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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Exodus 2: 1-4; Luke 1: 49-50
November 10, 2024

Down By the Riverside, from Generation to Generation

Let me begin by saying that I'm honored to be sharing the pulpit this morning with Rev. Gregg Carlson. As you've now heard, Gregg works with progressive faith communities across the country, helping them - helping us - to adapt to a rapidly changing religious landscape in the United States. Gregg, we're grateful for your presence, for the careful listening you have been doing here and elsewhere, and for the wisdom you bring with you. So please know how glad all of us are that you are here today.

Given the week that we've just had, before Gregg speaks, I need to take a little time, and so bear with me. It was eight years ago on this Sunday that I had to preach a difficult sermon after a troubling election. I had us focus on one of the resurrection appearances recounted in John's Gospel. It's a moment in which the disciples are still reeling from the death of their friend, struggling to understand what that new reality of resurrection meant for them. They're dazed, bewildered, and still grieving. And Jesus appears to them on a lakeshore, and he takes Peter aside, Peter who is struggling over having betrayed his friend, and also himself. "Peter, do you love me?" Jesus asks. "Lord, you know I do," is Peter's answer, to which Jesus responds, "Then feed my sheep." Three times Jesus poses the question. Three times Peter answers. And three times he is instructed: "Feed my sheep." Which is to say, take care of my people. Love them. Support them. Protect and uphold them. There may be some turbulence ahead. But feed my sheep.

Amidst all we were thinking and feeling eight years ago, that was the message I thought we needed to hear. Amidst all our worries, the task of the church, and the task of this community, remained constant. We were to do the work of loving the people that Jesus loved - the poor, the isolated, the sick, and the vulnerable - but also each and every one of you, for we all felt vulnerable, as we do now. For us, that translated into taking care of immigrants and refugees, doubling down on our support for the LGBTQI population, reaching out to Muslims and also to our Jewish neighbors, and being especially, especially mindful of the needs of people of color throughout our region. It meant remaining true to our core values. And I quoted Martin Luther King, who spoke about the imperative of creative maladjustment. There are some things to which we must adjust, King said, but we must remain permanently maladjusted to injustice and to racism, to bigotry and intolerance. To the shock delivered eight years ago, the admonition to "feed my sheep," and to remain creatively maladjusted served as bedrock truths for this community, cairns of rock by which to orient ourselves in a bewildering new territory. And I want you to hear this: we found our way. We will do so again.

I don't know what it was like for you on Wednesday morning. For all I know, there may have been celebration among some of you. But for many of us, though, Wednesday was a day of withdrawn silence. I received no emails that day, and virtually no texts. No one wanted to meet. There was little to say. It was as though there had been a great crash in the woods, and all of us, the animals, had recoiled into a stunned silence. Some of us have started to find our voices

again, but still in halting, stuttered utterances. I think we're still somehow in that cone of silence, which I understand is somehow protective and sheltering. If I had to guess, I would venture that that's where many of us remain, at least for now, and I wish to honor that.

What I said eight years ago still obtains. We shall be charged, in the words of Jesus, to "feed my sheep" - to take care of people, and of one another - and we shall be called toward creative forms of maladjustment in ever new ways. But there's another image that comes to mind right now, one I'd like you to hold onto. It's the figure of Miriam, the sister of Moses, watching from a distance as her infant brother is swept up in the current of the Nile. That image has resonance for what we're going through right now as a nation and as people of faith, but it also has resonance for the work that our church is doing this year with Convergence, and what Gregg is here to talk about this morning.

Here's the scene. Exodus opens with a community in turmoil. The Hebrew people are captives in Egypt, and they're reproducing faster than the dominant majority. And so the Egyptian Pharaoh, held in thrall to something like the Great Replacement Theory that now circulates among many who now belong to the far right, orders that all male Hebrew infants be put to death. One woman gives birth, however, and hides her child. At a certain point, she places him in a makeshift waterproof basket, and then puts both the child and the basket in the Nile river. And then, in the fourth verse of Exodus, chapter two, we find a very helpful phrase: "his (the child's) sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him."

