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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Proverbs 2: 1-10; Matthew 2: 12

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### **Where Shall Wisdom Be Found: A Story of Pilgrimage and Discovery**

Nearly six years ago, the white suburbs had to learn how to say Black Lives Matter after George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis. It wasn't hard for a lot of folks, but it didn't come naturally to everyone. Here at the church, we received criticism for the signs we placed on the lawn outside, and several times we had to deal with vandalism. My response was that if you're unable or unwilling to say that Black lives matter, you might also have a hard time saying that immigrant lives matter. If you can't say that Black lives matter, you might also have a hard time saying that Latino/Latina/and Latinx lives matter. If you can't say that Black lives matter, you might wind up having a hard time saying that Trans or Queer lives matter. If you can't say that Black lives matter, you might find it hard to say that Muslim, or Palestinian, lives matter. And eventually, eventually, you won't even be able to say that White lives matter, because no lives will matter anymore.

That is exactly what the murder of Renee Nicole Good this past week signifies - a blatant and nihilistic disregard for any and all lives. If we who are white thought we were immune to such violence, because of our skin color, because of our financial status, because of our vocation or our educational background, it is time to think again. People of color have been speaking this truth for a long time now, and we didn't need one more dead body to know it. When you allow some subsection of people to be devalued and dehumanized, to be less than, sooner or later your life too will become devalued. That is one lesson of Renee Nicole Good's murder. The other is that it discloses the utter contempt for humanity shown by this administration and of those who do its bidding.

And so once again, we're faced with the question, where shall wisdom be found? How are we to live? What are we to do? How are we to stay human during an inhuman time?

The final line of the story of the wise men furnishes a clue for us: they went home by another road, the text says, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod. The wise men were, in essence, warned against trusting a narcissistic and dangerous political leader. They were warned against the lies and blandishments spoken by that leader. They were warned against trusting the henchmen who would shortly unleash slaughter against innocent people. They were warned against the blatant disregard of humanity demonstrated by Herod, and they chose for themselves another path.

Here at FCCOL, we are seeking that other path. In two days time a small interfaith delegation from our church and from the Berlin Mosque will be visiting Palestine, where we shall encounter

those who are pursuing another path: educators, religious leaders, activists, musicians, grieving parents, and olive farmers, all of whom seek to remind the world of the humanity of a people being expunged from the face of the earth. Jews, Christians, Muslims, they help us to understand that, despite what some biblical passages might say, God is not in the business of making real estate deals, but is, rather, in the business of helping humanity to find and to value one another across our religious and cultural differences. We'll look forward to sharing with you what we see and learn when we return.

Today, I'd like to set the stage for another of our projects in 2026, which is a spiritual, and a moral pilgrimage to Salvador, Brazil. It too is a part of our search for wisdom during inhumane times, a part of our quest for the other pathway home. The north of Brazil is the portion of the Americas that lies closest to Africa, and so it is no accident that Brazil received the greatest proportion of kidnapped Africans in the entire hemisphere during the Transatlantic Slave Trade - nearly 5 million people. To put that in perspective, the United States received about 389,000 trafficked individuals. The United States outlawed new shipments of Africans in 1807, and fully banned chattel slavery in 1865, at the end of the Civil War. Brazil, on the other hand, didn't ban slavery until 1888. Salvador is one of several key places in the Americas that has preserved the traditions, rituals, music, dance, and foodways that have helped people hold onto their humanity for generations. These traditions, these rituals, are a precious gift bequeathed to the world, and they are meant for all people. We have been invited to witness the moral and spiritual beauty of these Afro-Brazilian traditions this coming summer. They too are an important clue into how we might stay human in inhumane times.

When the African traditions arrived in the Americas, they grew into similar, though also very different forms, depending on where you look. In Cuba, those traditions grew into Santeria and Palo. In Haiti, they were combined into what is now Vodou. And in Brazil, the African practices became what is called Candomble, and Umbanda, which we'll witness. All of these traditions bear resemblances to one another. All of them were created in order to resist the dehumanization and violence of empire building. All of them were shelters, in which care, moral wisdom, and resistance could be exercised. I've come to believe that they were all models of that other pathway charted by the wise men.

