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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Job 21: 7-13; Joel 2: 12-13a; Matthew 20: 16
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Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North, Part II

We're in the second week of a sermon series called *Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North*. It's a virtual tour of some of the spaces around us, spaces having to do with enslavement, and also resistance to enslavement. Many of us have become familiar with stories having to do with the South, and how slavery led to a particular strand of racism and white supremacy that, we imagine, was transplanted elsewhere. For those of us who live in the North, and in places like New England in particular, it's tempting to tell comforting stories about abolition, or the Underground Railroad, or about other forms of opposition to enslavement and racism. However comforting that might be, it's not an accurate understanding of what happened here, all around us. There's a deeper story that needs to be told, that all of us need to become familiar with as responsible members of society, and as responsible practitioners of Christian faith. And so we've invited some friends to narrate stories of the Deep North, stories that occurred throughout Southern New England, in the spaces all around us, as a means of grappling with truths we too often choose to forget. Last week, Carolyn Wakeman shared the stories of enslaved people who lived on Lyme Street, on the site of what is now the Florence Griswold Museum and what was the Bee and Thistle Inn. And Michael Kickingbear Johnson shared a devastating story that took place in what is now Mystic, when English settlers enlisted the help of a rival native population to slaughter some 400 or more Pequot men, women, and children, an act that would now be characterized as ethnic cleansing. A coda to that story is that those who survived the massacre were shipped to the West Indies to work as slaves. It's hard to hear those stories, but it's also necessary, in order to counteract a cultural amnesia that continues to harm the descendants of those who suffered such events. We, who live in predominantly white communities along the Shoreline, must have the courage and the maturity, to listen, and to have our hearts broken by such truths. Broken hearts lead to empathy. Empathy builds understanding. Understanding can build relationships. When we listen and learn, we can sometimes help to lighten the burden that another person is carrying.

This week we'll share two additional stories, one beginning in Bristol, Rhode Island, and another beginning in Stonington. I'll be narrating the first sequence, and then Marilyn Nelson will narrate the second. The first concerns a prominent New England family, and how they helped to create a vast, circum-Atlantic slaving empire. They did it right here in the North – not in Charleston or New Orleans, but here, in New England. The second story concerns a single individual who was caught up in that demonic machinery, and who managed to exert a remarkable degree of agency for himself and his family, even in spite of the hell he suffered.

The first story poses some insoluble questions, ones that were given expression in the Book of Job. “Why do the wicked prosper, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?” Why indeed – it is the question of the hour. I regret to inform you that Job never receives an adequate response in the book that bears his name. But his question reverberates through the ages, preserved as Scripture, giving us to know that to ask such a thing, to give expression to it, is itself a holy act.

Indeed, it may be that to ask the question, to sense the perennial outrage of the universe, is to be well on the way to Jesus, who turns social ethics upside down, declaring that in his way of doing things, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

So it is in our stories today. In Bristol, we struggle with a family who achieved great wealth, prominence, and political power through the Atlantic slave trade. In Stonington, we become acquainted with a man once virtually unknown, but who now offers us a profile of courage and self-preservation, even against those who would grind his soul into powder. Morally, spiritually, the last shall indeed be first.

We'll begin in Bristol. I'll see you there...

[Film clips from Bristol, and from Old Lyme]

[Film clips from Stonington, and East Haddam]

We saw two gravesites in our journey today, and they represent two different directions we might go from here. One was the patriarch of a family that unleashed untold suffering upon generations of people in a quest for wealth and power. The other was an African prince who exhibited bravery and courage in delivering himself and his family to freedom. Both graves, both stories, both arcs, have much to teach us. But I would suggest that juxtaposing the two demonstrates the truth of Jesus's words: the first, the prominent, the powerful, in the kingdom of heaven, they shall be last. And the last, those made to suffer for the ambitions of the prominent – they shall be first. Venture, Broteer, is now the one who offers us the greatest wisdom and guidance.

As for us, we must struggle with the ways white supremacy helped to build and shape the spaces that we inhabit, that we take for granted, and it will require sustained and conscious work to understand how deeply that legacy runs, and how deeply it continues to affect us all. It's tempting, after stories like these, to immediately spring into some kind of nervous action. For now, perhaps the thing to do is to sit with these stories, to absorb them, and to allow ourselves to be troubled. For they form a part of our history, our ancestry, our common heritage. Perhaps, it is as the book of Joel has it: what's necessary just now isn't to rend our garments, but to rend our hearts. Because it's in so rending that a change may finally come.

We'll go out today with Sam Cooke, A Change is Gonna Come. The whole of American history is contained in the song. The whole of the Deep North too. It's been a long time coming, but I still believe that by telling these stories, by absorbing them, a change is gonna come.

Coda:

If you want to know more about the stories you heard today, there are several helpful sources. The first is a film by Katrina Brown entitled *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*. I've borrowed the subtitle of this sermon series from that film. But it tells you the story of Bristol, and of the DeWolf family, in much greater detail. If you're interested in learning more, I hope you'll seek it out. And then Marilyn Nelson has written a wonderful book about Venture

Smith, entitled *The Freedom Business*. I also enthusiastically recommend that book, as well as the account that Venture himself wrote about his life – which is included in Marilyn’s book. Another source that has been informing the entirety of this project is Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.