

John Sampson  
"The Creation of Humanity"  
Text: Exodus 14:21 – 30a  
Preached at KVCC  
June 7, 2020

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today, I'm asking Martha to share an image of holy blackness while I read from our sacred stories, and as I reflect on them. I've asked Martha to do this because as I often say our church is a place where we are asked to tell a different story, and where we are challenged to live in a different way, than what we hear and see around us.

In a world where we witness over and over again how black lives don't matter, here, in our virtual sanctuary, we say they do matter, but more than that, we say they are sacred. We already know that in our nation white lives matter. We see the proof of this all around us, every day. We know that white lives can be sacred. Who hasn't seen the blond haired, blue-eyed Jesus, even when Jesus definitely wasn't blond and blue-eyed? But as a nation, our collective imagination and heart seems to fail when it comes to our African American brothers and sisters.

That's why today we show a different icon.

Not an image of George Floyd on the ground with a policeman's knee on his neck, slowly bringing his breath to an end. But an image of a black woman clothed in purity, and crowned with a golden nimbus of Spirit.

In this icon we see the truth of God's love for her black children, which is so often lost, and obscured, and denied in these United States of America.

Hear the words of our sacred story:

[Read Exodus 14:21 – 30a]

This is a story of Creation.

It uses all of the images of the story that opens our Bible, the story that speaks of the creation of heaven, and earth, and everything in between. On the shores of the Red Sea, God, working through Moses, creates again, dividing water from water, revealing dry ground. God is present, and her Spirit active.

And what she creates on this day of deliverance is humanity. Not humanity as a physical being, not a species whose charge is simply to multiply and fill the earth. No, today she raises that physical being and crowns it with freedom. Today, God enters history and liberates the enslaved, and gives dignity to those who have been seen as less than human.

See what humanity looks like. It looks like the black woman in the icon before us.

And God saw her creation, that it was good, that it was very good.

But we know all of this isn't enough.

We know that even if God gives you a crown you can still end up being falsely accused, being delivered to a police force that will torture you, and make sport with your life, that will bring you before a kangaroo court, and steal your breath, the very presence of God, which gives each of us life. And we know that this is truer for our black and brown brothers and sisters, than it is for Euro-Americans.

We know that even if you are clothed in purity you can still find yourself hanging on a cross, being choked to death as you cry out that you can't breathe, that you can still find yourself being that strange fruit hanging from a tree that Billie Holiday sings about. And we know this is truer for people like Breonna Taylor, and Eric Garner than it is for you and me.

Last week we commissioned our Creation Justice Church Taskforce to help lead our congregation through a period of discernment reflecting on how we could live more deeply and profoundly into God's charge to all of us to nurture, and protect and celebrate the natural world around us. We enter this time of discernment and action because our world is at a moment of crisis, it is at a moment when the world we have always known is slipping through our fingers.

Today, there is another creation slipping through our fingers. It is the creation of humanity – the lived experience of freedom and dignity and justice. We are at a moment of national crisis in which the sacredness of black America is again hanging in the balance, and the commitment of white America to our teacher's commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves is again up for grabs.

What will we choose?

It's in this moment of crisis that I received an email from Faithful America, an online community of Christians who are trying to put faith into action for social justice. In this email the group published a guide for what people of faith can do to make a difference in healing the racial divisions in our nation.

There were three suggestions, which I will share with you over the upcoming weeks. But today I start with their first suggestion. Faithful America challenges us all to commit to a discipline of study, to read more and learn more about the history of how we got to this moment, the power dynamics involved, the economics, the politics and the legal structures that create and reinforce racial division in our nation.

We may hear this suggestion from Faithful America and think the time for study and reflection is past. With our cities on fire, and black and brown bodies being killed in the streets, we may believe that now is the time to act.

And it is the time to act, but it is also the time to welcome the voices of our spiritual elders into the conversation, so that our plans for action don't simply recreate the dynamics we are looking to end.

Two Februarys ago the Tuesday night book group started meeting and since then we've read James Cone's book on the spirituals and the blues, which is also an introduction to black liberation theology. We read a selection of Malcolm X's essays on Black Nationalism and the power of Islam to undo racist structures. We read MLK's account of the Montgomery bus boycott, and his commitment to nonviolent resistance. And we are just now finishing up Desmond Tutu's overview of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission created in South Africa to heal the nation after the fall of Apartheid.

At some point, while reading these books, each one of us who has been a member of the group, has had an aha moment, has had a moment when our understanding of the intersection of race, spirituality and politics in America has been transformed. Each one of us has been able to see issues connected to race in a new light. And I know this makes us better prepared for this moment, and better prepared to hear God's invitation to the future. I know it has better prepared me for this moment.

That is why, today, I take the statement that black lives matter from its origin in a protest movement and I invite it to join us in our worship. I do this in a way I haven't done before because I know some of us are uneasy with these words, and what we feel they imply. Don't all lives matter? I hear you, and I hear your concerns. And I ask that you share your discomfort so that we can have a truly honest and faithful conversation within our community about what it means to say black lives matter, not just out there, out beyond the walls of our virtual church, but also right here in the center of our sacred gathering.

I believe that this is the conversation that God is asking us to have, and she is asking that it be informed by the best history and theology and reflection that our spiritual elders have to offer. This study and conversation is not a stand in for voting, and writing our representatives, and showing up to advocate for racial equality on the shoulders of Route 73. But it is a necessary corollary to it, a piece that can easily be forgotten in a moment of crisis like the one we are living in right now.

So look, look at the icon of holy blackness before you. And see the creation of humanity, of a people created for dignity, and for freedom, and the gift of God's breath, which is life itself. Look and see that black lives matter. But look a little deeper, and see the truth that black lives are sacred.

Amen.

