

Steve Jungkeit

The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Exodus 13: 17-22; Matthew 4: 23-25; John 1: 43-46

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Palenque!

In the middle of August, I had occasion to visit a music school on the outskirts of Buenaventura, a port town on Colombia's Pacific coast. The school was called "Palenque," and it was situated in an unfinished building along one of Buenaventura's trucking routes. It's a place where children are invited to spend time after school and in other free hours, learning traditional forms of music that African descended peoples have played in that region for hundreds of years.

On a rough porch made of cinderblocks, with a few low watt bulbs glowing against the darkening sky, ten or so children, ranging in age from four or five to the mid-teens, astonished our small band of travelers with their musical prowess. They played a kind of music called *Currulao*. It's made up of two large bass drums, called *bombo*, which form the bottom layer of the music, issuing a kind of thunder you can feel in your chest. Several smaller hand drums, called *cununo*, add staccato rhythms that weave into the thunder of the two *bombo* drums, and then on top of that, or surrounding it, *marimba* players hammer out complicated melodies. Finally, interwoven into all those sounds, bamboo shakers, called *guasa*, usually shaken by vocalists, add further texture, resulting in music that feels somehow thick, warm, ancient, and beautifully alive.

UNESCO has recently designated *Currulao* status as a monument to the cultural heritage of humanity. Standing on the porch while listening to those children, it was easy to understand why. It's music that is profoundly Colombian, rooted in the aquatic societies of the Black Pacific coast. But it's also music that is profoundly African, sourced from places like Congo, Mali, and Nigeria. The world itself is contained in those sounds.

Buenaventura is a hard, though also a beautiful, place. Like the vibrant but wounded ecology of that region, the lives of those who reside there, are precarious, the result of years of government neglect, civil conflicts, and grinding poverty. The children of "Palenque" come to learn musical skills, their teacher told us, but above all, he said, they come there to learn goodness. From music, but also from rituals, dance, and foodways – the kids could be taught that their lives mattered, that they had worth. They could take their place within a tradition that offered transcendent meaning and moral purpose, and they could learn a form of communal music making that might sustain them - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I came away grateful for what I had seen and heard, while also pondering the life lessons that the experience might afford.

What I'd like to offer this morning is an extended meditation on the very word "Palenque," as a means of describing what I learned in Colombia, but also as a way of opening up a theological and yes, a political truth worth heeding: the need for protected and sheltered enclaves that exist outside of, and yet also within, the prevailing and dominant frames of our social reality, not unlike that music school in Buenaventura. That school, and the reality to which it points, is not a bad way to imagine what a church would have been in its earliest days, and perhaps what it still might be.

So what is a Palenque? It's an old word, dating from the days of the slave trade. It means, quite literally, a place of refuge, a safe space, where those who fled enslavement could run, and seek shelter. Palenques, also called maroon communities, grew up in the wild, in inhospitable places like swamps, remote mountains, or thick forests, places where slave masters or slave catchers wouldn't or couldn't follow. The Palenque was difficult to access, a geographical secret that functioned as both rumor and promise. But for those who dared, the Palenque could be found. The swamps of Louisiana and the low country of the Carolina coast were known to have large maroon communities - Palenques - living there. They existed in Cuba, in Haiti, in Brazil, in Colombia - anywhere the savage reality of enslavement was enacted, including, most likely, New England. In a Palenque, the values of the dominant culture, the colonial culture, were inverted. If dignity was stolen in the colonial settlement, in the Palenque dignity was handed back. If autonomy and freedom were stripped away among the Spanish, or the French, or the English, in the Palenque it was restored. If African ancestral practices were suppressed by the so called "civilized peoples" of the colony, in the Palenque those practices were encouraged. And if vulnerable flesh was flayed or destroyed by those claiming to own that flesh in the colonial settlements, in the Palenque that flesh was cherished and protected. Of course, there were harsh truths about Palenques as well - dangerous physical conditions, and the constant threat of discovery, which happened often. Nevertheless, the Palenque, the experience of marronage, may stand as one of the most powerful expressions of self-determination and liberty in all of the Americas. They deserve to take their place beside, and perhaps above, all the other signifiers of freedom and independence in the Americas - 1776, Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, and analogous symbols within other countries.

