



“BELIED BELIEF”

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 6:1-8; ROMANS 8:12-17

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, May 26, 2024, Trinity Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 6:1-8

6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 6:2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 6:3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." 6:4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 6:5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" 6:6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 6:7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." 6:8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Romans 8:12-17

8:12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 8:13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 8:14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 8:15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" 8:16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 8:17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Yesterday marked 4 years since George Floyd's (46 years old) public lynching in the streets of Minneapolis, MN. His murder at the hands of a white Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin (44 years old), in front of God and the whole world sparked a reckoning in America around the choke hold that white supremacy has on policing, our judicial process, education, health care, housing, our election systems... You name it about any part or layer of our culture, and anti-blackness and white supremacy is there.

Remember how an unprecedented number of people in white bodies took to the streets alongside our siblings in Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies. Remember all the learning and doing we were engaged in together as a nation. Remember the statues that toppled, the conversations that were amplified, the policies that were implemented? Remember the voices that were being heard about what it's like to be Black in America, remember the alliances that were forged around this work—the solidarity that was practiced. Remember the promise to finally take concrete steps for Reparations for Black people in America?

There was a vortex, a portal of transformation that gathered steam.

Now just four years later, many of those new beginnings have been squelched at the institutional level. Police reforms have gone largely unrealized. In Virginia some High Schools named after Confederate Generals whose names were changed, just recently voted to change the names back to the names of the Confederate Generals. In North Carolina, the Board of Governors that set policies for our public university system, just repealed their own policy around Diversity and Equity practices and policies on college campuses.

The white lash that we are in right now is grotesque and withering.

And it cannot and will not and must not stop us from the work this country, this community, this planet needs the human family to do. This white lash has impacted our community, our church. And we cannot and will not betray the truth we know, we cannot unhear or unsee or unbelieve the truth we know. Our work together is crucial—especially as people of faith—given how much God and Jesus and the Bible are being used to fuel this white lash.

This summer we are taking time to reflect on how our work to dismantle and disrupt and divorce ourselves from white supremacy culture is impacting how we worship together. We are going to take time each Sunday to pause and reflect and deepen our shared understanding how what it means to decolonize worship.

Decolonization Definition

Slide One: “Decolonization involves identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems. It is not ‘integration’ or simply the token inclusion of the intellectual achievements of non-white cultures.” (University of Essex Library)

Slide Two: Decolonization:

- “involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion and denial to the making of space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems.”
- “a culture shift to thinking more widely about why common knowledge is what it is, and in so doing adjusting cultural perceptions and power relations.” (University of Essex Library)

First 3 Slides from Rev. Dr. Kelle Brown on decolonizing the church¹

Slide Three: Rev. Dr. Kelle J. Brown, Senior Pastor at Plymouth UCC in Seattle Washington

Slide Four: “Those active in decolonizing will desire liberation over comfort. They will prioritize the freedom of those impacted in the church and beyond over tradition, nostalgia, practice, or what has worked in the past.”

“The decolonizing church creates ways to honestly evaluate its history and strategize about the future.”

Slide Five: “Decolonizing the church requires honest reflection as to the anti-Blackness, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia prevalent in our liturgies, music, faith formation, and study of sacred text. The faithful must turn their reflection into moral and ethical action.”

Bible Study—we went an hour over time because we were all so engaged in the practice encountering the scripture through the lens of decolonization.

It is not about getting back to a pre-imperial version of the scripture, it is about being wise to the impacts of Empire and being self-aware and curious and courageous enough to acknowledge and interrogate and be transformed in the process.

As we listen to scripture this morning, we are going to practice using the lens of decolonization and disrupting white supremacy in our collective hearing of scripture.

And look for where the liberation is in the passage—how does it breathe a liberative word into our current context? How does it strengthen, inform, and galvanize our work together?

¹ <https://www.ecclesio.com/2022/03/decolonizing-from-withinby-kelle-brown/>

Those in the sanctuary can use your insert to actively participate in the meaning making—what do you hear? what do you feel? what comes up for you?

If you are home, I hope you can find a Bible and some paper and something to write with.

Using what you know about white supremacy, empire, abuse of power, anti-semitism, homophobia, transphobia, the history of genocide of indigenous people, patriarchy, anti-blackness, ableism—listen to our first reading today.

Some of those who participated in Bible Study on Wednesday are sharing scripture today. We will listen to it in parts.

The Book of Isaiah

Dave Cozad: A reading from the Prophet Isaiah 6:1-4

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

MMS: take a moment to notice what words, phrases, feelings emerge for you.

- Holiness
- Slide of Seraphim (show when I prompt you)
- God as other
- Kingship

Get some responses.

