

2020 11 29 – Hope Rooted in Story

Psalm 80 (NRSV)

This week our Advent study group met for our first session. As we shared and listened and discussed, I was grateful for a resource that speaks to the time in which we are living. Our Advent study was written knowing that COVID-19 is our reality and that we will be wearing masks, physical distancing and even self-isolating during this holiday season. I was especially grateful for the invitation to lament. In this study the author, Janice MacLean, reminds us that practicing lament helps us to confront our fears and to name our grief and loss.

<https://prayerbench.ca/product/now-advent-small-group-study/>

Today's scripture reading is a lament. Psalm 80, like many of the ancient songs found in the Bible, is a song of grief and loss. A song that was written over 2500 years ago at a time when the Israelites were experiencing a great calamity. Scholars are not in agreement about the exact circumstances; but it was probably written in response to the fall and exile of the northern kingdom of Israel. The psalmist compares their kingdom to a vineyard when he asks God,

¹⁴Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

¹³The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.

As we are all aware, we too, as a congregation, as a nation, as a world have reason for lament. We have all experienced loss at some level during these past nine months. Some have had traumatic losses such as jobs, homes, illness or

even loved ones and we have all struggled with the effects of COVID-19. So we all have reason to lament

The Israelites believed that when bad things happened it was because YHWH, their God, was angry at them. We read,

⁴O LORD, God of hosts
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
⁶You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.

Unlike the psalmist, I don't believe in a wrathful God, a God that punishes us for our wrongdoing. I believe in a God of love and forgiveness. I believe in a God that mourns with us and feels our pain. I believe in the healing power of lament, the blessing of naming our fear, our grief, and our loss.

I also believe in the gift of story. In this psalm the Israelites are pleading, "Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved." The Hebrew people believe in the possibility of restoration and new life because they know that they have lived through difficult times in the past and, as a nation, they have survived. In today's psalm, the writer refers to their most famous story of deliverance: their exodus from slavery in Egypt and their journey to the Promised Land. He writes

⁸You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
⁹You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.

They remember that, with God's help, Moses was able to lead them out of captivity, through the wilderness and eventually to a land where they prospered.

We also use these ancient stories to give us hope. In our opening hymn this morning, we sang of that same journey with the words:

O come, O come, great God of might
who to your tribes, on Sinai's height,
In ancient times once gave the law
In cloud and majesty and awe.

We remember that even in the wilderness, God was with the Israelites, guiding them and providing them with the wisdom to survive. These stories of freedom, of healing, of new life, give us reason to believe in the power of love and compassion, of justice and peace.

The cover story for the most current issue of the United Church's *Broadview* magazine is called "Christmas Magic, True Stories about the Small Miracles that Connect Us". I will be sharing some of these stories with you over the Advent season. For today I have chosen a story by Adele Halliday, a staff member at the national office of The United Church.

Adele was born in Canada but her family's roots are in St. Kitts, an island in the Caribbean. When Adele was eight her family travelled to St. Kitts for the Christmas holidays. One of the traditions that she encountered on that trip was the 5 a.m. worship service on Christmas morning at the local Methodist church. She writes, "I remember how I sat through the service bleary-eyed and weary, wishing I could still be snug in my bed."

It was many years later, that a pastor on St. Kitts finally explained the tradition of the 5 a.m. church service. Adele said, "the truth simultaneously shocked and inspired me." This is what she wrote:

People gather for worship in many churches in St. Kitts (and across the Caribbean) to pay homage to the past. In the days when Black people were still enslaved on the island, their only option for a Christmas service was to go to church at that early hour. This would give them enough time to get back home and prepare the house and food so their white enslavers could go to church, too. But it was not a simple act, the pastor told me: gathering for worship was actually illegal. People would walk to church in the protective cloak of darkness, knowing that this could result in sanctions against them. By keeping the early worship time on Christmas even now, nearly two centuries after slavery was outlawed on the island, we honour the courage of our enslaved ancestors and give thanks for our freedom in the present.

Adele goes on to say:

For me, finally having my “why” question answered brought about a transformation of my mind and soul — a shift from resentment to rootedness. I no longer view the pre-dawn service as something to be endured. Rather, it has become a powerful experience that connects me to my ancestors and deepens my resolve to fight for justice.

(Broadview December 2020, page 26.)

Stories, whether they are personal, biblical, ancestral, community-based or national, all have the power to enlighten us, inspire us and to give us hope. The

Israelites found their hope in the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses and King David. As Christians we tell the stories of Jesus—his birth, life, death, and resurrection—and we remember the ordeals of the early church. Even now with a pandemic raging, we look back to stories of other plagues: real ones like the Spanish Flu and Polio and those that have been imagined in movies like *Contagion*. The stories that we turn to may even be our own. In our Advent study, we were asked to think about other difficult times in our own lives and in the life of our congregation and to remember what we learned from those experiences.

One of the ways that we remember these stories is through ritual. We remember them through the lighting of candles, the reading of scripture, the singing of hymns and the reciting of prayers. We gather here this morning to lament our grief and sorrow, to hear the stories, to share in the rituals and thus to find comfort, inspiration and hope. As we move through these difficult times what story will you remember, what ritual will you practice, what song will you sing?