Palenques, and their philosophical and artistic offshoots, have been showing up everywhere of late. When I saw Shakespeare's *As You Like It* performed in Central Park a few weeks ago, the Forest of Arden in that play, where exiles from a royal court form a fugitive community in the wild, had been reimaged as a Palenque, a maroon community. In Gayl Jones's recent novel *Palmares*, a Pulitzer finalist last year, a Palenque is featured prominently, until it is discovered, and attacked. In music, one of my favorite artists these days is a Cuban performer who goes by the name *Cimafunk*. That name is a combination of the words *cimarron* - Spanish for the one who flees the plantation, becoming maroon, seeking the Palenque - and, of course, funk. The latter part of that name, *Cimafunk*, also helps remind us that funk itself can be understood as a kind of expressive Palenque. One of the greatest funk artists of all time, George Clinton, used Afrofuturist images - spaceships and aliens - to create a kind of cosmic Palenque. Every time his band Parliament Funkadelic plays - and they still do, they were just down in New Haven - it is a kind of Palenque that George Clinton assembles onstage. The word *funk* was itself originally used to describe the body odor of enslaved peoples. One early slave master complained about the funky smell that emerged from the slave cabins on his property. Funk was, as one writer puts it, a natural slave master repellent. In music, it is a way of inoculating oneself against forms of mastery and control. It is an acoustic Palenque. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the Palenque is emerging everywhere in our cultural life as a way of imagining a vibrant, dynamic, and above all protected present and future, outside of dominant systems that have been exploitative or harmful, especially for people of color. Like the music school, wherever the Palenque materializes, it is a place, or a state of being, in which the fullness of humanity is restored and celebrated.

What I find so inspiring about contemporary imaginations of the Palenque is the way they help us to trace similar patterns throughout the past, and not only the modern past. As a reader

of the Bible, and as a person of faith seeking to discern how that faith is now being expressed in the world - with or without the name of the official religions - I began to sense that the Palenque is central to the biblical narrative. I'll name three ways in which it might be discerned in the Bible. First, when Abraham leaves the land of Ur, he isn't fleeing slavery. But he is fleeing what, at that point, was a center of civilization, one that had amassed a great deal of wealth and political power. It is as though God were saying to Abraham, "I've got to get you out of here if your humanity is to remain intact." What if we understood the story of Abraham as the creation of a kind of Palenque, both outside of, and yet also still within, the dominant culture?

The same, of course, applies to the story of the Exodus. The flight from Egypt into the wilderness is itself the story of the Palenque. The Hebrew people had been trapped in slavery, and Moses leads them into a hostile region where no one else would follow. There, in the wilderness, the Hebrews create a new society, complete with an elaborate code of laws. Looking back in hindsight, we can see its many flaws, but at the core of those laws was a concern for the protection of those most vulnerable in the world. It can be easy to get lost in some of the weird thou shalt and thou shalt nots, but the thrust of those books - Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy - really has to do with protecting vulnerable flesh. They have to do, largely, with preventing, or curtailing, violence, sexual assault, theft of property, and the abuse of those rendered dependent upon the good will of others. The story of the Exodus, and the formation of Israel as a people, is the story of a Palenque. As we heard in the short passage that I selected from Exodus, it is God who helps to lead and then to form the Palenque, the protected and sheltered place in which lives could flourish. Taking with them the bones of an ancestor, Joseph, the people are led into the wilderness by God, in the form of a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. Might we then say that it is God who intends the Palenque - that of the ancient Hebrews, but also that of all those maroon communities throughout the Americas? Might the Palenque, in its historical and now cultural and literary forms, be a retelling of an ancient story of faith?

If the Palenque is the very structure of the ancient Hebrew story, then it's also at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Why, we might ask, does the story of God becoming flesh not take place in Jerusalem, the center of ritual and legal power in ancient Israel? And why, for that matter, does it not take place in Rome, the center of imperial power in the Mediterranean world? Jerusalem itself was already a backwater, at least from the vantage of Rome, but Jesus conducts his work in a backwater of the backwater - in Galilee. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth," Nathaniel asks early in John's Gospel, alerting us just how far outside the dominant frame Jesus was then operating. But then Philip, Nathaniel's interlocutor, issues the invitation toward what we can understand as the Palenque - "Come and see," he tells Nathaniel. In the earliest pages of Mark's Gospel, when Jesus is healing and teaching throughout the Galilee region, lives are made whole. Spirits are eased and calmed, and maimed flesh is healed. We can think of the entirety of Galilee as the Palenque that Jesus was forming. It is, in its way, the new wilderness community, a rewriting of the story of ancient Israel. But it is also the Forest of Arden, or the Buenaventura music school, or the cimarron community in the farthest reaches of the mountains or the swamp. It's the place to which people flee in order to restore their bodily integrity, in order to find wholeness and sanity. The very geographical isolation of Galilee in the midst of the wider Roman Empire helps to alert us to the presence of the Palenque. In fact, let us be bold enough to say: the Gospel *is* the formation of the Palenque! So too, we can be bold to say that the early church was the continuation of the Palenque within the Roman Empire, which quickly acquired the habit of torturing followers of Jesus's Way. This, here, what we're doing, is meant to be the continuation of the Palenque.

