.
- Love is active participation in transforming church and society; fear maintains the status quo.
- Love strengthens us to sit with our discomfort so we can hear the stories of those we fear.

Beloved, racism, and all its manifestations, is sin. But, courageous love, bold love, love expressing itself in truth telling and right action will dismantle the principalities and powers of racism. Why is this kind of love so important? Because it's the love that Jesus demonstrated. It's the love that kept Jesus on mission. This is the kind of love that Jesus died to make real for us. This is the only kind of love that matters to God. And as children of God it's this kind of love that ought to matter to us.

It's Complicated (Luke 10:25-37)

Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp

Today we continue the sermon series on food justice where Rev. Y posed the question to us, “When will there be a harvest?” See, food is a necessity of life. We need food in order to survive and to thrive. Yet, each night there are a lot of children and adults who go to sleep with only stomach pains because they didn’t have anything to eat. Many children wake up each morning and head to school hungry and/or malnourished, and because their stomach is speaking so loudly, they cannot concentrate on what the teacher is teaching. So, they are often accused of not paying attention or being disruptive, when truthfully they are just hungry.

Hunger pains come in the bodies of so many across the world. People are hungry and for many reasons. As Rev. Y and Dr. Irie told us, people are hungry because of greed, and some systems give a lot to some and little to nothing to others. People are hungry because of policies that give corporations tax breaks while trying to cut SNAP food benefits for people. There are several contributing factors to the harsh reality that many people do not get the food they need, and sometimes it seems so simple, but really it’s complicated, much like today’s biblical passage.

Today we look at the oh-so-familiar parable of the Samaritan who helps a man in need. I have to be honest; it wasn’t until more recently that I began to really appreciate the parables. I used to be like, “Jesus, why can’t you just tell them straight up? Enough with the stories.” But now I get it. The reality is sometimes folks can’t handle the truth straight up; they don’t hear you when it’s not what they want to hear. And sometimes people remember stories better. I know my memory is a little shady these days; you can tell me your name and I may or may not remember, but if you tell me part of your story I usually don’t forget that.

The good thing about the parable, though, is you cannot reduce it to only one meaning. I know people try, but really parables can have more than one meaning, as most things. I know we have heard this text preached so many times, but I want to take a close look at it today and see what it might mean for us who say we are followers of Jesus in this moment.

The passage begins with a lawyer standing up to try Jesus. We’ve all been there before, right? Folks want to make themselves look good, so they decide to try you. Well, you see Jesus had time on this day. The text says he stood up to test Jesus, and asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). The funny thing about this is the tense of the word “do” here in Greek is something he just needs to do one time. You know like do x-y-z, check, I got eternal life. I’m good.

But Jesus comes back and asks him, “What does the law say, lawyer? What did you read there?” We often read over that as a simple question because we think of it in our modern times, when most people can read and have access to things to read, but that isn’t the case here. We have to remember that most people in this culture were illiterate and extremely poor, and the people who heard Jesus tell this parable were poor or struggling working class people and most of them in danger of starving. To be able to read the law for yourself means you have to have some privilege and means. The lawyer takes two well-known Jewish verses, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, and uses them to answer Jesus question: “love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

Jesus tells him, “ding, ding, ding, you got the right answer; now “do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28). Now when Jesus says “do,” it is a different tense; it’s a different kind of “do.” It’s an imperative “do”; it’s a command and something you might have to do over and over. But the lawyer wants to really show out and he asks, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). That is a very good question, especially in these divisive times we live in. Who is my neighbor?

This is the part of the sermon where we might hear that we need to think more about who is our neighbor. Like the people who are not getting food every day, people experiencing homelessness, the marginalized—these are all our neighbors. Or we could talk about how we live in a global society, and the reality is that just as the man next door whose name we don’t know is a neighbor we should be concerned about, so is the Palestinian woman living in Israel under attack. Often we talk about extending our idea of who our neighbor is, and as I sat with this passage I wrestled with this question. I believe both of those are correct, and we need to think even more about who is our neighbor.

But I kept thinking about this and reading; then I remembered Rev. Y preaching a couple weeks ago from Genesis about God creating humankind and the earth, and it was good. God created humankind and the earth, and it was good. What if we considered all of God’s creations our neighbor? Meaning all living creatures including the planet on which we live? How could that change the way we interact with the planet that God also created? The hard truth is how we treat this planet that God created matters. How we have treated this planet that God created matters.

This week alone we have not one, two, but three hurricanes approaching. We have much warmer winters, excessive rain

that causes flooding, excessive heat that causes droughts, and this means that some people don't get the food they need. When there is flooding and droughts in California, Wisconsin, and so many other places, crops are ruined. Food that we need is no longer available, sometimes creating shortages and higher prices. Which means some people who may have wanted to buy certain fruits and vegetables can no longer afford them because now they are too expensive. Then we have changes in the ocean temperature that cause calcification in the ocean that kills a lot of animals. Yet there are one billion people depending on food from the ocean as their main source of protein. But these animals are dying or being overfished. So many people do not get the food they need.

Food insecurity is caused by many factors, and it's complicated because so many of the reasons we may not have direct effect on, like policies, poverty, wars, and the economy and then there are some we do. Some of the reasons of food insecurity are because of us.

Oh, I can hear you, wait what? Kamilah, how am I a reason for hunger? I am not keeping food from people. Oh, we all are. How? I will give you two ways, first waste. We waste so much food each day. Let me restate that. I waste so much food every day, and knowing how many children, women, and men do not eat, my waste is not only shameful, but it is sinful. I stand before you today and confess. I'm told confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation. But I must be honest. The way I waste food is sinful, and I must do better than I'm doing right now.

Another way that we are responsible for hunger is one that we do not think about, and some do not even like to mention, climate change. I know that there are many people who will deny the reality of climate change. I know that the current resident of the White House removed the words "climate change" from all the White House and State Department websites when he took office. But not saying it or ignoring it does not mean that it is not real.

Climate change is when the earth temperature increases each year because of human activity. Yes, humans like you and me. There are things that we do that cause the climate to change. Increased consumption of natural resources and increased emission of greenhouse gases cause climate change. See, we have bought into the idea that more is better. So now it is difficult for us to understand words like "restraint," "sharing," "limits," and "boundaries" because so much of our political and personal lives focus on words like "expansion," "growth," and "development." The reality is the growth model we have built up economically and ecologically is not sustainable. We do not have enough resources to continue at the rate we are going, and Mother Nature does not do bailouts.

We know that this planet is part of God's creation, yet we don't care for it like it is. I know this girl who used to say all the time, "It's all about me." She really believed that; she still does and truthfully most of us do. We have operated in the "me" and "mine" paradigm for so long we forget about "God's." We have no problem trashing God's creation because it's not mine. If you come to my house and I give you a bottle of water and you throw it on my floor and walk away when you finished, we would have a problem, right? Let me tell you we would have a problem. Yet, so many of us have no problem throwing our trash out the window or on the ground because we don't think that caring for something outside of what is ours is our responsibility. We deny that loving God means loving all of God's creation and caring for it because it's inconvenient. Or we sometimes fall victim to moral paralysis; we know what is right, but we do not move to do anything.

We like to say, "Jesus paid it all." Jesus paying with his life does not mean we do not have work to do. When I went to college at the wonderful Florida A&M University, I had a small scholarship and the rest of my tuition my mother paid in full, with her hard-earned money. But my mother's paying my balance did not mean that I didn't have to do anything else to get the degree. I still had to do my part. I had to get up, I had to go to class, I had to study, and I had to pass my exams. My mother's paying the debt only opened the door to the opportunity. Jesus' death and resurrection give us opportunity; it does not take away our responsibility.

Look at what Jesus shows us in his parable; the Samaritan gives of his time and resources to help the person in need. This seems like a situation of death until the Samaritan does something about it. The problems of our planet seem like a situation of death unless something is done. Now we can look at this parable a couple different ways. First, obviously we can look at the work the Samaritan is doing to help. This man is interrupting his plans, using his time and resources to help in a needed situation, and likely did not get anything in return. We can say we need to be like the Samaritan and go do what is right for all of God's creation.

Or we can say what if we are not the Samaritan but the person in need and we are being called to receive help from God, but we can't receive God's help because it's too much stuff keeping us from seeing we need help. We see our beautiful SUVs, but we don't see the harm they're doing to the environment. We see our bags of groceries we bring home, but we don't see the landfills the bags fill up because they aren't recyclable. We see our fresh produce, but not the blood that was shed when the

people picked the produce from the soil and cut their hands to get it to us when many of them can't afford to buy any for themselves. There is a cost to everything and not just the price we pay for it. Maybe we have too much stuff and it is keeping us from seeing we need God's help.

I don't know how you will see yourself in this parable, as the Samaritan or the person in need. What is clear to me, though, is however we see ourselves, we have to do some things differently. We must change the way we think so that we can change our behaviors. We must begin to take seriously all of God's creation and how we are responsible for the destruction as well as the care. The reality is climate change is real and it impacts the availability of food for people. It's complicated for us because we are complicit, but we are not without hope.

The good news is there are some things we can do to reduce our complicity. Some are simple; some are more complex. We can consume less. I'm not saying stop buying things, but more is not better. We can recycle. I know that isn't really a thing in Texas apparently, but it is something we can do as a matter of faith. We can eat less meat and more locally grown vegetables and fruits. There are so many things we can do, but doing nothing isn't an option. I know that these small things are not the cure-all for our problems, but they help, and they are a way of practicing our faith as followers of Jesus caring for God's creation.

Today I'm going to do something a little different. Take out the Worship Bulletin and turn to the back where it says "notes." I want you to take a minute and write down one thing you can do to care for God's creation and help improve this planet. Something that you are not doing now or maybe not doing regularly. Write this down and see if you can make that change. For me, I'm going to return to doing meatless Mondays for dinner. You don't have to share your one thing with us unless you like, but write it down. Then I want you to write down one thing that will take much more effort on your part to do that will show care for God's creation and help improve the planet. I want you to pray about this big thing over the next week or so and see if it is something you can in fact do. The lawyer who stood up to try Jesus wanted one easy thing to do one time and be done; Jesus gave him an ongoing "do." We as followers of Jesus have an ongoing "do," so let's go and do likewise.

Not Up in Here! (2 Samuel 20:12 CEV; 1422 NLT)

Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session

God empowers certain people to become strategic leaders committed to protecting and preserving their communities. The Black Mambas are an example of such leaders. They are the world's first all-female, anti-poaching unit in South Africa. These women have one goal in mind—saving the rhino from extinction. "The illicit sale of the rhino horn has become one of the most valuable commodities in the world, worth as much as gold, diamonds and cocaine."⁸⁴ Greedy and unscrupulous people come into these African communities, hunt, brutalize, and butcher rhinos. Smugglers then leave with their horns to potentially make hundreds of thousands of dollars. It is estimated that in South Africa one rhino is killed every seven hours. To save South Africa's rhinos, game reserves have experimented with various technologies, drones, thermal optics, and satellite tracking. But the only thing that has shown any return on its investment is the Black Mambas movement. These women have specialty training in tracking and bush craft. The Black Mambas is a movement led by a unit of twenty-six women committed to resisting the destruction of their community and its valuable assets.

