

Re-Creating Freedom

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

January 17, 2021

I am recording this today in our very own JP Webster library. This space has been closed to the public since March, but all of their resources are available online. I would like to emphasize the opportunity -- the creative opportunity -- during this pandemic to engage in reading and reflection, we understand that reading has been taken up widely, book sales are up, and many libraries report high circulation even while they are closed.

As much as I want to encourage you to worship online with us, I also recognize my own need in this pandemic to take regular breaks from screens. Reading a book is a great way of making new creative connections, off line. Writing a book is a creative act, and likewise reading a book sparks creativity.

On this MLK holiday weekend I'd like to highlight for you that we have been witnessing a tremendous flourishing of racial and social justice publishing, and this library has an excellent collection available. What I do is search their catalogue online from their website at www.whfirstchurch.org/jp-webster-library/catalog, which then allows me to request a title, and Karla usually contacts me to let me know when it is available and then I make arrangements to pick it up. I keep the catalogue bookmarked on my computer.

So from this place of contemplation and reflection, this space where the creative words of authors are collected, that I'd like to lead you in this time of reflection on Psalm 139.

Let us pray: *Eternal God, you challenge us in our complacency to heed your call for justice. Inspire in us the strength to seek change and the courage to embrace that change when it comes. God, may our journey move from the injustice of past centuries to a future of reconciliation with one another and with you...*

I am aware that as I record this on Thursday, there are reports that there will be demonstrations at every state capitol this weekend. On January 6 we witnessed a demonstration at our nation's capital in which the houses of congress were broken into -- a deeply unsettling image for Americans. The citadel of our democracy under siege, the democratic work of certifying the votes of the electoral college was forced to halt, threats of violence, loss of life. In 2021 there will be no peaceful transfer of democracy, we already have grieving families.

At the end of my sermon last week I told you about words I heard by one of the CNN commentators on that day, Van Jones: "some things need to be seen to be believed; and some things need to be believed to be seen." And I mentioned that I recognize the echo of the African American religious tradition in those words. We use these words at Easter, about how the early disciples grappled with the empty tomb. Looking at the empty tomb but not recognizing its meaning; if you do not believe that Christ can rise, then you cannot see it. I appreciated how he was inviting all of us into a moment of creative deliberation on what is happening in our country

in this moment. *What do you see? What do you believe about what you see? What would you rather not see? What would you rather not believe?*

Amazing or coincidence(?) that the days leading up to the inauguration “just happen” to be these days which contain the MLK holiday weekend. I’d like to remind you in light of the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr that democracy while practiced in those buildings, does not live there. Democracy and freedom, liberty and justice for all, live in the hearts of the people of this nation. They need to be claimed and valued by every generation in order for them to continue to continue to thrive.¹

In this season of Epiphany, we are focusing on the immense creativity of God, how Christ was deeply creative as he re-created, renewing and repurposing the law to bring good news to those who were formerly outside of it, and to celebrate the deep creative and ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Creator, created, creating – creativity in all aspects of the triune God.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr said: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that...The time is always right to do what is right.” In his day he is creatively pulling together the plight of those without a voice and the words of scripture.

Freedom is an ideal that needs to be widely valued in order for it to be a principle that affects most of us. If the people around us do not value their own freedom, or our freedom, it immediately begins to escape us. Martin Luther King, Jr said “almost always, the creative dedicated minority has made the world better.”

Jesus said: I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.² They are talking about the same thing. How our actions affect those we may be inclined to overlook? In that moment, our deepest values begin to erode.

Psalms 139 says:

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them—they are more than the sand;

I come to the end —I am still with you.

¹ For those reading, I will note that: Thomas Jefferson said in several settings (speeches, letters) that revolutions are good for democracies. Chilling to my ears, as I consider the collateral -- loss of life, but his focus is on the need to value freedom, the need to value democracy, the importance of making sacrifices for these worthwhile ideals. The person who is asked to fight for their country gets very clear on the reasons for their sacrifice, what exactly the stakes are. And if there are not noble, meaningful reasons for the sacrifice, they are tremendously troubled by the task.

² Matthew 25:45 the Message

Likewise, honestly, I don't have an end to this sermon today. If we could read all the books here, we still wouldn't have the answers and endings – we have questions, we have opportunities, connections. And so I'm going to ask you today: how are you engaging creativity, what creative voice have you heard, how can you creatively engage this moment, where you are, to use your authentic voice creatively now, to reflect the truth you know.

A life of faith, the living of these values, is something that needs to be cultivated, valued, nurtured and passed on – generation to generation, in families, in books (book to book even), in education and conversation, and yes, at church. The kind of church that resides in human hearts.

Instead of ending, I'd like to ask you to begin this work for yourself, work that needs to be begun again every year, every day, for this community and congregation, for the sake of our country and our world. We are at a tender moment in our democracy. This is a moment for creativity.

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