

“Gospel and Protest, Contemplation and Action”
 Proper 6A (June 14, 2020) - COVID-19 (Sunday 14)
 Scripture: Isaiah 1:2, 4, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8
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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen.<<

In the May 20th edition of the *Christian Century*, editor Peter Marty introduced the issue by writing about the health benefits of reading books. A “study by Yale University researchers several years ago,” he writes, “showed a significant linkage between book reading and longevity. ... The 3,635 individuals involved in the study,” he continues, “all over the age of 50 and tracked for an average of nearly ten years, were asked the question, ‘How many hours did you spend reading books last week?’ Respondents were then divided up into three separate groups: those who read no books at all, those who read books for up to three and a half hours, and those who read more than that.” The respondents who regularly read were healthier, happier, and lived longer than those who didn’t. “Regardless of wealth, marital status, job placement, sex, race, education, or even depression,” writes Peter Marty, “older adults demonstrated the survival advantage of reading books. According to researchers,” he concludes, “two cognitive processes involved with book reading help create this advantage. First, there is the benefit of slow and immersive reading patterns that accompany ‘deep reading.’ Second, books can promote empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence.” Peter Marty ended his piece with a comment that made me chuckle when he wondered whether there were even more health benefits for readers of the *Christian Century* – “a variable,” he said, “that Yale researchers failed to consider.”

Many of us – especially those of us with jobs and kids – wish we had more time to read for pleasure, but at least it’s good to know that we would be healthier if we *were* to sit down with a good book. The concentration. The peacefulness. The rhythmic breathing. The body at rest as the eyes move across the page. The imagination engaged. The brain learning new things. All benefits of reading. Plus, as Peter Marty says, “books can promote empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence.” Have you noticed what books Americans are reading right now? The top five books on the *New York Times*’ nonfiction bestseller list are: *White Fragility*, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, *How to be an Antiracist*, *Me and White Supremacy*, and *The New Jim Crow*. Five books about racism and white privilege. Sometimes the spirit of God merely hovers in the air humming in the background. Other times, though, – and maybe we are living in one of those times – she rushes in like a hurricane and transforms collective hearts and knocks down entire edifices of oppression like a collapsing tower of Jenga blocks. Who would’ve thought back in March when we locked ourselves safely in our homes – sneaking out occasionally with masks and gloves to grab groceries – that by June we would be in the streets demanding change and going online to buy up every available copy of *White Fragility* or *So You Want to Talk About Race*? Who would’ve thought back in March when we were sharing recipes for the best banana bread to eat while quarantined that by June crowds of protesters would be pulling down symbols of the confederacy? One person tweeted this week: “[In just a few weeks,] we’ve gone from learning how to bake banana bread to tearing down confederate symbols and shouting that Black Lives Matter.” The spirit of God is on the move. The change is so dramatic that Marc Fisher of the *Washington Post* wrote on Thursday that the “scenes of [crowds in U.S. streets

pulling down confederate monuments] recall the fall of the Soviet Union, when crowds tore down statues of Lenin, Stalin, and other icons of totalitarianism.”¹

The late Rachel Held Evans, in her book *Inspired*, talks about the tearing down of confederate symbols as a form of acted prophecy, like that of the Hebrew prophets of old.² Held Evans tells the story of Bree Newsome. “On a muggy June morning in South Carolina,” she writes, “a young black woman named Bree Newsome scaled the thirty-foot flagpole outside the state’s capitol building and removed its Confederate flag. As police and protestors shouted at her from the ground, Newsome, just thirty years old and wearing a helmet and harness, shouted back, ‘In the name of Jesus, this flag has to come down. You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today.’ Ten days earlier,” writes Rachel Held Evans, “white supremacist Dylann Roof walked into a prayer service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston and after sitting among the congregants for nearly an hour, pulled out a handgun from his bag. ... He killed nine people, including the church’s pastor. In pictures on his website, Roof posed with symbols of white supremacy and neo-Nazism, including the Confederate flag, so the massacre had reopened a debate among lawmakers about removing the flag from statehouse grounds. But as the conversation droned on, and some white citizens pushed back against the potential change, [Bree] Newsome’s spirit grew restless. That flag had flown over the state when her fourth great-grandparents were enslaved there. It had been reraised over the statehouse in 1962 in defiance of the civil rights movement. ... ‘I couldn’t sleep,’ Newsome later recalled. ‘I sat awake in the dead of night. All the ghosts of the past seemed to be rising.’ Unwilling to wait through yet another round of bureaucracy, Newsome collaborated with other activists to formulate a plan of protest designed for maximum visual impact. ... [She] scaled the flagpole on a Saturday morning when protestors were just beginning to gather. She reached the top of the pole as the morning sun bathed the statehouse in light, and the resulting photo – of Newsome clinging to the flagpole, her right arm extended with the dislocated Confederate flag in her fist – went viral. When [she] reached the ground, she [and those who helped her] were arrested. As she was handcuffed, she quoted the Psalms: ‘The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?’” “‘In the name of Jesus,’” she said, “‘this flag has to come down.’”