The #metoo, #churchtoo, and #blacklivesmatter movements are also movements created and led by women to resist patriarchy, white supremacy, and racism. These movements are needed because unfortunately there are those who actually look for opportunities to steal, kill, and destroy the vibrancy and vitality of human beings and communities in order that they might gain profits, prestige, and/or power. Such was the case of Sheba in our preaching passage.

Sheba's Revolt

Sheba staged a revolt against King David and convinced all the people from Israel to follow him. Now before we go further, I need to provide a bit of context so we understand where David's head was at when all this went down. David had just returned to Jerusalem after running for his life. His son Absalom led a rebellion against him. Upon his return to Jerusalem, David learned that Absalom, the son who had him on the run, the son who raped each of his father's concubines on the rooftop of the palace for all Israel to see, had been killed by Joab, the military leader—despite David's instructions to bring Absalom back alive.

Joab—A Bad Man

David returns to Jerusalem only to be met with more drama. Now Sheba wants his throne. But Joab isn't having it! Joab is also the one who conspired with Amnon, another of David's sons, to rape his half sister Tamar. Joab was a bad man, a fierce and oftentimes ruthless military leader. But despite his hot-tempered nature and take-no-prisoners attitude, Joab was loyal to the throne. And so, he set out to find Sheba and handle up on some business.

Sheba in Abel

Sheba and those who joined him in the rebellion took flight. The Bible says Sheba "passed through all the tribes of Israel" until he arrived in the town of Abel, where he found safety, sanctuary, and refuge (2 Samuel 20:14 NLT). The people of Abel were harboring a fugitive and didn't know it. But Joab did. And so, Joab and his brother Abishai pursued Sheba to the town of Abel.

Picture this, Sheba's in hiding in Abel, and Joab and his army have just arrived. It is about to be on and poppin' up in the city. Joab's men begin battering the wall of the city to break it down. They are coming for Sheba! Then something unusual happens. Joab hears a voice. But not just any voice. He hears the voice of a woman! The woman was inside the city of Abel on the other side of wall, but her voice was loud enough for Joab to hear her over the battering of the wall.

She Got Loud

Beloved, there are times when a woman must raise her voice—when we must get loud. Like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), political activist and U.S. congresswoman. I remember when AOC raised her voice as she talked about sexual assault. She raised her voice to the listening crowd, "Sexual assault is not a crime of passion; it's about the abuse of power." She got loud when she said, "It is always women who are marginalized, it is the young, it is the interns, it is the immigrant, it is the trans. They are always most at risk."⁸⁵ AOC raised her voice; she got loud. Auntie Maxine raised her voice, "I am reclaiming my time."⁸⁶

We must raise our voices and tell our stories of assault and abuse, even if we're not believed. You see, there's a certain kind of freedom that comes for us when we raise our voices. Freedom from shame. Freedom from the expectations of others. Freedom from injustice.

Following the example of the woman of Abel, there are times when we have to raise our voices—like when our children lie dead in the streets because of the implicit bias of some police officers. We must raise our voices against discrimination, sexism, gender-based violence, and any and everything else that threatens our own well-being and that of our communities. Joab heard the loud voice of a woman. Now, it's one thing for a woman to raise her voice and get loud; it's another for her to actually have something meaningful to say.

Womanist Wisdom Calls Out

The woman of Abel had something to say: "Listen, to me, Joab. Come over here so I can talk to you!" (2 Samuel 20:16 NLT). Joab was called out by a woman who had something important to say. But she wasn't just any woman—the text calls her a "wise woman." I'd like to think this sista had womanist wisdom! Linda Hollies, womanist preacher and author says, "Womanist wisdom is that learned by women of color who have grappled with the issues of race, sex, and class discrimination and yet continue to rise above the odds and the world's expectations. Womanist wisdom gives you a word of sage knowledge. It's not the 'easy' way. But it's the way of courage." Womanist wisdom called Joab out.

Have you ever been called out? You're about to make a foolish move and a friend, parent, or partner sees the mess you're about to make and calls you out. They show you the trouble you're about to cause for yourself? Well, maybe you haven't, but I've been called out a time or two. And, I will confess that I'm grateful for people who saw what I couldn't. I'm grateful for people who loved me enough to tell me the truth.

Everyone needs wise women in their life—women who have been through some things and came out more insightful, and less afraid to speak up and out. The woman who called out Joab was a wise woman, most probably a district judge in Abel, a city known for its fair and just judicial system. This woman was a protector of her community and a woman of influence. She was a woman who seemed to understand the rights of her constituency, her community. Which meant, she also knew Joab violated the law by attacking Abel without first seeking peace.

According to the law (Deuteronomy 20:1012), peace was to be offered before a city was laid waste. According to the rules

of war, Joab was to have made a verbal appeal to the city before he attacked it. But he didn't do that. The wise woman in Abel knew what Joab was about to do was a violation of the law. And, she possessed the courage to confront him with that truth—something no man had ever done. By calling Joab out, by talking back to him, bell hooks would argue that in her actions, she positioned herself as “Joab's equal.”

It was no small thing that no man ever tried to negotiate with Joab, a fierce, righteous warrior. I imagine Joab wasn't used to being called out. But because she knew the law, she called him out. People, know your rights. Women, know your rights! On your job, know the personnel policies. Know the bylaws, the constitution, and Roberts Rules of Order. You never know when you may need to call someone out, or when you may need to call the system to account. But when you do, you better have your facts straight.

She Interrupted

She called Joab out and when she did, she did something else—she *interrupted* the battering of the wall. Do we have any interrupters in the house tonight? This wise woman was an interrupter.

I recently learned of a group in Chicago called “The Interrupters.” They have one goal in mind—to save a life. Their tagline is “to cure it you need to interrupt it.” Chicago's Interrupters, through informed conversations, group meetings, and consistent involvement in their respective communities, disrupt violence.

The wise woman in Abel was a violence interrupter. She called out Joab, a man who was about to destroy the community she loved. Can't you see Joab's men looking around wondering, wait what? Did she just call out Joab? Doesn't she know who he is and what he's capable of? Joab killed his own cousin for disobeying a direct order from King David. Did she call *him* out? Why yes, I do believe she did! But listen. It gets even better than that! Joab obliges her strong request; the Bible says that Joab “came near her.” Then she asked, “Are you Joab?” And he answered, “I am” (2 Samuel 20:17 NLT).

She Speaks, He Listens

Once she affirms his identity, the wise woman advises Joab, “Listen carefully to your servant.” He answered, “I'm listening.” Church, can I tell you how much I love reading that part! Joab responded, “I'm listening” (2 Samuel 20:17 NLT).

Oh, how different our world would be if more military leaders said, “I am listening.” What if we had more government officials who said to wise women, “I am listening”? What if we had leaders in the White House who, when a wise woman spoke, they responded, “I am listening”? Wouldn't it be healing for someone to say to survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual assault, “I am listening”? What if lawmakers would say to LGBTQ persons and transgender persons, and gender-nonconforming persons, “We are listening”? Joab listened. Joab, the man in charge of the king's army, just as he was about to break through the wall of the city and capture Sheba, stopped what he was doing—laid aside his agenda, his strategic battle plan, and listened to the wise woman of Abel. He didn't try to mansplain his actions; he didn't assert his authority or power to make her feel small; he didn't tell her she was out of place. None of that. Joab listened. She speaks, he listens.

This wise woman explains to Joab the historicity of Abel. How it was known for its wisdom and good judgment. She makes it clear that to destroy Abel was to destroy a city that was “a mother in Israel” (2 Samuel 20:19 CEV). A go-to city for settling disagreements and lawsuits because Abel was known as a city where right judgments always prevailed. The wise woman speaks and Joab listens. He listens to a woman who had the ear of her community, a woman who knew the legal system. A woman of great influence. Joab listens to a wise woman who possessed the courage to confront him and show him the injustice he was about to mete out to innocent people. Joab listens to a wise woman who interrupted a siege, a confident woman who wasn't intimidated by patriarchy, people, politics, or power structures. In this text, the wise woman uses her voice, her critical thinking, and her influence as resistance to the government officials about to destroy her city. This wise woman refuses to be silent or silenced—perhaps she knew, like Zora Neale Hurston, “If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”⁸² She would not be silent. There was too much at stake for silence. What was at stake? The city, the community—her home, her hood, filled with families, children, friends, businesses, markets, and synagogues.

Communal Concerns

This wise woman had *communal concerns*—she was a protector and preserver of community. She resisted militarism, which would have led to the complete destruction of her community. And she had the influence to rally her community to handle business with the one who put their community at risk.

Many of our communities are at risk. Some are at risk from gentrification; some are already food deserts. Some are at risk of unequal treatment based on race, sexual orientation, and/or gender roles. We can learn a thing or two from the wise woman of Abel, a woman who had in mind the best interest of her city.

I wonder, do our city leaders have in mind the best interest of the people— or just their parts of the city? Recently, the Urban Institute completed a study of 274 cities to determine their economic equity. Out of 274 cities, Dallas ranked 274th, dead last for economic equality.⁸⁸ Dallas has the most economic inequity out of 274 cities studied. And yet, business is booming in Dallas. High rises are going up everywhere; upscale apartments are coming in to the Bishop Arts District, a community with a large Hispanic population. City leaders and the wealthy are battering down the walls of Oak Cliff, South Dallas, and other parts of town with a high concentration of poor people. But the wise woman in this text had in mind the best interest of the city and ALL the people who lived within its walls.

Credible and Convincing

Because of her credibility in the community, she knew the people would listen to her just as Joab had. So, she assured Joab that she and the people of the city would deliver the head of Sheba. She wasn't willing to sacrifice an entire city for one scoundrel. Sheba meant the city no good—he was a troublemaker rather than a peacemaker. He entered Abel not with the best interest of the city in mind, but to save his own life, putting the entire city and its people at risk of destruction.

Everyone who comes into our city doesn't have in mind the best interest of that city. Every politician who comes to your church right before an election doesn't have in mind the best interest of your community. And so, the people cut off the head of Sheba and threw it over the wall to Joab.

What do we need to throw over the wall? What do we need to get rid of in our city? Well, I think we need to get rid of monuments to white supremacy. We need to get rid of council persons who don't support earned paid sick leave for Dallas citizens. We need to get rid of politicians who don't think Dallas employees should earn a living wage. We need to throw implicit bias, heterosexism, and gender binaries over the wall. We most certainly need to throw white supremacy, patriarchy, and white fragility over the wall. These things don't make our city better, but worse. They slowly and methodically destroy the possibility for creating beloved community.

Not Up in Here!

So, the wise woman convinced her community to join together, to work in unity, to collaborate to get rid of, throw over the wall that which meant it no good. Joab and the Abel community listened to a credible and convincing wise woman. Now, I have to admit, I was baffled by Joab's humble listening and acquiescence to the wise woman's voice. Joab wasn't typically a man who took advice from anyone, let alone a woman. There were times when Joab didn't even listen to the king! So, why listen to this wise woman? So, I did a little of research and discovered something interesting. The woman of Abel wasn't the first wise woman Joab listened to.