I can, at last, tell you what I was chasing in Colombia: it was that fleeting and yet also omnipresent reality of the Palenque, of marronage, as an expression of something fundamental to faith itself. I sense in that dynamic not only a lesson learned after the horrors of slavery, but one that exists at the very heart of my own faith in Jesus as the Christ, the chosen One of God. In Cuba, in Haiti, in New Orleans, and now in Colombia, I have been interested in those places and practices where, against the most heinous tendencies of racism, imperialism, warfare and violence, predatory capitalism, and yes, state communism, zones of protection, dignity, and relative autonomy have been created, where human lives can, in some measure, be restored and renewed. That is the story, and the Way, of Jesus the Christ in its most elemental form.

But what does that have to do with you? What does that have to do with us, as a church, as a faith community? I have several answers to those questions, but let me say first that there are some obvious pitfalls that I wish to name, and if I can, avoid. We are a predominantly white community, one that, for much of its existence, was the opposite of a Palenque. In fact, if you visit the Witness Stones out in front of the church, you'll see that one of those stones names an individual, Caesar, who fled this place in 1784, becoming a fugitive in order to find or create some version of a Palenque - elsewhere. To what degree, then, is the vision of the Palenque available to a community that is predominantly, though not entirely, white, and a community that is predominantly, though not entirely, affluent? Put differently, what right do those of us who are the bearers of white privilege, who likely consume more than our fair share, and who live in comparative splendor, have to hold onto this beautiful vision of the Palenque? Are we not, sometimes, the ones from whom the Caesars of the world still wish to flee?

Honesty and humility entail that we must own that aspect of who we have been, and who, to some degree, we continue to be. We are all, sometimes, those from whom others would flee, in order to create the conditions of their own best survival. That is one truth, but here is another: we are all, no matter our race or class status, no matter our gender or sexuality, no matter our age or any other visible marker, those who have suffered pain. To varying degrees, we are all those who have experienced rejection, or loss, or heartache. We are all those who have suffered ailments, and sometimes insults, and sometimes exclusion. These days we have all become vulnerable to climate disasters, and to spasms of grotesque violence. No matter who we are, we are all seeking those communities of shelter that can sustain us amidst all that would distort and degrade our own humanity. Caught within such contradictions - of our complicity and our undeniable need, how are we to proceed?

With care, first of all - by caring for the very real burdens that we do bring to this place every week. Ordinary gestures, of listening well, asking open ended questions, being open to one another's varied experiences, giving of our time - these go a long way toward preserving, and upholding our own bruised humanity. We do what we can to create the Palenque for one another. But that contradiction, of both needing the Palenque and, at times, being the cause of that need, also entails that we must push ourselves: toward the cinderblock porches of the world, toward struggles for justice and human rights, toward those places in the world where the Palenque is most clearly discerned. We must push to broaden ourselves, not only toward the classics of European and North American art and culture, but toward accounts of life in which we ourselves become de-centered, and thus open to true mutuality and friendship. And we must do the difficult work of building friendships, not only with those who share our proclivities and background, but with those who do not.

But I think the most important clue as to how we might navigate our own contradictions is found in the funk in all of its many dimensions. Perhaps we must have the courage to dwell

not so much in our propriety, but in our funk, for the funk is the sign of our own deep humanity at work. It is the place where everything within us that loves authority -and mastery, and power - is generally unwilling to go. The funk is the swampland of our inner lives, where we live into our contradictions, our messiness, our pleasures, our yearnings, our hopes. To live in the funk is to become more free, more open, more relatable, and less controlled. It's the first, but not the last, place in which the Palenque is to be found. I am convinced that it is in the funk, the swamplands of the heart, that Jesus is hiding, waiting to be discovered.

As for me, my heart remains on that cinder block porch, dimly lit, where complex and alluring truths thunder and roll from the mallets, sticks and drums of children. It is a call to seek the Palenque, wherever it might be found.