

“There is a River”

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Preacher

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From the Pulpit

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“There is a River”

*I will bless our God at all times
God's praise shall forever be on my lips
My soul makes its boast in God
For every mountain, that God brought us over,
For every trial God has seen us through
For every blessing bestowed upon us
God, I give you the praise.*

I greet you this morning in the name of God the Creator of life, Jesus, God's son, and Word made visible and the Holy Spirit – the life force, the breath of God that is bestowed upon us.

Thank you, Reverend Doctor Timothy Ahrens, Dayna McCrary, Al Waddel, Allen Baker, Mike and Jane Weddle, and all the members of First Church that have extended to me an amazing and wonderful weekend of hospitality. I am honored to have this opportunity to be with you.

I bring you greetings from all the places where I am honored to serve as minister, mother, and elder. My home church, New Macedonia Afro-Christian United Church of Christ in Norfolk, Virginia, where the Rev. Patricia Crawley Ricks is pastor.

I bring greetings as the mother and elder of Franklinton Center at Bricks located in Whitakers, North Carolina. We are located on the grounds of what was an antebellum plantation. However, we have transformed that space into sacred ground—sacred space—and a sacred model of resistance, resilience, survival and sustainability. Franklinton Center now flows with the Fifth Stream as a life-giving center for the entire United Church of Christ working

for justice, equality, freedom, healing, and reconciliation. It is also the archive of the Afro-Christian Convention where we are documenting this story, the journey, the contributions of the mothers and fathers of the Afro-Christian tradition—past and present—and their walk with God from Africa through enslavement, through the continued reality of segregation and racism.

I also bring greetings from the fellowship of affirming ministries where I was consecrated last year as a Right Reverend Mother.

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Let us pray: Have your way God, have your way. You are the potter; we are the clay. Mold us and make us after your will. Mold this gathered congregation after your will. Mold me, your preacher, and this sermon reflection after your will. By the power of your Holy Spirit, teach and touch, praise and bless. Bless all of us who simply need a word. Have your way with us this morning. It is in your name that we pray. Amen.

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In the gospel reading of Mark, chapter 4 verses 35-41, the faith of the disciples is being tested as strong winds and storms are rocking and rolling their lifeboat while Jesus is asleep at the switch. In the psalter reading of Psalm 46, we are wrestling with the question of what anchors us and holds us when the very foundations that we have come to depend upon, believe in, are shaking and moving, turning our lives upside down.

In my 85 years of life, I have lived through many storms and the time in which we live is no exception. To use Dr. King's words: "This is the fierce urgency of now." The storms are raging in our nation as our democracy is being threatened by an autocracy. The storms are raging as the gains of the second reconstruction are being dismantled challenging our right to vote. The storms are raging as our vision of a beloved, inclusive, diverse nation is being challenged by the idolatry of white supremacy, privilege, and power. The storms are raging as pressure is growing to whitewash history. There are at

least 50 groups with at least 300 members actively lobbying for the banning of books by African American authors and African American history at the national, state, and local levels.

When storms are raging, there is a thin line between fear and faith, hope and doubt. The question as we worship here? Is there a word? The word emerges from today's scriptures. The word from the gospel of Mark is that faith can conquer fear. The word from David in the 46th psalm is that there is a God who is our refuge and strength, offering to us a river of life-giving water.

My sermon topic: There is a River!

In the midst of everything that can turn your life upside down, knock you off course, cause you to lose your way ... in the midst of the world-changing phenomena where the earth is changing, mountains are shaking in the heart of the sea, waters are roaring and foaming, causing even the mountains to tremble ... that there are some things that are temporary and then there are those that are permanent.

The psalmist is speaking about that which is permanent, that which can ground us and anchor us and sustain us. We have a God who is a river of life-giving water. We have a faith flowing directly from God and that river.

There are three affirmations that speak to me from our scripture passages. The first affirmation calls us to remember that our belief is rooted in God, Creator of the heaven and the earth, our life source. The second affirmation is hope: We do not have to fear because there is a river of life that is flowing from God. Third affirmation: from the river are streams that make glad the city of God. The streams are the Word of God becoming flesh and spirit, moving to the rhythm of a different narrative in our time.

For the past two years, facing the fierce urgency of now, a group of elders and myself have been writing about a narrative for troubled times. We have been writing about a narrative rooted in God, a narrative rooted in hope, a narrative that is now recognized and flowing as the Afro-Christian

Convention ... a Fifth Stream ... flowing from a river of life into the United Church of Christ.

The elders I am referring to are witnesses and testifiers to what faith in God can do. The elders in this book are Iva Carruthers, Jeremiah Wright, Julia Speller, Vivian Lucas, K. Ray Hill, Brenda Square, Henry Simmons, Richard Taylor, and myself.

We write the story of the Afro-Christian Convention which represented the majority of African American churches that entered the United Church of Christ at the time of its founding in 1957. This story has been absent, invisible, from any of the records of that historical moment describing four predominantly white streams flowing together as a “united and uniting” faith witness.