In 2 Samuel, chapter 14, we find Joab calling on the wise woman of Tekoa to assist him in negotiating a truce between David and Absalom. Joab seemed to understand the value of consulting and following the sage wisdom of women. He understood that wise women were able to communicate effectively the fundamental cultural values of their people and their God. Somehow Joab learned that wise women could be trusted because of their strength as diplomats, their depth of instinct, self-possession, and intelligence. It wasn't lost on Joab that wise women were able to handle difficult situations with extraordinary skill, sensitivity, and courage. And so, when the wise woman of Abel used her influence to resist the destruction of her city, when she in essence said, "Not Up in Here," Joab listened.

Whenever a wise woman says, "Not Up in Here," she means it; she's going to protect her people!

When a wise woman says, "Not Up in Here," she's going to hold her country accountable for living into its stated values!

When a wise woman says, "Not Up in Here," she's going to show up and speak up for her children.

When a wise woman says, "Not Up in Here," she's going to protect her family and community.

When wise women say, "Not Up in Here," they're going to save the rhinos in South Africa.

When a wise woman says, "Not Up in Here," she's going to put feet on her faith and follow in the steps of Jesus, who also said, "Not Up in Here"; not even death will have the last word!

Not Up in Here, Up in Here!

Hope in Crossing Borders (Matthew 2:1315)

Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp

It seems to me that the birth of Jesus brought forth a lot of talk in the Bethlehem streets. Of course, there was no Twitter back then, but I think Jesus was trending. When the word on the street was that there was a new king in town, this clearly ruffled some feathers, mainly the ones worn by Herod.

See, Herod had been in power for about thirty years. He came to power when the Romans placed him there and no one voted to remove him from office. As with most people with power, Herod enjoyed his power and he was not looking to give it up or even share it with anyone else. Herod would do whatever he thought he needed to do to hold on to power. Herod would lie, Herod would have secret conversations, Herod would be vengeful, Herod would kill babies, and not think twice about any of it in order to maintain his power.

So, to avoid the deception and violence of the one in power, in order to be safe, in order to have peace, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Egypt. In Egypt they were beyond the reach of Herod. Egypt was seen as a place of refuge, Egypt. Scholarly gentrification and racist interpretation have provided us with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, but the reality is Mary and Joseph took their brown-skinned baby boy to Egypt so they could lay low and keep him safe. As the biblical scholar and one of the first Black people to hold a doctorate in biblical studies, the late Cain Hope Felder, says, the parents of sweet baby Jesus followed the established train to Africa, not Europe.⁸⁹ They had to go from where they were and cross the border in order for them and their baby to be safe.

I'm amazed at how many people love to talk about the miraculous birth of Jesus but don't want to talk about how his family had to run across the border for their safety. And how Egypt didn't try to keep them from coming. There was no wall to block Jesus from entering Egypt, he didn't have to wait on the Egyptian border in Judea and wait to apply for asylum, and there were no financial requirements. They were allowed to come and find refuge.

You know this story teaches me some things. First of all, when there is no peace where you are, sometimes you may have to cross some borders to find it. There are times when we have to move from where we are in order to protect and/or prepare ourselves for the work that lies ahead. Understanding that what lies ahead is our work and often our hope. Elaine Crawford says, "Hope is the bridge from oppression to liberation."⁹⁰ And there are many times when if we do not move, our hope can die or it can be killed in the hands of others, and sometimes it's a slow death.

Here, Joseph and Mary see the hope in Jesus; they heard of the hope in Jesus and now they must make sure that hope lives on. In order to do that, they must cross the border. The thing I realized is they didn't do this on their own. The three Magi first of all showed up. They travelled far to show up and see this baby, and they came bearing gifts. The gifts they brought could be used, and some of them could help pay for their expenses in traveling and living in Egypt. They went into their treasure chest and gave nice gifts because they were investing in the hope that Jesus was bringing. For me, that shows support: to show up and invest in hope is how to make sure that hope lives on. This shows us that Mary and Joseph did not do this thing alone. For sure God was with them and other people were working with them to make sure that this hope lived on.

Which is why I am hurt and confused by so much of what happens today. We see people taking the little they have and leaving the country they live in because it is so dangerous. Taking their kids just like Mary and Jesus and trying to cross borders so that they may live. They head for these borders, believing there is some hope on the other side of the border. Yet, we have people who will do anything and everything they can to keep people from crossing the border to get hope. So, we have children being separated from their parents, not being fed, dying as they are held in cages, in camps, and they are told they cannot cross this border. More children on the other side of the border freezing outdoors because they are told they cannot cross this border.

But Mary and Joseph traveled by night and crossed the border and went to Egypt. I'm so glad Herod couldn't stop them at the border, I'm so glad no border patrol could detain them, I'm so glad the wise men supported them, and I'm so glad they had safe passage to Egypt, because there they found refuge. There they crossed the border carrying hope. The hope was not with Herod. The hope was with Mary and Joseph in Egypt. In Egypt, hope lived on even while Herod sought to capture it and destroy it. Hope grew and began to spread. Hope outlasted Herod. And we know that just as Jesus crossed the border, our ancestors crossed borders, and sometimes we might need to cross borders. We know there is a history of hope that continues to live on. So, we too can have hope in all of us because as the Voices of The Gathering sang tonight, "Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." And despite talk about our personal relationships with God, it's not all about us; it's not only about us. God is with us all. And since God is with us, we continue to invest in hope, protect hope, and carry hope forward not just for ourselves, but for others, for those who will come later. Carry forward the hope.

It's All God (Isaiah 5:17 CEB)

Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session

What God has for you is for you. If you're like me, you've heard this quote plenty of times during your walk with Jesus. The idea is no matter what happens in your life no one can take away what God has for you. Because, it's for YOU. The longer I live, the more I discover about the nature of God, the less I believe that quote as stated. What I have come to believe is this: *What God has for you is not just for you. Not your money. Not your wealth. Not your prosperity. Not your house. Not your car. Not your food. Not your intellect, not even your faith.*

God is not a capitalist. God is not concerned as much about our individual prosperity as our communal thriving and flourishing. Just this week I read a quote by Franklin D. Roosevelt that gets to the heart of what I mean: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."⁹¹

A Divine Setup

Providing for those who have too little is a concern in tonight's preaching passage. It begins with the prophet Isaiah illuminating what I call a "Divine Setup."

Here's what I mean. God set up Jerusalem to be prosperous and productive in every way. To flourish economically, materially, and spiritually. God made provision for God's own people. God did all the heavy lifting to ensure the community's prosperity. The Bible says that God removed stones from the vineyard. Stones were barriers, obstacles, and enemies—any and everything preventing human flourishing and economic prosperity. In this text, which is actually a poem, Jerusalem is a vineyard, personified as a woman. But what woman? Or rather, which women, since prophets always had communal concerns? A prophetic critique was rarely focused on individual concerns, unless the individual's ungodly behavior adversely affected the community. In this text, there is a communal concern that Jerusalem as a vineyard, as a well-kept woman, failed to produce what was expected. In fact, Isaiah 1:21 gets even more ratchet. It describes Jerusalem as a town that "has become a prostitute! She was full of justice; righteousness lived in her—but now murderers" (CEB).

Can I keep it real? And, I don't like it. I don't like it one bit. I know women whose backs are against the wall. Women who don't have money. Women who don't have pensions. Women who don't have wealthy parents. Women whose options are limited. Women who were not set up like Jerusalem, as vineyard as women. This metaphor brought to mind women I've ministered to for years. Women with sugar daddies and sugar mamas. It represents, at least to me, this capitalistic idea of "I'll do this for you—spend my money on you, give you clothes, cars, and cash—if you do this"—fill in the blank—"for me."

Thus, as a womanist interpreter of this metaphor of Jerusalem as *vineyard as women*, I bring critique to bear on not just any women, but women of means, chosen women. Women protected and provided for, women whose husbands were at the top of the social pyramid.

Women of Means

"Women of means" is the metaphor I lift up to represent the ones who by this world's standards have economic, social, and material prosperity who fail to use said prosperity and privilege to dismantle oppressive systems and structures. During ancient times that would have been kings, priests, government and army officials, and land owners—the ruling elites of Judah and Israel.⁹² Today, that might be the 53 percent who chose whiteness over their gender. Today that would be the owner of the Miami Dolphins, Stephen Ross, who has a nonprofit supposedly championing racial equality and who had a recent fundraiser for 45 that yielded \$12 million for his re-election campaign. As Miami Dolphins wide receiver Kenny Stills commented, "It just doesn't add up."

Twenty-First Century Setup

This Isaiah passage deals with what we do with what God has graciously provided. What we do with our money and prosperity. In this text God as the creator and cultivator of the vineyard set it up to prosper. In the twenty-first century there are people, God's people, who are also set up. Some are set up because they were born into a setup family—they didn't work for it; they didn't earn it. They were born into it. Others are set up because they had opportunity to use their God-given gifts, intellect, and skill to set up themselves and their family members. But, no matter how some are set up, no matter how we arrive at a place of flourishing and prosperity, there are human beings on the other end of the prosperity spectrum. There are God's beloveds who are not flourishing. The question then becomes, what of those who are not set up?

The Prosperous Prevent the Poor from Prospering.

No Unrealistic Expectations

Just as it was then, so it is today. God has expectations of those who have prospered. And, God does not have unrealistic expectations. God has expectations of fidelity, fruitfulness, and flourishing. Sadly, God's expectations are often not met. Why? Because too often the prosperous prevent the poor from also prospering. Too many prosperous believers use God's provisions to exploit and oppress others of God's human creation. Womanist biblical scholar Delores Williams asked this question of this Isaiah text that must be interrogated, "What happens when systems are set up that prevent the growth of good grapes? What happens when prosperous people use what God has provided just for themselves?"⁹³

My Response:

- What happens when we see "the land of the free and home of the brave" as belonging only to a certain demographic? This is what happens: We see 680 Latinx workers arrested by ICE while their children are in school.
- What happens when prosperous people use what God has intended for all, just for themselves? This is what happens: We get more and more charitable donations for tax deductions and no structural or systemic change.
- What happens when prosperous people use what God has provided just for themselves? This is what happens: We get no increased restrictions on gun sales. Restrictions that could save countless lives.

Live Up to God's Expectations

I wonder, what would it look like if followers of Jesus put forth every effort to use our money and prosperity to live up to God's expectations that we bring about justice and righteousness? What is justice? What is biblical justice? Here it is: As a primary attribute of God, justice is "maintaining the right relationship to the poor and the destitute, rescuing the weak and the needy, and delivering them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:34 author paraphrase).

In the Hebrew, a term used to describe the justice of God is *misphat* and refers to creating or maintaining equitable, fair, and harmonious social relationships. *Misphat* suggests that every human being is created in the image of God and therefore, "has the same inalienable right to abundance and wholeness and freedom from oppression."⁹⁴

What if each and every one of us strived to help God get the world that God wants? You see, I am clear of one thing: a day of reckoning is coming. God has expectations. God will get what God wants. Even if God has to destroy/uproot/dismantle the vineyard to do so.

But I don't think it has to come to that.