My own first real exposure to these worlds came thanks to this church, and to Becky and Ted Crosby's work in Haiti. During my first visit to Haiti in 2014, I began to sense that Vodou was actually a powerful wisdom tradition, one that churches needed to acknowledge and honor. It was, first of all, a liberatory tradition: before rising up against the sadistic cruelty of the French, the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue, as Haiti was then called, performed a Vodou ceremony. It was this tradition that helped to fuel the only successful slave revolt in the Western hemisphere. Vodou, then, was a practice that reminded individuals of their worth, of their humanity, and of their dignity - things worth fighting for. But Vodou also suggested to me something of what Christianity itself might have been during its earliest years. Persecuted by Rome, the earliest followers of Jesus went underground, practicing in secret, not unlike Vodou and the other African traditions. At that time, Christianity was a means of retaining the value of humanity, even as an empire was hunting people down for sport. When Christianity itself

became the language of empire and colonization, it was Vodou, and the other African traditions that went underground, providing people with a means to access their own worth. But then finally, I began to sense the beauty, the artistry, the vivacity, and really the sheer genius of these traditions. Far from being “primitive,” they are highly sophisticated modern inventions, born from ancient sources, but rigorously adapted to confront the social and spiritual needs of the time. It’s hard for me to describe the hunger and thirst I had - and still have - to learn more about this world.

One story captures that desire. In a way, it encapsulates the multi-year journey that we have embarked upon here at FCCOL, to learn about and explore the wisdom of the African traditions in diaspora, leading us from Haiti to Cuba to New Orleans and to West Africa and soon to Brazil. Here’s the story.

I had returned to Port-au-Prince with Becky and Ted, and we were staying at a legendary hotel, one that has now burned to the ground. I had a day on my own, while the two of them dealt with some business, and I was eager (ravenous would not be too strong a word) to learn more about this sacred, this holy, tradition. But I didn’t know how. And my desire became concentrated into an urge to find examples of Vodou icons called drapeau - handstitched sequin flags used in ceremonies that call forth certain spirits. I wished to purchase one, to have it in Old Lyme, that it might be a window, a first glimpse, at least, into this sacred world.

There was virtually no one at the hotel that day. There was no one I could talk to, and I couldn’t exactly just wander the streets of Port-au-Prince asking strangers about the world of Vodou and its sacred arts. A kind of desperation began to grow in me - who knew when I would be back, who knew when I would have another opportunity to be in this city?

On one of the inner walls of the hotel compound, there was some Vodou iconography. And I remember approaching it, and closing my eyes, and whispering a prayer: “Please, I said, please help me to find you. Help me to discover you, whoever and whatever you are.”

I had a book with me, and in it were pictures of those sequined flags. I took it to the person at the front desk, the only person I could find. She spoke no English and I spoke no Creole, but I opened the book and gestured, and tried my best to ask where I might find these icons in the city. She said she didn’t know, and then she called somebody. Wait, she said, just wait.

I did wait, though for what I didn’t know. But then an old car pulled up, and it was clear that this was the person the woman at the desk had called. Was he an artist? A ritual expert? Who was he?

He was neither of those. He was just a guy with a car. He introduced himself as Jean-Pierre, and invited me to get in the car. I showed him some of the pictures from the book, and he nodded, and pulled out.

We drove to a large compound, with a huge iron gate. Jean-Pierre picked up a small stone, and tapped on a sliding panel. It slid open, and a pair of eyes appeared. After some words of explanation, again in Creole, we were invited in, where we were shown into a large house. In the front room were all sorts of decorative arts that had been collected for sale. A woman was there,

from Lebanon, and she spoke some broken English. No, she didn't have any drapeau, no icons or religious material like that, she said. Sorry. Maybe try Petionville, she told us.

Petionville is a Port-au-Prince suburb where diplomats and government officials lived. It's on a mountain, and it takes a long time to get there - 40 minutes sometimes longer. I looked at Jean-Pierre, and rummaged for what remained of my French. "Est-il possible d'y aller a Petionville?" He shrugged. "Oui, monsieur!" And he gestured for me to follow him out.