Rachel Held Evans calls what Bree Newsome did a prophetic act of protest – a form of protest street theater. Isaiah in today’s Old Testament reading does something similar. Isaiah comes roaring out of the gate in chapter one of his 66 chapter book by singing, reciting, shouting a song of protest – a protest song that reminds me of modern protest songs from artists like *Rage Against the Machine*, the *Fugees*, the *Wu-Tang Clan*, Bob Marley, and Bob Dylan. Isaiah’s protest lyrics are a relentless verbal assault on the society of his day. Like other Hebrew prophets, Isaiah had fire in his belly; he felt the very heart of God deep in his soul; he looked at the world of his day through the eyes of God. And he, like other Hebrew prophets, could not accept a society that treated some people differently than others. And so Isaiah unleashes a passionate verbal barrage. Perhaps he was in the bustling city center when he called the people a “sinful nation.” Perhaps he was standing on the steps of the temple when he called the sacrifices and the festivals and the prayers worthless. Perhaps he was near the king’s court – the seat of political power – when he called the national leaders “rulers of Sodom,” recalling the city of Sodom in the book of Genesis that was destroyed by God for its

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/06/11/confederate-statues-attacked-protesters-george-floyd/>

² Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 115-116.

lack of hospitality toward the strangers in its midst. Isaiah's poem – his provocative prophetic song – called the whole society to, in his words, cease doing evil, learn to do what's right, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend society's most vulnerable – words that remind me of those spoken by modern day prophet, Martin Luther King Jr. who said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation,” he said, “can be great if it does not have concern for the ‘least of these.’”

If we were to skip ahead a few chapters in the book of Isaiah, we would find the prophet out in the streets engaged in provocative street theater. Isaiah actually took off his clothes and his shoes, and walked around naked in public for three years to symbolize the soon-coming exile. The Hebrew word for “exile” means “uncovering.” Other prophets in ancient Israel practiced the art of street theater protest. Jeremiah walked around with the yoke of an ox on his shoulders to symbolize that the people would come under the yoke of Babylonian rule. He carried that thing into the king's court and then got himself arrested. The prophet Ezekiel built a model city of Jerusalem in the middle of the street, got down on his knees, and started yelling at it as passersby looked at him like he was nuts. Jesus, according to the New Testament gospels, made a whip and rushed into the temple to destroy property by turning over the tables of the moneychangers, who were oppressing the poor by charging fees to make sacrifices in the temple. And Paul was accused of “turning the world upside down” in the book of Acts, because he insisted on preaching a message that challenged the authority of the Roman emperor, and he was constantly harassed by the police and jailed as a result.