It's All God's

What if everything we had, we saw as belonging to God. All that money some of y'all have in the bank. That Mercedes! That Maybach! That Lexus! That Toyota! What if you saw that intellectual mind you are cultivating in college or graduate school as a gift from God? What if we really believed those hands that create technology, skyscrapers, and cages to house children were given us by God? Today, let's give that idea a try. Starting today, our mind belongs to God. Our eyes belong to God. Our feet belong to God. Our hands belong to God. Our money belongs to God. Today, it's all God. God enabled us to earn it, make it, build it, and buy it. It's All God!

Jesus knew it too. That's why he said on one occasion, "I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but the will of

him who sent me” (John 6:38 CEB). So, “Let the same mind be in [us] that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself” (Philippians 2:57a NRSV). Jesus humbled himself. Let us go and do likewise.

Last Sunday morning I walked into worship at Friendship-West Baptist Church a little late. As I went to my seat, the male chorus was singing “It’s All God,”²⁵ a song I never heard before. I’ve since done a Google search of the song, sung by The Soul Seekers. Listening to “It’s All God” again, I thought, “This is the title of my sermon.”

Thank You for Being a Friend (Luke 5:1720)

Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp

Anyone who knows me knows that at the end of the day I like to get on my couch with my snacks and my lap quilt to watch *The Golden Girls*. This is how I relax. I’ve seen probably every episode; I will finish the lines with the characters, and still laugh at the jokes. Most of us have a favorite show that we love to watch over and over, and that one is mine. *The Golden Girls* has one of the most memorable opening songs on a television show. As soon as I hear it, I immediately know what it is, but if you ever pay attention to the lyrics of the song, they are actually pretty good. “Thank you for being a friend. Travel down the road and back again. Your heart is pure, you’re a pal and a confidant.”

For me, this is a great way of thinking about a true friend. Someone you can count on to be there with you through the changes of life because we all have changes in life. When things are going well, they celebrate with you. And when things are not going well, they are there because sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we need help. We need a friend.

Women throughout this country and the world have found themselves in these rough situations as they suffer abuse verbally and through slaps, punches, kicks at the hands of someone who claims to love them. The boyfriend, girlfriend, partner, or husband is determined to have power over them and desires to control them, so they become abusive. Our girls, women, and sometimes men could use a friend but may find themselves often in a situation feeling alone because they have been isolated from their friends and family by an abuser. And for one to find themselves in this situation is not easy to understand, because people don’t want to be abused, people don’t seek to be abused, and most of us think it will never happen to me. Until it does.

Domestic violence does not just happen to certain women. Domestic violence and intimate partner violence happen to all types of people no matter race, social class, and even gender. Though most who suffer abuse are women, there are men and nonbinary people who are abused as well. But the hard reality for us is that Black women are 30 to 50 percent more likely to be victims to domestic violence than white women. Black women are more likely to suffer through domestic violence and are statistically less likely to report than any other ethnicity.

There are many reasons why we do not report abuse. First of all, let’s be honest; most of us don’t trust the police. The police have not been known in our community to protect Black and brown bodies. And Black women have been ignored by police when they call and even end up in jail or dead themselves after calling the police for help. Some of us don’t report because of the shame we feel. Then some of us don’t ask for help because we have internalized the need to be strong. We have the “Strongblackwoman” syndrome we’ve talked about before, all pushed together, no room to breathe. And the “Strongblackwoman” syndrome can leave us feeling like we have nowhere to turn to and so we do not report. The person who is being abused can be our neighbor, relative, or even us, and it’s happening all around us daily.

Just this past week here in Dallas, Donna Alexander, a domestic violence advocate and the young entrepreneur who created the Anger Room, was reported to have been beaten to death by either her live-in or estranged boyfriend. So, on today we speak her name; we could spend hours calling the names of those who have been murdered by someone who professes to love them. We have many women, children, and men living in danger.

And what I believe is a person who is being abused or stalked could use a friend, a friend like the ones in our passage today. Here Luke reports that the friends of this paralyzed man take their friend to Jesus so he can be healed. This text is fascinating to me because it shows so clearly what friends in community with faith can accomplish with Jesus.

When I look at this passage and the friends who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus, it speaks to me. The first thing I noticed is the friends knew that their friend needed help. Now in this case it was easy to see that he needed help because he was paralyzed; his issue was clearly visible. The thing about domestic violence and intimate partner abuse is sometimes we don’t see it because everything appears normal. Because there is no one type of abuse victim, often people who are being abused and we have no idea. And then when someone is killed, we hear a lot of “I cannot believe it” or “he was so nice.” These are words

you hear in cases like Karen Smith, who was killed by her husband, Cedric Anderson, who was a pastor and called “a man of God” by those commenting after her murder. Yes, there are times when we do not see someone is in need and we never suspect anything is wrong.

Then there are times when we do, yet we pretend not to see. We notice the bruise on the face. We see the extra makeup. We hear the violent arguments, but we tell ourselves that’s none of our business. There are times when we can see that a person is in danger and in need, and yet we turn our heads to look the other way. The friends in this passage who knew their friend needed help did not turn the other way; they instead went and picked him up to get him some help.

You know the other thing is the friends in the passage were informed. They knew where Jesus was, so they knew where to go for help. They knew if they took their friend to Jesus, he could get the help he needed. If we as a community are going to be the friend people need in these times, we have to be informed. We have to know where to direct or take people for the help. Now I can hear somebody saying we got to get them to Jesus. Yes, and we have to get them to people and places here that can help them and keep them safe, which requires us to be educated on some things. There is some information we need to know if we are to help others escape abuse.

I know many of us have said it before, “If it was me, I would just leave.” Maybe we would and maybe we wouldn’t. A lot of times we like to say what we will do in a certain situation when we have never been in that situation, and it’s easy to say “do something” when it doesn’t require our doing. As Rev. Freddie Haynes has said, “We judge people’s actions and we don’t know their options.”⁹⁶ We will say they just need to leave, but that does not take seriously what that can mean. See, for those who are in an abusive relationship, leaving can be dangerous.

The sad reality is that often it is when people leave that the abuser tries to kill them. Leaving can be difficult because domestic violence is about control. Often the person being abused may not have access to money, resources, and documents, so up and leaving really is not that simple. There has to be a plan to leave, but to be the kind of friend that a person in this situation would need we need to know that. We need to know where they can get the help they need. We need to know what they should and should not do. We have to be informed.

You know the friends in the passage also took a risk to help their friend. Think about it; they were so determined to get their friend to help that they took him to the roof of the house, made a hole in the roof, and lowered their friend down so that they could put him before Jesus. You have to understand; this was not a home that had to pass inspection before it could be occupied. Houses in this time were not made like ours today. But really, would we want to climb on the roof of a home even today and stand up there while putting a hole in the roof? That’s dangerous. And we cannot be honest about helping those affected by domestic violence without recognizing it can be dangerous.

I don’t believe it does us any good to tell people about things like domestic violence if we aren’t going to tell the whole story. There is a reason that the locations of safe homes for domestic violence victims are kept secret. There is a reason when people do leave they don’t want them to know where they are, because this person has already showed they have the ability to hurt other people. So, let’s be real, this can be dangerous. And I believe we have a responsibility to do what is right even though often doing what is right comes with risk. Ask Harriet, ask Mandela, ask Cesar Chavez, ask Coretta Scott King. We have to do what is right even when it’s risky.

But these friends were willing to take that risk because they believed it would help their friend; they believed the risk would pay off because they believed Jesus could help them and they were right. These folks had so much faith in the ability of Jesus to help that they would not let the crowds keep them from him, they would not let the difficulty keep them from him, and they would not let the risk keep them from getting their friend the help. What kind of faith is that?

I also thought a lot about the paralyzed man. Here he is unable to walk around freely, depending on others, and being marginalized because in this society most people believed if something was wrong with you, it was because you sinned. You did something wrong or your parents did something wrong. The pain one must feel to have been told the only reason this is happening to you is because of what you did wrong. The pain one must feel when they internalize this and begin to believe it. Here he is living with this, and his friends now are taking him to get help. The text does not say whose idea it was. I don’t know if the man asked them or if it was the friends’ idea. What I do know is the friends are now taking him. That tells me two things: (1) The friends had to be willing to take him, and (2) the man had to be willing to go. The friends had to be willing to take him, and the man had to be willing to go.

See, what that means for us is as a community we have to be willing to help those in need and those of us who have been abused must be willing to take help. What would it look like if we were the friends lowering our sister before Jesus? What would it look like if we came as a community around our people in need and said, “My friend, I got you in this time of need”? How does the church create a space where people feel safe and comfortable enough to come and say, “I need help; I’m in danger”?

For so long, we have failed victims of domestic violence. Abused women have been counseled to pray for their abuser to stop, try not to make them mad, and stay. Well, do I pray before or after I'm beaten? Or they are told, "Don't get divorced because as 'Christians' we should not get a divorce." My friends, we have lost too many people to that type of damaging counsel. Please hear me when I say this; I do not believe God wants any of us to stay in a relationship where we are being abused, married or not. I believe God loves us too much to want us to be abused. God does not want what God has created and said is wonderfully and fearfully made harmed in any way. And as the church, as followers of Jesus, we should not want anyone to be abused for the sake of staying married or in a relationship. If someone comes to us and is willing to receive our help and says, "I need help," we must be willing to help them. We have to be able to get people to the help they need.

Unfortunately, too often we have failed in churches in getting people the help they need because we tell them things like, "All you need is Jesus." Well, what if I got Jesus and I'm still getting beat? We sing songs like, "As long as I got King Jesus I don't need nobody else." See, we have been conditioned to say we just need Jesus. I am not standing before you today saying we don't need Jesus. I need Jesus, we all need Jesus, and I believe we still need each other and there are some physical things we need to survive. Telling someone in need they just need Jesus isn't enough. Really, it's a cop-out for us. It's a way of us not really getting involved. I think we sometimes forget we are the hands and feet of Jesus. We can show or take people to get the help they need. We can take them to shelters, provide them with resources and the things they need for help, and we can bring them to Jesus to get them what they need to heal. Because the wounds of domestic violence go much further than the cuts and bruises on the skin. Domestic violence also can wound the spirit. I often say "mind, body, and spirit," and this is truly a situation where one needs support for their mind, body, and spirit.

When the friends in this passage bring the man to Jesus, he's so moved by their faith he tells him his sins are forgiven. You know I want to make sure we understand this in context because context matters. As I said before, in this particular time sickness was related to sin in the minds of most people. They thought if something was wrong with you, it was because of some sin you did. If we're honest about it, a lot of us still think like that although it's not true. And I want to make it abundantly clear to those who have experienced domestic violence or intimate partner violence: it is not because you have sinned. It is not because you have done something wrong. Jesus tells him his sins are forgiven. I really believe that was for the people around who were listening.

When Jesus says this, it causes a commotion because they want to know who was he to forgive sins? But here is where Jesus is able to show his power when as a rebuttal to their interrogation he tells the man to stand up and walk. You see that is where I felt the spirit of God moving. Jesus told this man who could not walk, who was paralyzed, and could not even get to Jesus without the help of friends who were determined to get him to Jesus to get some help. He told that man to stand up and walk. And the man stood up and walked.

