

Sunday February 13, 2022 Redlands United Church of Christ
Barbie Fiske-Phillips
Roots of Faith and Freedom

Good morning. Please pray with me...May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you. Amen

This is certainly the week for surprises – when the week began, we were a church that was gathering only online. Today we are a church where some of us are here physically, and others are participating online! We are a church who was expecting the bright and beautiful face of Jill to be guiding us through another Sunday service and sharing in her unabashed joy at being able to lead us in worship together. I personally expected to be on the other side of this pulpit either in that pew over there, or in my jams on my couch! But as with much in these times, our expectations shift and change and we find ourselves called into new ways of being! So, here we are, me on this side of the pulpit, Jill hopefully in her jams on her couch and all of us in worship together.

When Jill called on Thursday night to ask if I'd be willing to give the message today, my first inclination was – “Uh, NO!”... however, knowing the situation, and knowing how concerned Jill must be, how could I say no? She said she had heard that the topic for last Sacred Saturday resonated with that group and wondered if it would translate into something for today. I am honored to be asked. So, folks, we're in this together and I am trusting that Spirit is present and will get us all through these next few minutes.

As you are well aware, this month is Black History month. As I prepared for last week's Sacred Saturday program I began to wonder and wander through words and songs by black folks I don't know much about. In the last few years I have started to learn some of the untold stories of The United States' history. I think there are many of us who have begun to read authors we haven't read before and listen to music and voices that have been silenced. I began to wonder if some of that same silencing had created a skewed understanding of Black American Christianity. Had I ever even really stopped to consider that in America, the filter of race was also born in our expression of faith?

Before we go further, I want to be clear – I am a white woman. I will never be able to fully immerse myself in black American Christianity, nor is that my place. However, I think that time considering what I can know with openness and wonder may enrich my own spiritual journey and help to envision the beloved community

to come. I am striving to approach this subject through the lens of appreciation rather than appropriation.

In America, enslaved Africans were forced into a new religion – Christianity. The religion of their enslavers. According to Yolanda Pierce, the dean of the divinity school at Howard University, Christianity was proslavery. So much of early American Christian identity is predicated on a proslavery theology. The Africans who were brought to America from 1619 onward carried with them diverse religious traditions. 20-30% were Muslim, some had learned of Christianity before coming to America, but many practiced African spiritual traditions.

Theologian Diana Hayes says in her book *Forged in the Fiery Furnace* that the Black Christian church had its beginnings in slavery – but its roots are in Africa. She goes on to say that Black religious expression tends to have these attributes directly linked to religious expression in Africa before enslavement.

It is Animistic – or Spirit-filled

It is human-centered, dynamic and expressionistic

There is an element of being able to communicate with spirits

There is belief in magic, or miracles

During enslavement, there was encouragement by some preachers that enslavers should allow slaves to attend worship services – in separate gatherings – led by white proslavery preachers. Those men of God argued that scriptures such as those in Ephesians and Colossians “slaves, obey your earthly master” would promote docility among the enslaved. Often whole portions of the bible were kept away – Washington’s museum of the Bible displays a “slave Bible” published in 1807 which doesn’t include the Exodus story because that could inspire rebellious thinking.

It is not as though none of the censored stories got through – they did and those stories had a powerful impact . According to Diana Hayes, “Blacks believed that the Gospel must have something important to do with freedom and well-being for blacks, since parts of it was kept from them.

Rooted deeply within Black Christian Theology is always a quest for freedom, and that freedom or liberation will come from God. Again and again black people were able to see themselves in many of the stories of the bible – certainly in the story of the Exodus, and also in the story of Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego found in the

book of Daniel... if you haven't read it, or haven't read it in a long time, I encourage you to delve into it. But for now, here are the major notes..

The King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, created a massive golden statue and demanded that whenever the horns, bells and instruments sounded, all the people should bow down and worship it. If anyone refused to bow down and worship when told to do so, they would be thrown into the fiery furnace belonging to the King. Now, within Nebuchadnezzar's court were three young Israelite exiles who would come to be known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They refused to bow down when instructed to. They claimed that their God would save them. So, The King had them bound up and they were thrown into the fiery furnace. To the King's shock however, they remained unharmed. Their constraints disappeared and they walked in the fire, free and unharmed. When the King looked into the furnace, he said to his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" They answered the king, "True, O king." ²⁵ He replied, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god." Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire.

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was questioned about his radical civil disobedience, he replied that it didn't start with him...it started with Shadrach Meshach and Abednego!

The quest for freedom – for liberation is foundational for Black Christianity. Poet Maya Angelou wrote about it in her autobiography "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". The need for freedom is rooted deeply for all people, and for individuals. Listen to the poet and students tell us why the caged bird sings...

PLAY VIDEO.

While the struggle for freedom is part of the heart of Black American spirituality, it is important for us in the predominantly "white" American Christian church to consider this deeply as well.

Each of us have places in our lives where we are caged – we are held captive by situations we feel powerless to change – whether those situations are societal, family centered, or deep within our own beings. We each have within us a caged bird that is singing it's lungs out – praying for release. Pay attention to that part of

yourself. Allow it to believe that liberation is possible...what would it mean for your God to enter that cage with you? Do you believe you could fly free?

And, lest we forget, or try and look away, each of us also builds cages (or perhaps like Nebuchadnezzar we build statues and fiery furnaces) for others we are in relationships with ... Our expectations of “how things must be”, “how others should behave”, what must be done in order to achieve” can all become prisons of our making. I’m guessing each of us can recall or knows of a cage we have put others in – maybe it’s time to open the doors.

We all probably can, if we are honest with ourselves, call up times where we have not helped to break down the cages of oppression. Where we have not risked entering the fiery furnace for fear for ourselves. I believe most all of us have been in situations where we knew something wrong was happening, but we didn’t enter in; we didn’t help to dismantle the fiery furnace. We allowed someone to be seen as less than who they are, allowed our fear to overcome our faith.

I will say that I know this is true for me. When I hear stories like those of Exodus, of the Fiery Furnace of The Caged Bird...I am tempted to see myself as only one part of the story... the one being saved, set free, surviving the furnace,.

My favorite poet, Loring, wrote this last Saturday as part of his meditation...

Caged or Cager
By Loring Fiske-Phillips
February 2022

When I hear Dr. Angelou speak of the
Caged Bird, I see
Myself behind the bars.
Myself trapped by my choices,
Myself hearing voices telling me
What to see, how to be; oppressed to some degree.

But I am privileged to claim the sky.

It is not

My wings that are clipped and
My feet that are tied.
My sense of pride is seeing the bars,
While reality jars, a life with few mars, complaining of scars.

Oh, the desire to be the Hero of
The Story, the underdog, the
Focus of sympathy,
Focus that calms the storms,
Focus that warms the hearts. But I've always had more.
It's time to even the score, to end the war, to open the door.
Time to open the door.

Our scripture today that Connie read reminds us that “Jesus came down and stood with them and stood on a level place – from that level place Jesus healed and cured them. Surely we can trust that the same is true today.

BENEDICTION

Go now in the spirit of liberation – your own, and that of others’.
Go now knowing that the cage door can be opened whether you are on the inside or out.
Go now, knowing that the work of freedom, the work of liberation begins by holding hands and walking into the furnace... You will meet God there...