That's the image I want you to hold onto. His sister stood at a distance. Her name, as we later discover, is Miriam. What is she doing there in the bulrushes? Please do not mistake her distance for passivity. She is, for the time being, silent. She is watching. She is waiting. Perhaps she is gathering her strength, and her wits. Perhaps she is praying. Perhaps she is drawing upon what wisdom was available to her. Perhaps she is studying the conditions around her. Notice what she is not doing: she is not splashing around, making a scene, trying to save her infant brother. Nor is she turning away from the scene, in despair. She stood at a distance, which implies that she is gaining the perspective that distance can bring. And so please, do not mistake her distance for passivity.

Miriam doesn't know that her infant brother will become Moses. She doesn't know that the Hebrew people will one day be liberated, nor does she know that the Pharaoh and his armies will drown in the sea. She doesn't know that the law will be given at Sinai, and that a covenant will be forged between God and humanity. She knows nothing of all this as she watches from a distance. She simply knows that she must not turn away, that she must use her wits and her cunning. She knows that she must remain true. Which is why a few verses later, she intercedes with the Pharaoh's daughter, urging her to nurture the child she had found floating upon the river. Miriam watches and waits, and when the moment is right, she moves.

Friends, I think right now that we are Miriam, in more ways than one. There is a current - of history and of politics - that is swirling around us right now, and it is bearing the world along every bit as much as it bore that child along. And right now, we are, in a way, watching what is unfolding, as if from a distance. Not disengaged. Not turning away. But neither splashing about in a panic. Like Miriam, right now we are observing, gaining needed perspective. Like Miriam, we are guarding our strength, observing the scene around us, and waiting to see how we might be called upon to intervene. When the moment is right, we will, as will many others.

But there's a further resonance here. Miriam's is a very particular kind of watching. Her gaze is, obviously, that of a woman. Her careful and studied attention is that of one watching from the underside of history. Hers is the alert watchfulness of the downtrodden and the

oppressed. Lingering with Miriam, as I think we're called to do just now, means that we may do well to take our lead from women, but I think especially women of color. Miriam is, in a way, Ida B. Wells, documenting the savagery of lynching in a Memphis newspaper, long before there was a civil rights movement. She is Harriet Tubman lingering at the edge of the field after the sun had set, long before there was an Emancipation Proclamation. She is Fannie Lou Hamer raising hell at the Democratic National Convention in 1964, drawing attention to the people that Party refused to see in that era. She is Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, Isabel Allende, Arundhati Roy, voices all who call us back to our humanity. Our narrative suggests the wisdom of staying with Miriam, trying to see what it is that she sees, to know what she knows, and to be ready to move when she is ready.

This is not an easy place to be, this watching, this waiting. We can be sure that it was agony for Miriam. Like it or not, it's where we find ourselves just now. It's where the current of history has drawn us. And so we must use this silence well. We must use it to gather our wits. We must use it to find our wisdom sources. And we must be poised to move when the time is right, trusting that there remains a hopeful, and yes, a liberatory future beyond what we can currently see or imagine.

Now, it may seem like what we're doing with Convergence, and what Gregg is here to share with us, is a different story from the one I've described thus far. It is not. In Cameron Trimble's presentations, she suggested that in the life of churches some old stories are currently in the process of dying out, while new stories are still struggling to be born. In the life of churches, in this moment of profound transition in religious life, we are also Miriam in the bulrushes, maintaining our calm and our poise in the in-between. Here too, we are seeking perspective, waiting and watching for the ways we might respond to the currents of history swirling around us. And so Gregg, I invite you to take it from here.

(Gregg Carlson)

From generation to generation, people of faith and conscience have remained creatively maladjusted in difficult times. From generation to generation, churches have found their moral resolve, and they have heeded the charge that Jesus laid out to Peter - if you love me, then feed my sheep. From generation to generation, this congregation has wrestled with pressing ethical concerns, and we have learned what it means to stand with the vulnerable, down there in the bulrushes.

And so it shall be now. Let us draw from our best wisdom sources. Let us gather our courage. And let us be ready, trusting, even now, that there is a liberatory and hopeful story that is unfolding, trusting, even now, that we all have a part to play in that story. Amen.