See, I believe right now God is saying to us, "Stand up and walk." To my people who may be in an abusive relationship, "Stand up and walk. It's all right to get help; there is help available so stand up and walk." To the survivor of abuse who knows what it's like and can help guide a friend to safety, "Stand up and walk. Reach back and pull another friend to safety." To the person who knows that their friend or family member is abusing someone, "Stand up and walk. Say something because abuse thrives in silence; people are dying while nothing comes from our mouths, so stand up and walk." To the person who may be abusing someone, "Stand up and walk. Walk away and seek professional help and some time with Jesus." To the church, "Stand up and walk." We can no longer ignore the pain of those in need. We can't continue to allow our girls, women, and men to be beaten and killed by those claiming to love them. Silence is violence. Speak up even if your voice shakes. Stand up and walk!

It is time for the church to be a friend to those we've ignored for too long, those who sit in our pews week after week and have to go home and live in terror. It's time for the church to be a friend so people can get the help and healing they need. It's time for the church to stand up and walk! We are the church. Not this building, not The Gathering, not the preachers, but each and every one of us is the church. So, it's time for us to stand up and walk because I believe that's what Jesus has instructed us to do. But the good news is we don't have to walk alone. Not only can we walk together in community, but we can walk with Jesus. And I am so glad that Jesus will walk with us every step of the way. See, I know we got a friend in Jesus, but will we be a friend?

The Silence of Freedom (Acts 16:16-19; Luke 4:18-19)

Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session

What does it mean to be ministers of reconciliation in a world torn apart by grief, greed, anger, and hatred?

In church and society all voices do not have freedom of expression. Some voices are privileged while others are silenced.

However, ministers of reconciliation understand that God invites all voices to the Table; none are to be silenced. Jesus' ministry of liberating the oppressed and setting the captives free must, therefore, inform our ministries.

God spoke. "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so THEY can be responsible for (reign over, have dominion over) the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of the earth. God created human beings; God created them godlike, [that is] reflecting God's nature. God created THEM male and female" (Genesis 1:26-27 author paraphrase). In the beginning there was no hierarchy; even God *walked with* human beings. So, whenever a woman is subordinated based on her gender, race, or whatever, she's going to feel some way about it. Something in her will demand freedom; she will cry freedom; she will sing freedom; she will write her freedom; she will blog and text freedom; she will shout for freedom. Because, fundamentally, she was not created to be controlled, dominated, or exploited. She was created to be free. Free to be authentic. Free to become all God intended her to be and to do.

Meant for Freedom

Human beings were meant for freedom, all human beings. Jesus reminds us of this truth in his mission to proclaim release to the captives, to open the eyes of the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. Freedom is the beginning, middle, and the end of becoming who we are created to be. Unless we have the freedom to be who we are, not who people say we are, not who our families want us to be, not who we think we should be, but who we are, unless we have the freedom to be who we are, that is, who God created us to be, we will live beneath our privilege. You see, as my clergy colleague Michelle Shackelford says, "Freedom has life and freedom gives life. It has its own pulse and air. It is the ability to exist exactly as GOD made us." So many of us are spending our lives trying to be someone other than who God dreamed us to be. Without it, without freedom human beings are stifled from creativity, held prisoner to a life we were never meant to live. Such was the case of the unnamed slave girl in our focus text.

Paul and his companions while on their way to prayer meeting, while on their way to church, became acquainted with an exploited teen girl. They didn't just run into her; they learned who she was. They knew her backstory; they knew she was a victim of exploitation. Paul and his companions met a slave girl whose value was tied to what she could produce; they met an unnamed girl, a nameless girl, who at that very moment was being trafficked by hustlers; she was a victim whose gifts had been monetized. Now, I know some translations call her unique ability a "demon." Some call it a "spirit." I call it a "gift." The enslaved girl had a gift, one that enabled her to "tell the future."

Whatever the source of her unusual gift, it is clear that her owners were exploiting her abilities for their own gain. The girl and her gift had fallen into the wrong hands. Is there anybody in here whose gifts have fallen into the wrong hands? When our gifts fall into the wrong hands, we're abused, mistreated. When our gifts fall into the wrong hands, we're exploited, controlled, and manipulated. The enslaved girl and her gift were in the hands of unscrupulous men.

And yet, something within her anticipated release from their captivity. Something within her would not keep silent. That something within was loud, it was persistent, and it angered Paul!

Day after day the slave girl followed Paul and his companions, shouting. So much so that Paul became annoyed. In fact the text says that Paul became "exasperated" (Acts 16:18 NLT). "Exasperated" is a strong word. "Exasperated" means Paul wasn't merely ticked off; he was irritated, incensed, and infuriated. Paul was mad as _ _ _. Paul was emotionally frustrated, sick and tired of hearing her voice. So, in his frustration, not in his compassion for her, not in his desire to free her from bondage, not in his desire to heal what was broken in her, but because he was exasperated, he exorcised the gift out of her. Because *he* was irritated, he silenced the noise of her shout. Don't you find it interesting that it wasn't until the slave girl became a nuisance to Paul that he loosed her from the control of her traffickers? Her oppression had become an inconvenience to him.

Sadly, it seems that until the freedom of the powerful is *inconvenienced* by the oppression of the marginalized, they will remain silent and impotent. Sometimes we've got to speak up! Sometimes we've got to shout it out! Sometimes we've got to talk about it. Sometimes we must move out of the comfort zones of silence.

If the slave girl had remained silent, she would have remained in bondage; had she not persistently made her presence known to the one who had the power to transform her situation, she would've stayed a slave. Protests, sit-ins, die-ins, strikes, marches, and boycotts are inconveniences for the privileged and powerful, but for the oppressed and the marginalized, these are our last-ditch efforts at seeking justice and liberation. It's only when the oppression of one group adversely impacts the freedom of another group that change comes.

Beloved, freedom isn't typically handed to us on a silver platter. In the words of Afeni Shakur, "Freedom ain't free."⁹⁷ It must be wrested from the grips of those who oppress, because they won't let it go willingly.

The Silence of Freedom

The slave girl obtained her freedom because she was an irritant and a nuisance. But the text is silent about her freedom! What happened to her after losing the ability to tell the future? Was she discarded? No longer useful. Was she thrown away? Who was she anyway? Did she have a family to go back to? Was she able to provide for herself? Because of Paul's exorcism, was she now subordinated to a status of triple marginalization—female, formerly incarcerated, and jobless? Was her situation made worse?

The slave girl was set free from her captors. But we don't hear any more about her anywhere in the biblical text. They didn't hear about her freedom in Capernaum. They didn't hear about it in Ephesus.

While preparing this sermon, I asked my daughter this question: "Is it possible to be free and oppressed at the same time?" Here was her response: "Yes, it's called being Black." The slave girl in the text, like Black women and girls in the twenty-first century, was free and oppressed at the same time. Just like with the hundreds of Black women and girls who go missing every year, her exorcism didn't make the news. Freedom is yet silent for Black women and girls.

As I look around this room, I see women who've come to realize and embrace their freedom to live into their authentic selves. Women who now have the freedom, in one way or another, to use their Holy Spirit-endowed gifts of preaching, teaching, and other forms of ministerial service. As I'm overwhelmed with excitement for each of you, I can't help but notice who's not in the room. Freedom is yet silent for Black women and girls. We are witnesses that it is indeed possible to be free and oppressed simultaneously. That's why the thought came to the mind of my daughter, a millennial young Black woman, because it's her truth too. But, all too often Black women's truth is denied.

When Black women's truth is denied, our reality is questioned. When Black women's truth is denied, those who rape us go free—for we're still considered "unrapeable." When Black women's truth is denied, white fragility deliberately silences us in the workplace; when Black women's truth is denied, we're stereotyped as "angry Black women." When Black women's truth is denied, our confidence is described as arrogance; when Black women's truth is denied, our intellectual genius is intimidating to the insecure, and somehow their hurt feelings are our fault. When Black women's truth is denied, white women's tears have incredible power. When Black women's truth is denied, we are "preferably unheard."⁹⁸ Zora Neale Hurston says it this way, "If you're silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it."⁹⁹ But in response, Black poet and social activist Audre Lorde declares, "Your silences will not protect you."¹⁰⁰

Black Women's Gifts

What would it look like if Black women's truth were believed? What would it look like if our prophetic utterances were taken seriously?

What is missing in the body because of our silencing? Well for one, Black women and other women of color have what scholars call an "epistemological advantage." Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for us to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized. The term describes the ways in which Black women and other women of color are able to have a much clearer understanding of how the power structure works within a given society because we are not members of the dominant group.

What else is missing?

Well, Melissa Harris-Perry articulates that Black women are the canaries in the coal mines of society.¹⁰¹ "To be a 'canary in a coal mine' means that one is so sensitive to environmental conditions that one's suffering sends a warning signal to others nearby. This expression comes from the practice of using canaries as alarms in mining tunnels. The canary's lungs were so delicate that it would be affected by toxic gases and die."¹⁰² I am a canary. It's dangerous to be a canary.

Finally, I maintain that Black women come equipped with thermal imaging cameras—we see the fire in the walls. But all too often our truth is denied. I wonder what would it look like if church and society believed us, validated our truth, and celebrated our gifts.

Freedom from Silence

It is clear that in church and society all voices do not have freedom of expression. Some voices are privileged while others are deliberately silenced. However, ministers of reconciliation understand that God invites all voices to the Table; none are to be silenced. Jesus' ministry of liberating the oppressed and setting the captives free must, therefore, inform our ministries.

As ministers of reconciliation we must create opportunities for the deliberately silenced to be heard. The silenced are the marginalized and oppressed. The silenced are missing from boardrooms and Communion tables. The silenced are absent from pulpits and coed classrooms. The silenced have a perspective that the privileged and dominant culture does not.

Our freedom doesn't have to be silent. Jesus came to proclaim release to the captives, open the eyes of the blind, and set the oppressed free, and that means all of us. That means every human being on the planet is worthy of freedom. Living into their full human potential. Nelson Mandela said it like this, "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."¹⁰³ Which is why all of us must work together for the freedom of the oppressed, marginalized, thrown away, and disenfranchised. God has set us free in Christ to work for the freedom of others.

When You Feel Like the Canaanites (Joshua 6:1521)

Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp

Tonight we are in another familiar passage that has been told, preached, and sung about many times. The passage tells the story of Joshua leading the people of Israel as they begin their conquest of the land of Canaan. It is here that they follow the instructions of God and march around the city of Jericho seven times, blow the trumpets, shout, and the walls around the city fall down.

We have probably heard some sermons on this passage. We have likely heard celebration of the miracle God performs in making the walls fall down. It is a miraculous event. We celebrate the victory at Jericho. Like the song, "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls come tumbling down, hallelujah." We shout about the walls tumbling down usually because we want to see the walls in our own life come tumbling down. We want to see God work miracles in our lives once again. We want the victory.

