

A Sermon by the Reverend John S. McDuffie
The Second Sunday After Pentecost
June 14, 2020

Exodus 19:2-8a
Psalm 100
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:23

“You have seen what I have done to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

When I first saw the video of George Floyd’s death, I was numb with horror as I heard him gasp, “I can’t breathe!”, and then saw the face of Officer Derek Chauvin looking up calmly, almost nonchalantly, as he pressed his knee against Floyd’s neck. Within a day, I couldn’t get the words “I can’t breathe!” out of my mind, and I found myself alternately sobbing in tears, and then clenching my fist in a rage. It turns out that much of the whole world was having the same reaction. In her sermon at the Washington Cathedral last Sunday, Bishop Mariann reminded her listeners that this was nothing new... yet, for a moment, I found myself naively asking, “How can this be?” while at the same time asking, more importantly, where are we going?”

This morning I want to share with you for a few minutes a reflection on remembrance, and of how, so often, we collectively forget where we’ve been—but then to realize anew that God calls us to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

The words that I quoted from Exodus, which God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, have echoed down to us in our Christian faith tradition. In 1 Peter, Chapter 2, vs. 9-10, the writer proclaims, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

In the wilderness, the people of Israel are called to remember what God has done for them—he has delivered them from slavery and freed them from the Egyptians. The Book of Deuteronomy continues to emphasize the theme of remembrance, as Moses repeatedly tells the people about to enter the promised land that they are to remember that it is by the grace of God and not by their own power and might that they are to be gifted with the new land. The theme of remembering is celebrated regularly in the Jewish faith in the observance of the Passover seder.

And yet—we know that the people of Israel forgot quickly where they had come from. The great Biblical scholar Walter Bruggeman points out the supreme irony of the once-delivered slaves of the Egyptians turning into conquerors when they entered the Promised Land—laying cities to waste and killing the inhabitants. At the first gathering of the World Council of Churches in

1948, the American theologian Reinhold Neibuhr remarked. “Yesterday’s oppressed peasants become tomorrow’s commissars.”

And so it was in our own American history. With the exception of the Native Americans, we are a nation of immigrants—bound for the Promised Land, except for those brought here in chains against their will. But many white folks came here escaping from political and religious repression, in search of a new life and a new beginning—but instead of remembering who they had once been, they forgot. The fabled story of the Pilgrims, gathered in harmony and thanksgiving at a great feast, thankful that their new-found native American friends had helped save their depleted ranks by providing resources of food and crop production, has a sequel. Within a generation those same native Americans were demonized as the agents of Satan, who must be destroyed.

Our Bishop reminded us last week that much of the American prosperity in the early days of our nation was founded on the backs of African-American slaves. So let me take a risk here by sharing a bit of my own family history. In 2007 while on sabbatical, my wife and I journeyed to Scotland—my only visit thus far to Fr. Tim’s native land. There we went to Colonsay, an island in the inner Hebrides, which was the ancestral home of the McDuffie clan. Next to Colonsay is a smaller island, Oransay, only reachable by walking there during low tide. There we found the ruins of a priory, and the tombs of many McDuffies who had been priests and members of the monastic community, which ended around 1580 during the Scottish Reformation. The McDuffie clan was dispossessed in 1613 with the killing of its last clan chieftain. They were absorbed into the McFie clan. The McDuffies suffered further indignity and brokenness after the battle of Culloden in 1746, when they supported the Jacobite uprising of Charles Stuart, who claimed the English throne, and was soundly defeated in that battle

With their fortunes at a low ebb and with the great hope of finding a new life in the colonies, my forebears came and settled in the sand hills of North Carolina, where they became prosperous farmers. And here I must confess that I discovered that by the beginning of the 19th century they were a slave-holding family with one of the largest numbers of slaves in the state. Yesterday’s oppressed peasants become tomorrow’s commissars....

Last summer Mary and I were in Charleston, South Carolina, where I was the preacher at a wedding. We visited the museum on the site of the old slave market in Charleston. While walking the streets I learned more of a distant relative named George McDuffie, who was the governor of the state in the 1830’s and later also a United States Senator. He was an ardent supporter of slavery, and was opposed to any federal legislation that might endanger its existence.

Fast forward to 1968, when I recall one of my father’s cousins visiting with my father’s youngest sister, in Columbus Georgia, where my father grew up and where his family had lived for generations. My cousin had become a liberal Democrat, and he said to me, “John, I sat there on your Aunt Mary’s front porch, on a beautiful warm summer evening. She was the flower of Southern womanhood and beauty, and I was aghast when the conversation turned to politics and the presidential election that year, and she suddenly said to me, ‘You know, we are Wallace people’ (referring to George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama)”.

