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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Isaiah 14: 12-15; Matthew 4: 1-4; “On Mr. Milton’s Paradise Lost,” by Andrew Marvell

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What In Us Is Dark, Illumine

What in me is dark, illumine...

-John Milton, Paradise Lost

Having entered the season of Lent, it is necessary to spend at least a little time reflecting on Jesus’s own journey into the wilderness. After his baptism, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that the Spirit drove him into the desert, where he fasted for forty days and forty nights. Jesus was, of course, famished, to say nothing of being spiritually and emotionally depleted. The devil arrives, urging Jesus to gratify himself in three particular ways: to satisfy his hunger; to turn himself into a spectacle; and to seize political power. In each and every one of his refusals, Jesus responds with the words, “It is written.”

What does it mean that in the moment of trial, Jesus finds his footing among words, by appealing to writing? That question is augmented by his further response to the first temptation. When faced with the possibility of relieving his hunger by turning stones into bread, he tells the devil, “people don’t live by bread alone, but, again, by words, “every word that comes from the mouth of God.” It would seem, in this Lenten episode, that Jesus holds onto his humanity, and maintains his spiritual vision, by appealing to the power of words.

The power of words to sustain the human spirit came home to me recently when I encountered two separate stories, unfolding within about five years of each other. They have to do with encounters not with the Bible itself, but rather writing saturated with a Scriptural imagination. One story concerns Dante, the other John Milton. Both illustrate what it is to be hungry for more than bread.

The first is a story from Primo Levi. It takes place in early 1945, during his days in a German concentration camp. In one of the episodes of his book *If This Is a Man*, he recounts walking with a French prisoner who was trying to learn Italian, Levi’s native tongue. Amidst all the horror, Levi begins to recite from memory canto XXVI of Dante’s *Inferno*, where Ulysses sets sail once again, rallying his men with an appeal to their nobility of spirit. Levi describes feeling

in that instant that the words were the voice of God, like a trumpet blast, restoring a sense of his own humanity. The other man felt it too.

Levi writes: “He has received the message. He has felt that (the words have) to do with him, that (they) have to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular.” He then continues, “It is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen (to the words), that he understand (the words) ... before it is too late.” Words from a 14th century poet became more vital than bread, a matter of life and death. The words break up the frozen lake inside of their souls, reminding them what a soul is actually worth in the first place.

The second story takes place three years later, across the Atlantic. It was 1948, and Malcolm X was in prison in Massachusetts. He was still known as Malcolm Little in those days, and he was functionally illiterate. An encounter with another prisoner inspired Malcolm with a desire not only to read, but to understand complex reasoning. And so he began copying out the dictionary, starting with the letter A, writing out every last word and definition, while later reading all the definitions back to himself, out loud. In time, he was able to read simple books, and then, slowly but hungrily - for this is the hunger that needs more than bread - he moved on to more challenging fare.

One day, he discovered a poem in the prison library. It was John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, a long epic published in 1667 that recounts a war in heaven, the fall of Satan, and soon after, the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. Years later, in his *Autobiography*, Malcolm recounted how the poem changed him. On one level, he identified with being cast out of a heaven he would never reach, living under a condemnation he had never fully understood, for that is often what he felt as a young black man in the United States. On the other hand, he responded to Milton’s identification of Satan with the work of empire and the pillaging of continents for wealth, such that even after he had repudiated much of Western literature and philosophy, Malcolm retained an affinity for the prophetic qualities of *Paradise Lost*. The poem helped to ground him in a wilderness moment, helped him to sense possibilities within himself and the world around him that he hadn’t previously imagined. Malcolm X in prison, with his dictionary and his copy of Milton, replays the scenario of Jesus in the wilderness. “It is written,” Jesus says. In their own ways, Primo Levi and Malcolm X responded in kind. It is written.

I share those stories as a way to talk about a Lenten practice that we’ve followed around here for the past several years. Beginning in 2023, we read the entirety of Dante’s *Inferno* on the night of Maundy Thursday. The following year we did the same thing, with the *Purgatorio*. And then last year we completed the cycle by reading the *Paradiso*. It’s not everyone’s idea of a fun night, but for me, at least, it has opened up something in my soul that I had been and continue to be hungry for - ravenous actually. We live in neither a prison nor a camp, but something about these times made it feel urgent to touch that part of the soul that only the poets and mystics know how to reach.

It's the place within us that Jesus spoke about. It's the place that Primo Levi and Malcolm X discovered, the place inside us that is not fed by bread alone but by words - words that have tarried with the eternal; words that have wrestled with the angel; words so shattering that they can leave you limping after you have encountered them; but also words so trustworthy that they bestow a blessing, and convey to you a new name. That place inside us is the parched and dry place, the waste land, that longs for something more than triviality, that wishes to be done with things that do not matter, that thirsts for waters from a deeper well. Something powerful enough to save a young messiah from perdition in a desert wilderness, something sharp enough to cut through the horrors of a camp or a prison in order to say, "Here is the dignity for which you were made."

There are some words that can usher you into that realm of vision and clarity, words you can carry with you like a portable temple within your soul. There are words - magic, incantatory, spellbinding words - that have the capacity to convey you into the holy of holies. The Bible possesses such power. Dante and Milton do as well.

And so when I thought of how to approach our Lenten journey this year, and of what to do on Maundy Thursday, I wanted us to continue this practice of wrestling with the angel, that we might be blessed. But rather than cycling back to the beginning of Dante, it seemed to me that it was time for something new. You'll have guessed by now where this is going.