But can I be honest with y'all? Can I be real? This is one of the stories in the Bible that really bothers me. It bothers me for so many reasons. One reason I'm bothered is that when the walls came tumbling down, there were people who lived inside that wall and lives were taken and their world was destroyed without mercy. I think about the women, men, and children who lived inside of Jericho's walls, whose parents and grandparents lived inside Jericho's walls. I can imagine them inside the city living their life as any other day and hearing horns, hearing shouting, and then for the walls of the city to suddenly collapse. How terrifying must that have been?

I think about the pain and anguish they must have felt to see the walls of the home they have always known to crumble before their eyes, everything around them being destroyed, and then to be attacked. I struggle with how they must have felt. I know we usually don't focus on the Canaanites because we usually read the passage as if we are the Israelites. It is the way we have been taught to read the Bible as Christians and especially as people who have suffered much oppression of our own. I know we are looking for our victory. I know we like to shout for the victory. I know we want to be on the side of the winners in the story, but sometimes that's not really our story.

See, sometimes life is moving fast and seems to be circling us seven times. Sometimes the walls seem to be shaking because our world appears as if it's about to come crashing down. There are days, weeks, and seasons in our lives when we can't really identify with the victor because life seems to be beating us to no ends and we seem to be losing the battle. If we are honest, there are a lot of times when we feel like the Canaanites. Maybe I shouldn't say "we." Maybe your days are filled with sunshine and rainbows; maybe the storms of life have passed over you and moved to the lives of others. Maybe you're just living your best life and if that is your story, that's fine. Praise be to God for your story.

For those of us who have had to go through some things, like when the doctor calls and says the test results aren't normal. Or one minute things seem to be going well and then, bam, your marriage is on the rocks. When you get let go from your job and the little savings you had has run out, but the bills keep coming. When you've been applying for jobs and no one is calling you back. When the car breaks down and you got enough money to either pay rent or get the car fixed, you can't do both. When your mama gets sick and you have to take care of her, your family, and try to keep your job. I'm just talking about the stuff in our day-to-day lives. This does not include the attacks of widespread oppression, the "isms," the foolishness of politicians, or the trauma of being in the world. When life just keeps coming and coming and you feel like you can't take no more. There are times when it feels like the walls are tumbling down and we are being attacked. God, what is really going on?

And that's the other thing that bothers me about this passage. You see, Joshua tells them God has given them this land, God said to go into this land that is already occupied by people, kill them, and we gone keep the gold and the land. I have a problem with that and it troubles my spirit. It troubles me on so many levels. I have a problem with God promising people land that is already occupied by other people. Why couldn't God give them land that was empty? And why would God say kill all these

people? I have a problem with this here God. I know many of us were taught it's in the Bible, so it must be OK. Well, for me, I'm sorry, for me it's not all right. I have questions and issues with this, so I have to push back. I know we like to get to the shout so we read past the atrocities to get to the shout, but that can be dangerous. We might need to hold the shout for a minute.

See, because people come centuries later and take this same passage to justify going into lands that were already occupied by people and killing the indigenous people and taking their land and everything they want in it, claiming that it was justified by God. Here in this country when the Puritans arrived and there were people here already in this land, the Puritans read themselves into the text and believed they were the New Israelites and this was their land, Manifest Destiny. Robert Warrior tells how Puritan preachers called Native Americans "Amalekites and Canaanites," which meant if they could not be converted, they were to be annihilated.¹⁰⁴ Those were the preachers.

Just like the story of Canaan, the U.S. conquest narratives are of devastating warfare initiated and perpetrated by the invaders claiming to be authorized by God. Many indigenous people have been murdered and pushed off their land not only here but around the world as colonizers read themselves into this narrative. We have to be careful reading ourselves into the narratives, especially when lives are at stake.

See, the Israelites believed that God had given them this land. The passage we read tonight tells this event from their point of view. But what I know is there is always more than one side of a story. We have to remember what many of us call the Old Testament comes from Hebrew Scriptures, and it tells the story of a people and their relationship with God. The stories written are told from those who were part of this group, and I'm sure the story would look different if told from the perspective of someone else. When you look at this the way it is written, it tells the story as if the Canaanite lives do not matter. Well, God, what about the Canaanites? Don't you care for these people you also created? If told from the Canaanites' point of view, this story could look a whole lot different.

See, I've said it before and I'll say it again; when others tell your story, it often does not sound like your story anymore. When we are being attacked by life, being oppressed, at some point we still have to tell our own story, talk about our own experiences and relationship with God. If you can muster up the strength to speak while you're in the midst of your own hell, tell the story. If you can't find the words until after it is over, tell the story. If you lost some people you loved along the way, tell the story. When you had victories, tell the story.

In our lives we all have our own experiences with God that shape our theology, what we think about God and what we believe about God. This can become even more influential in times of our suffering. There are things that you have learned to be true about God that you only know because of what you've been through. And that's the part we must tell. M. Shawn Copeland says a theology of suffering in womanist perspective remembers and retells the lives and suffering of those who came through and those who have gone on. By remembering and retelling our story, we make sure folks understand that our lives do matter not only to us but to God. And that we know God in our own way.¹⁰⁵

The other thing I kept thinking about while I wrestled with this text is the people in Jericho. When they got attacked, it was not one person in that community who went through that ordeal alone. I don't want y'all to miss that. When the people of Jericho got attacked, it was not one person in that community who went through that alone. See when it hits the fan and gets real tough, a lot of us like to withdraw; we try to go figure out how to get through it alone. The problem with that is it cuts us off from the very community who can try to help, hold us, and if necessary fight back with us.

We are all by ourselves trying to make it and thinking we're the only person going through right now. Let me help somebody, let me help myself, you're not the only one. It's a whole lot of other folk who have gone through what you're going through, going through what you're going through, or maybe gonna end up going through what you going through. True, this is your trouble right now, but it's not a new trouble. What would it look like if instead of trying to do it all by ourselves and pretend like everything is OK, we let the folks in our community know we need help? What could happen if we stood beside each other to face the attacks of life and the world?

The other thing about this story, again I struggled with it all week, then it finally hit me; Kamilah, this ain't the whole story. This is not only one view of the story; it is only part of a bigger story. Whatever happened the day the wall came tumbling down in Jericho wasn't the end of the story either. The story of the Canaanites kept going after that. Even if their story isn't heard enough, the story still did not end that day. Y'all looking at me like how do I know? I know because, first of all, Judges tells how there were Canaanites who lived with Israelites. But then hundreds of years later Mark writes about a Canaanite woman with a clapback.

Y'all remember the Canaanite woman who asked Jesus for help and Jesus tried to play her. Jesus called her a dog, but that didn't stop this Canaanite woman. See, the clapback was real. She let Jesus know this is not how this story will end. She told

Jesus to his face, “My life and my daughter’s life matters. We matter.” She made sure that he understood that they were not going to be ignored and written out of the story. She was going to make sure that he understood, and she helped Jesus on that day (Matthew 15:21-28).

And I believe that she helped us all on that day. Not only did she declare our lives matter and you will see me, but she let us know there was more to the story. See, we have to understand that even when the walls seem to be falling down all around us, nothing seems to be going right, God don’t seem to be present, and we believe we might be facing our end, we have to remember this ain’t the end of the story. Now let me be clear, it could be an end of a chapter, but it’s not the end of the story. I need to know y’all are getting what I’m trying to say.

See, y’all know I love to read. Unfortunately, lately none of my reading has been reading for pleasure, but I love to read all types of books—novels, biographies, books on theology, books on history. Now my daughter is beginning to enjoy reading much more too, which I love. As she got better with reading, she transitioned from short stories to chapter books. The short stories often tell a story in a very little time that typically has a happy ending. Not that they are all fairy tales, but they often end on a high note. Well, now she is in chapter books and what she is learning is all types of things can happen in one chapter. Sometimes things happen to characters, sometimes there are funny parts, or really sad things, sometimes the chapter ends with a cliff-hanger, and some chapters are better than other chapters. The thing is this is just what’s going on in that particular chapter.

Our lives are like this. We have chapters of our lives when things couldn’t get any better. Everything is going well; life is great. We also have chapters when some of the characters are taken out of our story in different ways, there are plots and twists that we don’t see coming, or a particular painful chapter that seems to be going on for such a long time that it seems like this is the way the story is going to end. But truth is it’s a chapter, not the whole story, or the end of the story. Just as the Canaanite story did not end when the walls came tumbling down, ours will not either.

Here’s the thing, for this story to keep going we have to remember our stories are tied together. And because our stories are tied together, we have to remember this is not a short story that will quickly end on a high note; this story has many chapters, bad and good. Even when I’m in the worst chapter of my life, it’s not the whole story. And the chapter of my story can have an impact on the chapters of your story. It doesn’t matter if my chapter is good or bad, it can impact your chapter and we can help each other in our chapters. We must share in our bad chapters and our good chapters. See, I believe God is wrapped up in the story of all people. We have to ask ourselves how do we see God in our story? How do we see God in the story of others?

When A Man Loves A Woman (Matthew 1:18-25 CEB)

Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session

This Is What Love Does

Tomorrow is the fourth Sunday of Advent, and the theme is Love. What is love? How can we recognize it? What does it look like? What does love feel like?

My daughter and I have this thing we do. I will say to her, “India, Mama loves you.” She’ll say, “I know, Mama.” Then I’ll say, “But do you really know? I mean, can you feel it? Do you feel my love?” She’ll respond, “Yes, Mama, I feel it.”

What good is it to say you love someone and they don’t feel it? What’s the point if those we love can’t point to any evidence or practical application of that love?

In our preaching passage, I see love. And there are three characteristics that help me understand that what I see in this passage is indeed love. First, love has a Story. Second, love has a Challenge. And, finally, love has Courage.

Betrothal

Tonight, the focus of this sermon is not on Mary, but Joseph. Joseph, a young man who made a commitment to Mary, a young girl, and her family. Joseph and Mary were betrothed. In those days, a betrothal was serious business. When I say business, that is exactly what I mean. Money and property were exchanged. Joseph paid what was called “the bride-price”¹⁰⁶ to Mary’s father. Typically, in those days, marriage was transactional. Love was not factored into the equation. Love had nothing to do with the arrangement. But this story isn’t like other stories of betrothal in marriage. This one is different.

The author of life is involved in this story.

The Divine Creator’s hands are all over this story.

Listen, if you want your story to be different, make sure God is involved in your story.

Before Joseph and Mary came together sexually, Joseph discovered what no person wants to find out. His partner was

pregnant, and the child wasn't his! Joseph thought that someone else had been sleeping in his bed. Their story had taken a detour. Their story was presented with a challenge.

Joseph's Challenge

If you want to know if your relationship story has a chance, pay attention to how you handle challenges—setbacks, disappointments, problems, and obstacles.

Joseph had a challenge. What was he going to do? As I thought about Joseph's challenge, I couldn't help but ponder a few questions. First, what is it like to be a man who loves a woman called to special ministry by God? Well, it would mean Joseph had to adjust his life, modify his plans, and possibly take heat from his homeboys. What does it mean for a man to marry a woman who is already pregnant? A woman pregnant with a vision. Pregnant with a call. Pregnant with something inside of her placed there by God. Then I realized this is precisely what it means for a man to be the head—a phrase so often used to subjugate women to inferior status. But Joseph modeled something else. Joseph shows us that for a man to be the head, he brings out the best of his partner. Why, because the head knows his wife—sexually and otherwise—he knows her needs, he knows her potential, he knows her gifts, he knows how she's wired.