Now the second half of the Isaiah passage.

Kaola Smallwood, a reading from the Prophet Isaiah 6:5-8

And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with

a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

MMS: Take a minute to notice words, phrases, feelings, images that have energy for you, have a charge.

- Sin
- Purity
- Prophet
- Sending

This passage is also used to proof text the doctrine of the Trinity—something that is not expressly described in the Bible, but something that the early church fathers read back into scripture to create one of the centerpieces of Christian orthodoxy—lives have been lost over this doctrine.

Then we come to Romans, and this passage may be the big reason we went so much overtime. Even the reading of these words can be too much for us. So before we hear the words, let us remind ourselves of where we are and what we are practicing and that there is support here. We are working together to cultivate a trustworthy space here for the work of mutual liberation.

(nervous system reset before Larry reads) (space—exits, ground, breath)

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Larry Stern: A reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans 8:12-14

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh--for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

MMS: Take a moment to notice what comes up for you. Where is there energy—resistance, resonance?

Romans

- A central biblical text for Western Christianity's focus on God's sovereignty and the totality of grace, justification by faith
- Cultural context already tangled up with Rome's imperial cooptation of religion to exert power and divide people
- The language of "flesh" in Paul has been a bludgeon around sexuality and embodiment in general

Frances Johnson: A reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans 8:15-17

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

MMS: What comes up for you?

- Children of God
- Intimacy/familial connection with God
- Suffering is sanctified--complicated and real, fraught
- Adoption into an inheritance--how that has been used to justify conquest and colonization.
- Another proof text for Trinity.

Our practice of exploring scripture is one layer of our work of decolonizing worship. I hope this sermon can be something you refer back to in times when you are confused or wonder why we are doing what we are doing. When you grow weary or are focusing your energy on what you miss about past worship styles instead of leaning into what is the joy and promise of what is emerging here.

Other Kelle Brown slides

Slide Six: "Becoming a church in the process of decolonizing requires expecting transformation and change. This church understands the risk implicit in evolution and will not shy away from the difficult work involved."

"A faith organization in the process of decolonizing will honor those sent by God as leaders to help stir the movement, as well as participate fully in relationship and community-building."

Slide Seven: “Decolonizing the church is welcoming prophetic and visionary voices that can see beyond what is present and learning to implement their wisdom.”

“Those who are in covenant with a church on this journey will remain active and connected. They will accept the responsibility to be transparent, vulnerable, and present as an act of discipleship.”

“The decolonizing church will choose abundance over scarcity; loving movement over fear; and righteousness over maintaining privilege.”

Slide Eight: “A decolonize[ing] community learns the tools and skills needed to work faithfully and intelligently by becoming anti-oppressive and trauma-informed while learning the definitions of the movement such as Christian Imperialism; white supremacy; dominant culture; racism; classism, and others for the purpose of being prepared for dialogue, organizing, and action.”

Slide Nine:” The decolonizing church understands that becoming antiracist is not simply about the percentages of minoritized people in the congregation. A congregation made up completely of white, cisheteronormative, able-bodied, and primarily resourced people (which I refer to as ‘dominant culture’) is charged by God—despite the homogeneity—to do antiracism and repent from anti-Blackness; to become feminist; to be open and affirming to the full LGBTQIA+ community; to be accessible and affirming to the disabled; to be youth-affirming and elder-inclusive; to make space for the neurodivergent; to welcome and affirm people of all sorts to participation and leadership.”

It is a gift to feel this resonance with what we are doing and what is emerging at GCPC. And we have our own wisdom to share as this work unfolds in our midst.

The summer series: I pray that you will make it a priority to engage worship this summer consistently—the gift of our hybrid worship is that you can always figure out a way to connect that works for your time table.

- Gathering/Sabbath
- Offering
- Music
- Liturgy and language (Lord’s Prayer)
- Welcome
- Truth Telling
- Embodiment/space

- Order of Worship
- Symbols
- Kids
- closing/sending
- Prayers of the People
- Chairs
- Sacraments

The ways we have been colonized in our faith has led us as Christians to betray belief in a liberating God, in the way Jesus taught us about radical love and welcome and speaking truth to power. (belied belief) (belie: fail to fulfill or justify)

What is faith for—what are we here for? Are we here to prop up and collude in systems of oppression and delusion?

Faith is about believing in something beyond what we can see, but that compels us to manifest in real time. It's about staking our lives on the promise of a better world. It's about imagination, it's about a way of life that centers transformation and compassion, justice and community, liberation and love.

May it be so with us, Grace Covenant.

Thanks be to God.