We got back in the car, but instead of heading to Petionville, Jean-Pierre drove to a busy intersection and parked the car. "Wait, wait," he told me. And so again, I waited. For 20 or 30 minutes I sat there, scanning the crowd moving around the car, wondering what was happening, and if I should worry - there were kidnappings happening in Port-au-Prince, after all. Suddenly there was a tap on the passenger side window, and Jean-Pierre was there. He gestured for me to get out, and to follow him to another car waiting behind us. I tamped down my questions, and got in.

Jean-Pierre got behind the wheel, and tried to explain that he needed a better car in order to get to Petionville. Better was a relative term: as we climbed the long mountain road that led to Petionville, the engine stalled out. We sat for a moment, cars honked behind us, Jean-Pierre turned the ignition, and the car roared back to life. Two or three more times this happened, and I asked, "Will it be ok?" Jean-Pierre smiled a little and shrugged again. "Oui, monsieur!"

We made it to Petionville, and parked close to an art gallery that traded in high end Haitian art. And indeed, they had drapeau. The owner laid a few pieces out for me, but they were outrageously expensive. Where, I asked, was it possible to find Vodou art that was a little more affordable? I asked. "Maybe try the Iron Market, he said." The Iron Market is a legendary open air market in Port-au-Prince that I had heard warnings about - it might be dangerous. The gallery owner said it might take an hour to get there. "Est-il possible d'y aller?" I asked Jean-Pierre. He shrugged and smiled again. "Oui, monsieur. Pourquoi, pas?" Why not? And so we got back in the car, and drove down the mountain, into the teeming heart of the city.

Around the Iron Market, the streets were so full of people that it was nearly impossible for the car to move. We parked and entered the edifice, and began combing the stalls. Nothing. And then, in the deep recesses of the hall, in a back corner, I saw them - drapeau, dozens of them. And they were beautiful. Eventually, I was drawn to one depicting a mother and child, syncretized to look like Mary and Jesus. This was what I had been searching for. Indeed, it felt like an answer to my prayer. The artist told me his price, and I opened my wallet to count out the bills. With a sinking realization, I discovered that I didn't have enough.

Port-au-Prince doesn't exactly have ATMs on every corner, but I turned to Jean-Pierre and asked, "Est-il possible d'aller à la banque? Is it possible to go to a bank?" He thought for a bit, and said, "Oui." And so Jean-Pierre and I, along with the artist and the drapeau itself, piled into the car and crawled through crowded streets, until we arrived at a small building with an armed man standing outside. Inside the building was an ATM, which, miraculously, worked. I withdrew enough money to pay for the icon, and enough, I hoped, to generously thank Jean-Pierre. I paid the artist a little more than he asked, to thank him for coming out of his way. He handed me the

icon, and disappeared into the crowd. Then, to Jean-Pierre, I said, let's go back to the Oloffson. When he dropped me off, I emptied my wallet, and hugged him in thanks. And I ascended the steps to the hotel's wide porch, and unfurled my icon - Erzulie Danto and her child Ti-Jean. I felt elated.

I brought them with me today to show you. They have been a part of my journey ever since that day. They remind me of how my own tradition connects to another tradition, one that kept people alive through centuries of persecution. They remind me of how God seeks to draw us into one human family, irrespective of culture, race, or geography. They remind me of the other road by which the wise men departed, the one standing in opposition to empire. They have been with me - with all of us - as we have pursued dimensions of that other road in Cuba, Haiti, West Africa, New Orleans, and soon, in Brazil.

I believe there is a long through line that connects the enslavement and dehumanization of African peoples with the police murder of George Floyd, with ICE detentions of immigrants, and with the cruel killing of Renee Nicole Good - a long stream of inhumanity and violence that plagues us all.

But I also believe there is a through line connecting the spiritual traditions and resistance movements of the past, with those that we find today in Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, and elsewhere. These have sought to revalue human lives after so much degradation. They have nurtured the soil of human existence with songs and stories, dances and feasts. We in churches have ignored these traditions for too long. I want to keep on inviting you to join me in this journey of discovery, to share in the passion that I felt on that day in Haiti, and that I still feel today. I hope you might consider joining me in Brazil later this year.

Once again we ask, where shall wisdom be found? In the Bible is how I answered that question last week. To that, I add another possibility: in the traditions that have nurtured the human spirit, in hope, in resistance, in love, through generations of hardship. These are precious gifts, given to all of humanity. Amen.