Brothers, here's a word for you: You need to ask the woman you say you love, what has God placed in her that will transform the world and how can you love her so as to help her fulfill that purpose?

Joseph's Decision

The Bible says "*he decided* to call off their engagement quietly." Why, quietly, because "he didn't want to humiliate her" (Matthew 1:19).

Joseph refused to put Mary on Blast. He wasn't the man to put her seeming infidelity on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

Joseph wasn't Ray Jay.

Joseph wasn't Lil Fiz.

Joseph, the Bible says, "was a righteous man" (1:19).

Evidence of his righteousness was that there were some things Joseph just wouldn't do.

Joseph wouldn't shame Mary.

Joseph wouldn't demean Mary.

Joseph wouldn't suggest that Mary might be going to hell for what he thought she had done.

Joseph was a righteous man.

And because he was righteous, he would not humiliate her. Instead, he decided to divorce her quietly.

But, how many of you know, we make our plans but God directs our steps? Joseph decided to put her away, but Joseph forgot to check in with God.

You see, God had decided too. God had something to say that would derail Joseph's decision.

"Joseph . . . don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife" (1:20), said the angel. Beloved, I was struck by the angel's word choice. Don't be "afraid."

Why would Joseph be *afraid* to marry Mary?

Reluctant, sure.

Apprehensive, OK.

Unwilling, Hesitant, and Resistant. Certainly.

But afraid. Why? Well, here it is.

Prosecute Her

According to Roman law, if a man divorced his wife, he had to do it publicly with witnesses present. He then had to bring a prosecution against her within sixty days of the divorce. If found guilty of adultery, the wife and her lover were banished to different islands for life.¹⁰⁷ Now, if the husband chose not to divorce her, she was immune from prosecution. But check this out; a member of the community could prosecute the husband. Caesar Augustus enacted this law somewhere between 19 to 18 BC, primarily to "increase the birthrate through encouraging marriage and stable family life."¹⁰⁸

Joseph was afraid that if anyone found out Mary was pregnant by another man, and he didn't divorce her, that someone from the community would bring a case against him. The angel knew it. God knew it. Joseph didn't want to catch a case. And

yet, he still decided to put Mary away quietly. Joseph took a risk.

Believe the Unbelievable

Joseph listened to the vessel sent by God. Joseph obeyed the word of God. Joseph believed the unbelievable. God calls us to the unbelievable. And when it happens, we often hesitate and vacillate wondering if God is really serious. I wonder, what is the unbelievable God is steering you to this Advent season? Enroll in seminary? Start a business? Plant a church? Quit a toxic job without another one to replace it? Who is God calling us to love? Who is God inviting us to show mercy and kindness to? Who is God calling us to hold accountable? Are you listening to God? Will you obey? Joseph obeyed God in the unbelievable. Joseph didn't understand it. He couldn't prove it. He had no witnesses to verify it. All Joseph had was the angel's word from God. And he had the willingness to believe that word and the courage to obey. Beloved, it takes courage to love. Imagine what Joseph was up against. Whoever heard of such a thing—"pregnant by the Holy Ghost! Seriously man." It takes courage to do something that's never been done before. It takes courage to obey the word God has given to only you. People will think you're irrational and foolish. I bet that's just a small portion of what Joseph dealt with. But, Joseph was a righteous man. Joseph loved. He loved God and he loved Mary.

Joseph's Love

Beloved, when a man loves a woman, he'll "give up all his comforts and sleep out in the rain."¹⁰⁹ When a man loves a woman, he'll bring out the best in her. When a man loves a woman, he gives her the benefit of the doubt.

Joseph loved God, and he loved Mary the way she needed to be loved. Mary, pregnant with the unbelievable, needed security. Love feels like security. Mary's womb meant danger to Empire. She needed safety. Love feels like safety. Mary, a teenage girl carrying a miracle in her body, needed acceptance and not rejection from her betrothed. Love feels like acceptance.

Beloved, I'm grateful this Advent season for this story that shows us what it looks like *when a man loves a woman*. May we learn from Joseph's love for Mary how to better love one another.

Tag-Team Sermons

The Gathering co-pastors often do what they call "tag-team" preaching, both delivering short sermons, one after another. Tag-team preaching illustrates their equal partnership, providing a model for an egalitarian community. On the first anniversary of The Gathering they preached the two sermons that follow, each titled "Why Womanist? Why Now?" but from different biblical passages.

Why Womanist? Why Now? (2 Chronicles 34:21-22)

Rev. Kamilah Hall Sharp

It is nothing short of amazing to me that today we are celebrating one year of ministry here at The Gathering. I'm excited that each of you came out to join us. I'm amazed that week after week people continue to show up and people tune in online. I'm amazed, but I probably shouldn't be. When we agreed to start a worship service here, we wanted to create space where people could come together and worship and hear womanist preaching; that has turned into The Gathering, A Womanist Church in Dallas. There are already a lot of churches in Dallas: Why Womanist? Why Now? I believe this passage helps answer these questions.

Here in the passage we find Josiah, the young king, trying to get things in order, especially in the house of God when Hilkiah found the book of the law. The people had been through some things, some moves, wars, hurt, and the book hadn't been seen in a long time. So, they were not sure what to do with the book. They needed counsel on how to move forward. You see the king, the priest, and all the male governmental officials couldn't figure this out, so they had to go where they could get the help they needed. They had to go to a woman, the prophet Huldah.

Though this occurred in the eighteenth year when King Josiah reigned, it sounds familiar to me now. Here in 2018 in these all but United States, when ignorance is at an all-time high, the numbers are down in the stock market and the church, it seems that now folks want to hear from women. It is not lost on me the number of women now being sought out for leadership roles, particularly Black women in corporations, academy, and the church. They are often asked for their help and leadership when things aren't going well. When everything was fine, the men could handle it—we don't need your help, ladies—but now when

folks figure they have more questions than answers, more problems than solutions, we need help, so it's time to get a woman for the job.

So, Josiah and the rest of the boys decide to get Huldah, but why Huldah? Josiah could have sent for Jeremiah; he was around, but they went and got Huldah. Well, the text tells us Huldah was the royal prophet. She probably had a reputation of being trustworthy, one whose word you can depend on. Remember Jeremiah said stuff about a lot of other prophets, calling them false prophets, but we never hear him talking bad about Huldah. Huldah was one you could trust. When folks are in trouble or when they need help, they want someone they can trust. #Trustwomanists.

I believe Huldah had some experiences that were not like the men who came seeking her help. Yes, she was a prophet, but she was a woman prophet. To be clear, she wasn't the only woman prophet. Although the books of prophets all have male names, there were women prophets. But as a woman prophet, I believe there were some things she had seen, heard, and experienced as a woman living in a society filled with what we now call PMS—patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. Huldah had some insight. She could see some things that the men did not and sometimes could not see and had some experiences with God her male counterparts did not have.

I get that as Black women in this country, there are some things we've experienced that no man has ever had to endure, no matter their race. There are things that Black women endure that other women do not, and that is where womanism begins, but it is not where it ends. See, people will say it's just about women or just about Black women, and that's not true. Womanism is centered in the life experiences of Black women, but womanists are committed to the survival of all people. That's right, ALL people. In that commitment we recognize that living at the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism our entire lives gives us experiences that allow us to often see things others can't. We have conversations with God that others don't. The issue is that for so long there have been those who want to reject our experiences as if our truth is a lie.

There has been a constant struggle for people to believe the experiences of women are valid and have worth. As Sofia said, "All my life I had to fight!"¹¹⁰ We live in a society where a woman can be forced to relive her assault in front of the world and not receive any justice. Well, I believe her and the millions of women around this world who tell their truth. Let's be honest; there are men and nonbinary people whose experiences have been ignored as well. Let me say today whatever your experience is, it is your truth, it is real and has value and no speech or tweet gone change that. I believe you and we believe womanists.

Apparently, they trusted and believed Huldah. I'm sure she still had to deal with some men who didn't support her, some who thought she shouldn't be the one speaking for God. And I'm sure it wasn't just men, but probably women too. See, womanists can relate because there are plenty of men who say, "I don't buy into all that womanist stuff or I don't believe women should be preaching." And it's not just the men; there are plenty of women on that same wagon. They don't like womanists or feminists because they are "for-men-ist." Oh, it's just like it sounds, "for-men-ism"; it's like "masculinism" in that it subscribes to the belief in the inherent superiority of men over women, but it is not developed and sustained by men but by women. We have a lot of "for-men-ists," especially in the church. And many "for-men-ists" love to quote certain Bible verses, but here's the thing: Huldah was the first person recorded in the Bible who was asked to interpret what we now call the Bible. The men brought the book of laws to her to determine if this is in fact the word of God.

I get it though, because so many times we hear people do strange things, claiming it is the word of God. Folks take the errors of their heart and mind and wrap them in the word of God. We hear people condemn the LGBTQ community in the name of God, saying politics don't belong in the church. Then a well-known Black woman Christian writer with a large platform said she does not identify herself as a Black woman. Well, when I look at the book and look at my experience with God, I don't believe any of that to be the word of God.

You see it was Huldah who had to tell them that this is the word of God. Sometimes you need a woman to give you a word from God. But to be clear, not just any woman but one who is concerned about the people and not just their pockets. Those are the ones you can trust, believe, and listen to. Trust, believe, and listen to the womanists because at this moment in time when people are being shot in grocery stores, bombs sent through the mail, and attacks on synagogues, God is still speaking. We say "how long," and yet God speaks. God still has a word of liberation, a word of hope, a word of love for you, and those words are coming through the bodies of womanists. God has been speaking through women throughout time. God spoke through Huldah, God spoke through Mary Magdalene, and God is still speaking. Are we listening?

Why Womanist? Why Now? (2 Chronicles 34:31-33)

Rev. Dr. Irie Lynne Session

The prophet Huldah is consulted about the contents of a newly found scroll in the Temple. She interprets it and confirms that God will indeed bring disaster on the house of Judah because of their idolatry and for abandoning the ways of God.

Experience of Sankofa

Huldah's interpretation of the words of the book newly found in the Temple and her affirmation of their certainty in coming to pass led King Josiah to an experience of *Sankofa*, which he instilled in the people of Jerusalem and Benjamin. *Sankofa* is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana. The literal translation of the word and the symbol is "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind." The *Sankofa* symbolizes the Akan people's quest for knowledge—through critical examination, and intelligent and patient investigation. The symbol is based on a mythical bird with its feet firmly planted forward with its head turned backwards. Thus, the Akan believe the past serves as a guide for planning the future. To the Akan, it is this wisdom in learning from the past that ensures a strong future. *Sankofa* calls on us to look back and glean wisdom from the ancestors in order to move into a better future. The prophet Huldah inquired of God and interpreted the words of the book in a way that caused King Josiah to look back—to reflect on their ancestors.