This is some of the family heritage I carry, of which I am not proud. Many of us white folks carry some of that heritage as well. I can tell you that I had my own personal come-uppance in the early 1980's, on a night in which I carried my tenor saxophone to try to join in at a jam session at an African-American jazz club in Norfolk, Virginia. I was greeted at the door by a black hostess who smiled as I peered inside and saw that among a large crowd there was only one white person in the room, who was playing upright bass. I nervously said to the hostess, "Is it all right for me to be here?" She looked at me up and down, and said, "I don't know –I'll have to show you to the back door and let you talk to the owner." She led me outside and to the back door of the club, and through the door to a kitchen, where the owner was sitting, drinking a cup of coffee. She said to the owner, "He wants to know if it's all right for him to be here." The owner seriously looked at me, and paused for maybe as long as half a minute, and then said, "I think we'll let you in here." And then he burst into hearty gales of laughter, as if to say, "Now you know a little bit about how I've felt all my life." That club became one of my favorite places in Norfolk.

But back to Governor George Wallace. I told this congregation back in January on the Martin Luther King holiday weekend that in 2016 I participated in the annual historic civil rights tour led by the Rev. Jim Stowe of the Montgomery County Office of Human Rights. One of the places we visited was Selma, Alabama, site of the Edmund Pettus Bridge where "Bloody Sunday" took place on March 7, 1965, when those attempting to March to Montgomery from Selma to advocate for voting rights for African-Americans crossed the bridge, only to be met by state troopers mounted on horses and armed with clubs and tear gas. They were there under orders by Governor Wallace. We were given a tour of Selma by Joanne Bland, an African-American woman who was on the bridge that day as a fourteen-year old. She described the horror of the attack on this group of peaceful marchers—the horses bearing down, the tear gas, and of her falling on the bridge and coming to consciousness later as sat holding the bloodied head of her twelve-year old sister in her lap, who was crying.

Joanne led us to the place where the march began, led by John Lewis and Hosea Williams. Many people know about John Lewis, who suffered a fractured skull on Bloody Sunday, and who has served for many years in the House of Representatives; but they know less about Hosea Williams, who was an ardent champion for civil rights, who served in the Georgia State Senate and later on the Atlanta City Council, and for whom a street was re-named in Atlanta shortly before his death in 2000. As a young man, Williams enlisted in the United States Army during the second World War. He was in an all-black regiment under the command of General George Patton. He suffered through a particular bombing in which he was wounded and was the only survivor. He spent over a year recuperating in a military hospital and was awarded the Purple Heart.

When he returned home from the war, he was in full uniform and took a drink from a "whites-only" water fountain at a bus station where a group of angry whites savagely beat him. They thought he was dead, and they called a black funeral home to come pick up his body. The driver of the hearse noticed that Williams was still breathing and had a faint pulse. There was no local

hospital that would admit a black man. He had to be driven 100 miles away to a Veteran's Hospital, where he stayed for more than a month. Listen to his words about this incident:

I was deemed 100% disabled by the military and required a cane to walk. My wounds had earned me a Purple Heart. The war had just ended and I was still in my uniform for God's sake! But on the way home, to the brink of death, they beat me like a common dog. The very same people whose liberties I had fought and suffered to secure in the horrors of war...they beat me like a dog...merely because I wanted a drink of water...I had watched my best buddies tortured, murdered, and bodies blown to pieces. The French battlefields had literally been stained with my blood and fertilized with the rot of my loins. So at that moment, I truly felt as if I had fought on the wrong side. Then, and not until then, did I realize that God, time after time, had taken me to death's door, then spared my life...to be a general in the war for human rights and personal dignity.

Hosea Williams survived another beating on Bloody Sunday. But other people were killed during that time. Before the march, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a local black activist, was killed by the police. After the failed first March across the bridge James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister who had come to join the march, was beaten to death in Selma. Viola Liuzzo, a young white mother of four, had traveled from Detroit to Alabama and was helping people who finally successfully marched from Selma to Montgomery to get back home by driving them, when her car was ambushed and she was shot to death. That march, and the exposure to the country of the violent reaction to what began as a peaceful gathering, helped to lead to the historic Voting Rights Act passed by Congress in 1965. Sadly, today I fear that that same act is in jeopardy as we hear stories of more attempts of voter suppression, particularly among people of color.

When we stood there with Joanne Bland in Selma, where the March began, we were all challenged to stand up for truth and justice, whenever and wherever we see it being threatened.

So here we are today...As you can see, George Floyd's death was nothing new in the annals of racism in America. The current series of demonstrations that we are witnessing are a new response to old wound, and the stains of the sin of institutional racism in America. Where are we as a church? We, like our spiritual ancestors in the wilderness, have been called to be God's people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. We are called to recount, that once we were without mercy, but now we have received mercy. Like it or not, I believe that white folks are also called to examine their own history, their own ancient prejudices and fears, and their complicity in the racist structure of our society—of how we have collective amnesia about where we came from. If we can but remember—then we can be grateful for God's mercy, and think anew, and act anew.

In this time of significant unrest, there is the innate danger of emotional regression, in which we come to merely see an ongoing struggle between those who are scaring the established order with the cry for overdue necessary changes, versus those who scaring the disaffected with the cry for more "law and order". Somewhere, somehow, there has to be an avenue for civil discourse to prevail and for careful listening that attends to all of our common human needs. Jesus calls us, as he called his disciples long ago in today's Gospel lesson to be his servants, because the Kingdom of God is drawing near. The work is not easy; it is arduous. But the kingdom of which he speaks is a kingdom of love, justice, and peace. In whatever way each of us are called, let us work together and pray together. Amen.