This year, on Maundy Thursday, one month from now, we're going to undertake a three year cycle reading *Paradise Lost*. I'll tell you a little about how we're going to go about that, but I also wish to persuade you that this is a poem that matters right now. I wish to speak to those of you out there who are thinking, "Wait, not only does he want us to read poetry, but he wants us to read a 400 year old religious poem written by yet another old, dead, white, European man, and a Puritan at that." And some among us may be thinking, "So ok, fine, it was important to Malcolm X, but I can't even!" If that's you, I hear you. I've been you. I've taken two classes on *Paradise Lost* in my life, and I loved them. But for a long while, I set the poem aside, because I thought it no longer spoke to me or to the world I lived in.

But I've been drawn back to Milton, and I want to see if I can draw you in as well. *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, only two years after what is now Old Lyme had been settled. It was only one year after the first minister of what would become FCCOL had arrived in town. We - *Paradise Lost* and FCCOL - virtually share a birthday. John Milton had been a part of a revolutionary, anti-monarchical movement of radical Protestants that had tried to remove the English king from the throne. It was a No Kings movement. Milton and his contemporaries sought to install what we would now call democratic freedoms in England. He published pamphlets and essays decrying censorship and book bans, calling for free speech and freedom of thought. He called for liberty from church authorities that enforced an imprisoning spirituality upon the public. He marshalled all the passion and learning that he had into helping this revolution succeed. But it failed. The Monarchists returned to power, ushering in a period called

the Restoration, and Milton was forced to go into hiding. He was briefly imprisoned, and he narrowly escaped execution. Slowly going blind, he lived the final 15 years of his life in ignominy and scorn. It was then, around 1658, that Milton began to compose what would become *Paradise Lost*, his book of darkness and of light.

Milton's own revolution may have failed, but others seeking democratic freedoms and human rights were shaped by the poem. It was one of the key references for Thomas Jefferson as he composed the "Declaration of Independence." It was instrumental for a man named Baron Vastey, one of the shapers of what came to be known as Haiti, the world's first Black republic. As William Blake and William Wordsworth were surveying the "vast satanic mills" of early industrial capitalism, they turned to *Paradise Lost* as a guide and signpost in their efforts to recover a sense of humanity. When George Eliot and Virginia Woolf were articulating their early versions of feminism, it was, in part, *Paradise Lost* that helped them to shape their instincts. Hannah Arendt, struggling against fascism in the middle of the twentieth century, was shaped by Milton, as was the Caribbean revolutionary, C.L.R. James. This is a poem that has had a massive, galvanizing, seismic influence over the past 360 years, especially for those concerned with democratic and with human rights, to say nothing of those worried about creeping or overt authoritarian tendencies in the world. Those struggles are perennial. So is the poem.

But it's also, in a way, our poem. Like the founders of Lyme and Old Lyme, like our first ministers, Milton was a Puritan. He emphasized freedom of the conscience, not unlike what is found in our own church constitution. He emphasized individual liberty and freedom of thought, quite unlike some of the later Puritan reactionaries that we now tend to associate with that label, "Puritan." The entire poem turns around the question of the freedom of the will, together with the responsibilities and challenges that come with that freedom. Milton's poem is one of the fullest expressions of Protestantism and its ideals that we have available to us, affording us a unique insight into the origins of our own faith tradition. We need not agree with or like everything that is in Milton's poem, but that fact alone is a strong argument for reading it, and for reading it out loud in one another's company.

Here's how we'll do it. The poem is divided into twelve books. We'll read the first four of those books this year, which is about the same length as each of the parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. We'll do books 5-8 in 2027. And we'll complete the cycle with books 9-12 in 2028. As in years past, we'll divide the readings, so that we can have as many as 33 or 34 readers - I've done the math, and it will give us 117 lines apiece. Two weeks from now, I'll have sign ups available.

But there's one additional difference this time around. We're going to do this during the day, not in the middle of the night. That removes a bit of the ambience and allure, but it also means we won't be struggling to stay awake. Or, we might be, but not because it's late. We'll start the reading at 10:00 AM, and it will last throughout the day, probably until 4 or 5. We'll take

breaks. We'll have coffee and snacks. And afterwards we'll gather for our traditional Maundy Thursday service, with communion.

Throughout the reading, we'll be interspersing music. Our plan is to feature portions of Haydn's *Creation*, which draws a good deal of its libretto from *Paradise Lost*. It will be a multi-sensory way of entering into the days leading up to Easter.

So what do you say? Take the day off work. I promise that your boss will understand as soon as you explain what you'll be doing: reading a 400 year old poem out loud in a church all day. I mean, the appeal is obvious, right? If you're unsure about something as esoteric as epic poetry, well, why not try something new for a day? It will be unlike any of your other days. And if it doesn't work to come for the entirety of the reading, why not just drop for a little, and stay while you can?

It's tempting to say that when Primo Levi recited Dante, or when Malcolm X found Milton, they were living in different times, before screens, when it was still possible to believe in the power of words. It's tempting to say that what worked then couldn't possibly mean anything now. But as recently as 2018, in a prison in New Jersey, a group of incarcerated men studying for their college degrees found Milton's poem once again. One student, a man named Mark, read the first stanzas, and concluded that Milton was actually teaching people how to read disobediently, breaking rules of syntax and meter in order to achieve his ends. That insight opened the way to yet another encounter between Milton and those struggling to find their freedom. Even after all this time, *Paradise Lost* was still capable of reaching those willing to struggle with the angel, in order to receive a new name.

"What in me is dark, illumine," Milton writes at the beginning of his poem. May it be our prayer too throughout this Lenten season, as we seek for lasting, true, and powerful words to illuminate our lives. What in us is dark...illumine!