Ancestors

Use of the word "ancestors," particularly in verses 32-33, brought to mind a lecture presented by Rev. Dr. Frank Thomas a couple weeks ago during Scholars Week at Memphis Theological Seminary. In his lecture, Dr. Thomas discussed gaining wisdom from the ancestors, or what he called "Wisdom of the Ages." For many Black people, ancestors serve as our guides and wisdom bearers. We believe that through prayer, connecting with older members of our families, and retelling the stories of our ancestors, surviving and thriving against the odds, we as Black folk always have access to that wisdom. As womanists, we look to ancestral stories to help us strategize ways to move forward as pastoral leaders, as preachers, as theologians, heck, as Black women, in spite of the racist and sexist obstacles we face every single day. And, from reading this text, it's obvious to me that God also takes seriously the stories of the ancestors.

In the case of Judah, God is set to bring judgment on them because of the unrighteousness and the injustice of their ancestors. Because they "did not keep the word of the LORD, to act in accordance with all that was written in this book" (2 Chronicles 34:21). Disobedience and lack of concern for the word of the LORD became a lifestyle that was passed down through the generations. Certain of their ancestors were not persuaded that it was in their best interest to keep the word of the LORD.

Unpersuadable

Two weeks ago, Rev. Kamilah and I along with a few other preachers discussed this very idea. One of the pastors, a professor in Memphis, helped us see that some people are just not persuadable. They have believed, bought into, and benefited from living in opposition to the good purposes of God for so many generations that they are now unpersuadable. There are people we will never convince of the reality of white supremacy and its death-dealing effects in church or society. Some will never open their eyes wide enough or see that racism is in the DNA of America. And still others will resist any biblical translation other than the King James Version. The faith, religious ideologies, and practices of our ancestors make their way into our lives—even when we think they haven't. Which is why I believe some folk want to disengage themselves from the actions of their ancestors and while others of us are eager to learn more about the courage and strength of ours. Which is one of the reasons this text appeals to me.

Huldah, in a critical time in the life of Judah, was called upon as one with religious authority who had the ear of God and the ability to interpret the words of the book. One who could possibly assuage God's anger and ameliorate the consequences of the disobedience of their ancestors. To be sure, there were two other prophets during the reign of King Josiah who could have been consulted, Zephaniah and Jeremiah. However, the priest went to the prophet Huldah.

But why Huldah?

Wil Gafney, in her book *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel*, says of Huldah, "She is the prophetic

authority behind the reform usually attributed to King Josiah of Judah.”¹¹¹ Perhaps Huldah had a way of communicating prophecy that was more conducive to delivering news difficult to hear. I don’t know; maybe as a woman prophet Huldah had a certain kind of wisdom born from experiencing the difficulties of prophetic ministry. Although there were other women prophets, they were still in the minority. What I think is most important is not why the prophet Huldah was consulted, but that she was the go-to prophet in a critical moment in Judah’s history. And, that her voice was heard and she was believed.

Womanist Wisdom

What would it look like if Black women’s voices were heard and believed? I use Black women in a general sense, understanding that Black women are not monolithic—we do not all think the same, act the same, believe the same, or theologize the same. So, generally speaking, what would it look like if the prophetic utterances of Black preaching women and their ways of interpreting the biblical text were taken seriously rather than marginalized? What if the church, the academy, and larger society *made central Black women’s ways of knowing*?

You see, Black women have what scholars call an “epistemological advantage”; an “epistemological advantage” describes the ways in which Black women are able to have a much clearer understanding of how power structure works within a given society because we are not members of the dominant group. As women living at the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression, Black women have knowledge of the practices of our contexts as well as those of the dominant culture. Another way of expressing this way of knowing is *Womanist Wisdom*.

Linda Hollies, in her book *Bodacious Womanist Wisdom*, writes, “Womanist Wisdom is that learned by Black women who have grappled with issues of race, sex, and class discrimination and yet continue to rise above the odds and the world’s expectations. Womanist Wisdom gives you a word of knowledge. It’s not the easy way. But it’s the way of courage.”¹¹²

Churches, nonprofits, businesses, schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries who fail to make central the voices and perspectives of Black women in their employ are missing out on a critical mass of knowledge and expertise that could catapult their organizations to another stratosphere. Because we really do have that Magic.

Melissa Harris-Perry, in her book *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, writes of womanist wisdom in terms of Black women as the canaries in the coal mines of society.¹¹³ “To be a ‘canary in a coal mine’ means that one is so sensitive to environmental conditions that one’s suffering sends a warning signal to others nearby. This expression comes from the practice of using canaries as alarms in mining tunnels. The canary’s lungs are so delicate that they are affected by the toxic gases and die.”¹¹⁴ It’s dangerous being a canary. Womanists have determined to be more than canaries in the coal mines of the church and the academy. We’re tired of dying trying to get the church to see the toxic fumes of white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, and racism. And so, we create, we innovate, and with God’s help, we make room for ourselves. We build our own tables where we can live into the fullness of who God made us to be, women who care about and are actively engaged in work and ministry leading to the survival and wholeness of entire peoples, male and female.

So, Why Womanist? Because when we look back, we see that the playing field has never been level for us.

Why Womanist? Because when we look back, we’re reminded that Black women have always been treated as objects, rarely as subjects.

Why Womanist? Because when we look back, it’s clear to us that the Black woman is and has always been the most disrespected woman on the planet.

Why Womanist? Why Now? Because we will get the RESPECT we deserve or we’ll leave the table—wherever it is.

Why Womanist? Why Now? Because when we look back, we remember that God has fortified us with the strength, the tenacity, the internal equipment, and the ancestral legacy to Still Rise.

Why Womanist? Why Now? Because the church, the academy, and the larger society need Huldahs who have the ear of God. We need Huldahs who can interpret the words in the BOOK in a manner that elicits a resistance to every power and principality that keeps us from becoming the beloved community.

Why Womanist? Why Now? Well, why not?

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63. Rev. Yvette Blair-Lavallais, former co-pastor of The Gathering, co-founded The Gathering with Rev. Dr. Session and Rev. Hall Sharp.
64. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, xxi.
65. Medora and White, "You Don't Own Me."
66. "Current Population Survey," *U.S. Census Bureau* (2017). Unpublished calculation based on the median earnings for all women and men who worked full time, year-round in 2016; full time is defined as 35 hours a week or more.
67. "American Community Survey: Household Type," *U.S. Census Bureau* (2017). Calculation uses family households headed by females living in a household with family and no husband. A family household includes a householder, one or more people living in the same household who are related to the householder, and anyone else living in the same household.
68. "American Community Survey: Selected Population Profile," *U.S. Census Bureau* (2017). To determine whether a household falls below the poverty level, the U.S. Census Bureau considers the income of the householder, size of family, number of related children, and, for one- and two-person families, age of householder. The poverty threshold in 2017 was \$19,749 for a single householder and two children under 18.
69. Day, *Unfinished Business*, 31.
70. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 16263.
71. Gafney, "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah," 49.
72. Gafney, "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah," 65.
73. Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, Kindle ed., chapter 4.
74. Lorde, "Your Silences," para. 2.
75. Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 431.
76. Lakoff, "twitter.com/@GeorgeLakoff," <https://twitter.com/georgelakoff/status/985951056378060800>.
77. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 16.
78. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 16.
79. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 20.
80. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 153.
81. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 152.
82. West, "Justice is Love Made Public," para. 2.
83. King, "Let MLK Trouble Your Conscience," para. 30.
84. Williams and Warner, "The Black Mambas."
85. Ocasio-Cortez, "twitter.com/AOC," <https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1173609907033116672?lang=en>.
86. Waters, "Maxine Waters Teaches," para. 2.
87. Hurston, "If You Are Silent," para. 1.
88. Macon, "Dallas Ranked Dead Last," para. 12.
89. See Felder, "Cultural Ideology," 194.
90. Crawford, *Hope in the Holler*, xii.
91. Roosevelt, "Second Inaugural Address," para. 29.
92. Chaney, "Whose Sour Grapes?" 10522.
93. Williams, "The Salvation of Growth," 899.
94. Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, 43.
95. Lilly, "It's All God."
96. Haynes, "Headlights or Taillights."
97. Shakur, "Key Themes," para. 16.
98. Roy, "The 2004 Sydney Peace Prize," para. 4.
99. Hurston, "If You Are Silent," para. 1.
100. Lorde, "Your Silences," para. 1.
101. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 16.
102. Simpson, "Black Women Must Be More," para. 1.
103. Mandela, "A Selection of Quotes," para. 11.
104. Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 264.
105. Copeland "Wading Through Many Sorrows," 109129, 123.
106. Wilson, "Were Mary and Joseph Married," para. 6.
107. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 76.
108. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 75.
109. Lewis and Wright, "When a Man Loves a Woman," para. 2.
110. Walker, *The Color Purple*, 40.
111. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam*, 96.
112. Hollies, *Bodacious Womanist Wisdom*, x.
113. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 16.
114. Simpson, "Black Women Must Be More," para. 1.

Litanies for a Womanist Church

WOMANIST WORSHIP MOVES THEOLOGY and biblical interpretation from the head to the heart. Invigorating not only the mind, womanist worship also converts the imagination and empowers social justice activism. Womanist worship shapes values, stirs spirits, and drives actions. Along with sermons, litanies and music and all parts of a worship service are vital to womanist worship. This chapter includes litanies created for The Gathering, a Womanist Church. Included in the worship services of The Gathering, these litanies contribute to the liberating, transformative mission of this unique womanist church.

Together, Changing the World

ONE: Come, let us worship our Mother and Father, the Ground of our being, the Source of our lives, the Spirit who sets us free.

ALL: We come together to celebrate our partnership as sisters and brothers in ministry to transform our lives and to create an equitable world.

ONE: We gather to share one another's burdens and blessings, trials and triumphs.

ALL: As partners with Jesus and with one another, we bring healing and hope to our wounded world.

ONE: The Spirit calls us to wholehearted commitment to our mission of dismantling patriarchy, racism, and all injustices.

ALL: We move forward together side by side, empowered by the Spirit.

ONE: Our mission of inclusiveness is not easy in our time and place.

Let us dare to believe that we contribute to healing our global community by gathering here as a faith community to share our visions of transformation.

ALL: Let us dare to dream big dreams of bringing justice and peace to our community and our world.

ONE: All voices and all gifts are vital to make our dreams reality.

ALL: Together, we change the world.

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Faith Becoming Reality

ONE: We come together to profess our faith, our assurance of things hoped for, of things not seen.

ALL: We gather with open minds and spirits, believing we will receive new revelations.

ONE: Our worship is an act of faith in the Spirit of Love alive in each of us.

ALL: We speak and sing our visions as we reclaim our wholeness, our power in the image of the Divine.

ONE: Here at The Gathering we breathe the air of a time yet to be, a time when barriers are broken down and wounds are healed.

ALL: The Spirit gives us visions of what can be, guiding us forward to more than we can see.

ONE: Our faith becomes reality as we work so that all can be free.

ALL: Let us worship with hope and faith that
silenced voices will be heard,
trembling voices will be made strong,
oppressed people will be set free,
by power of the Spirit within us
at work yesterday, today, and forever.

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