All of these prophetic protests – whether climbing a flagpole in South Carolina, singing a protest song, reciting a protest poem, preaching a protest message in a town center, doing street theater, or turning over the tables of moneychangers – all of it is motivated by zeal for a single story. Biblical tradition calls this story “the story of salvation,” or, better, “the story of liberation.” The prophet Isaiah called it the story of “glad tidings.” The Greek version of Isaiah calls it the “gospel.” The same Greek word that New Testament writers use. In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus himself went about in the towns and villages preaching the “good news” – the Greek word is the word “gospel.” And in Paul's letter to the Romans – a portion of which we heard a moment ago – spends 16 chapters talking about the gospel and its effects. The gospel, the good news, the glad tidings tells and retells a single story of liberation. In Old Testament tradition it's the story of God liberating the people from slavery at the exodus. In New Testament tradition it's the story of God liberating the world from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ. In both testaments, the gospel is an announcement that people have been set free by the liberating love of God. It's that great epic story, told by generations of ancient Israelites around campfires, and by generations of our Jewish siblings in Passover meals. The gospel is that great epic story, told and retold by generations of Christians when we baptize (baptism is a symbol of salvation) and when we share the Lord's Supper and say the words “Christ has died, Christ is risen” – the story about what God has done to set people free. Which is why the prophets and Jesus and Paul and Bree Newsome and clergy today (including me) have been in the streets. Because anything in society that binds people up, presses them down, or relegates a single race of people to second-class status is contrary to the liberating love of the gospel.

On Tuesday, Dr. Philip Ozuah wrote a powerful op-ed that captured the spirit of the gospel.³ Dr. Ozuah is the President and Chief Executive of Montefiore Medicine in New York City. “The last 12 weeks will haunt me forever,” he writes. “At the Montefiore Health System, where I am the chief executive, the coronavirus has killed 2,204 patients and 21 members of our courageous staff, despite our best efforts. Now, as the pandemic has subsided and our Covid-19 caseload has dropped to 143 patients from a peak of 2,208 on April 12, the nation is coming to grips with another fearful crisis – the lethal effects of racism, the pain of which is all too familiar to me. It was hard for me,” he says, “to watch the video of Amy Cooper calling 911 after Christian Cooper, a black bird watcher in Central Park, asked her to leash her dog. ... I know what he must have expected would come next, because I’m a black man. I know – from when I was stopped years ago in Los Angeles while walking through a white neighborhood to catch a bus – that the police could ask him to put his arms up in the air, turn around, walk backward, get on his knees, interlace his fingers behind his head, and get frisked, all before any questions were asked. And if he dared to be indignant and ask why, well now he’s resisting, and the situation could easily escalate. He may not go home that day. I have never been arrested,” writes Ozuah, “as George Floyd was before a police officer crushed him to death. But I know the frustration and the rage and the humiliation of having to accept the abuse of police power. I know what it feels like to be pulled over almost daily because you’re young and you’re black and you’re male and you’re driving a late-model automobile. I know what it feels like when the officer walks up and the first question is, ‘Is this your car?’ And the next command is, ‘Please step out of the car.’ And then sit on the pavement, cross your ankles, put your hands behind you. And I know what it’s like to sit there for 40 minutes while they take the drug-sniffing dog through your car. ... And at the end of it, with no explanation and no apology, to be told, ‘OK, you’re good, you can go now.’ I also know what it feels like to be at a fancy gala at the Waldorf Astoria in a tuxedo, waiting to check your coat, and have other people walk up and hand you their mink coats and say, ‘Check this for me.’ I know the cumulative burden of those experiences day after day, week after week, month after month, decade after decade. While I know from experience,” writes Ozuah, “that most law enforcement officers honorably fulfill their oath to protect and serve, African-American men in particular have reason to fear that the police will hurt or kill them because of the color of their skin and they deserve to be free from that fear. All Americans deserve to have a life where they can walk freely, not threatened and harassed in their own country. ... But I see rare hope,” he says, “that these twin disasters ... – one a brand-new virus and the other a virus as old as the country itself – could finally prove the true strength of our shared humanity. America has changed its behavior in such profound and fundamental ways to mitigate the coronavirus [And] as our streets fill every night with protesters demanding a change that has been too long in coming, I dare to hope that we as a people can summon the same selfless courage and determination to change our behavior to address the endemic racism and brutality that plagues our country. Then finally we may rid ourselves of that deadly virus as well.” Then finally we will all be free.

...The power of the gospel – if it’s *really* the gospel – is that it unsettles us. It stirs up within us a fire, ignited by God’s spirit, to make the liberating work of Christ’s cross a reality in every sector of society, so that everyone can be free. Amen.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/opinion/coronavirus-racism-montefiore-medicine.html>