However, ignoring the story does not negate its existence. To silence a story does not prevent the power of the story to live. A Zimbabwean proverb says, “Until the lions have their own story tellers, hunters will always be the hero in their story.”

As elders, it was important that we stand on ground that would not give, that we have a mooring, an anchor. We therefore wrote as “unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian.” We go home to our taproot, the motherland of Africa, the center of our gravity. Our story does not begin when we were in chains; it begins in wholeness. It began with us as family, living in freedom and harmony. Like the 46th psalm, this story affirms that there is a God, there is a river, and there are streams from the river that make glad the city of God.

Our story begins: There is a God. The mothers and fathers of the Afro-Christian Convention were African, connected to a God and a worldview that began in Africa. Their first encounter with the divine was as the ultimate source of life. The divine was life and declared all life as sacred—human, earth, air, water, birds, trees. The divine was understood as the constant connection to all of life, connecting living and the dead and the yet to be

born. The God of the mothers and fathers of the Afro-Christian Convention was a God of freedom, flowing not from the top down, but flowing in a circular context from the past to the present and from the present to the past, the present is wedded to the past and the past to the future.

When facing the “fierce urgency of now”: They believed in a God of life and freedom sharing their common lot whether in their native home or on slave ships or on plantations or in hush harbors. God was present, calling life out of death, bringing order out of chaos, creating and recreating the spirit of resistance and resilience that was central to their ability to be clothed in their right mind in a new world that demeaned and denied their very humanity.

In the fierce urgency of now, our story continues: There is hope flowing from God as a river of love, of truth, of justice, of wholeness equipping and empowering one with spirit. The Fifth Stream is deeply spiritual. Spirit represents the life-force, the energy, the passion, the power that gives meaning to existence. The Spirit, moving like a river from the throne of God inspiring, directing, empowering one to speak, to pray, to sing, to testify, to act. “Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.”

The Spirit is moving like a river, reconnecting that which has been disconnected. The Spirit flowing across all the guardrails that have divided us one from the other. The Spirit reminds us that we are inextricably bound one to the other. The African word ubuntu—I am because you are and because you are I can be also—means my humanity is connected to your humanity.

Thank you, elder and ancestor Vincent Harding, for putting pen to paper and describing the Black struggle in America for freedom as a river, a river flowing with faith, flowing with courage, flowing with hope, flowing with spirit.

Vincent Harding reminds us that the river is in us liberating us as persons, teaching us what it means to be human. The river is the life force, the spirit force that keeps us moving forward in spite of the terrors of the night. However far the river flows, it never forgets its source. Empowered by a deep well of faith, spirituality, creativity, genius, freedom--a river of hope

and truth has been flowing from the motherland of Africa, in the midst of slave ships, the Middle Passage, auction blocks, enslavement, lynchings, the Black codes, Jim Crow, segregation, racism. It's a river of resilience that has been flowing-- "before I'd be a slave, I will be buried in my grave." A river has been flowing—"shadowed beneath God's hand, I will forever stand, true to our God, true to our native land." A river of resistance has been flowing—refusing definitions that define or limitations that confine. A river has been flowing, making a way out of no way, overcoming evil, pushing past boundaries, and blazing an unbelievable path of freedom and liberation.

The story continues in identifying streams flowing from the river that make glad the city of God. The Fifth Stream flows as a movement of resistance, resilience, empowerment in the hostile environment of racism. The Fifth Stream flows from God and God's river of life, hope, love, justice resulting in streams of living water—upfront and personal: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglas, Fannie Lou Hamer, Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, Mary McCloud-Bethune, John Lewis, Amanda Gorman, Jeremiah Wright, Iva Carruthers, Bryan Stevenson, Washington Gladden, Timothy Ahrens.

First Church here in Columbus is a stream of life-giving water flowing from the river of God. You have been flowing from 1852 to the present as the first white abolitionist church. You made the word of God plain by connecting your faith to social justice by building the first social justice park in America, the Washington Gladden social justice park. You are a Just Peace church, an ONA church. You are a Micah church – accepting the cost and joy of discipleship by witnessing for justice and equality in the city of Columbus and the wider world. For the past 25 years, you have had the gift of Reverend Timothy Ahrens as your pastor, priest, and prophet.

There are streams flowing from the river—sheroes and heroes, some unseen and unnamed, composed of every tribe, every race, every tongue—who are keeping the faith, who have made a vow to God and refuse to turn back.

We are in the fierce urgency of now! There is a God, there is a river, there are streams flowing from that river directly into this service this very hour. The invitation to us—the charge to us—is to keep on keeping on. The United Church of Christ is composed of five streams flowing from God who is our eternal spirit, flowing with hope because of the power of God’s Holy Spirit that binds us together, all ages, all tongues, all races; flowing as a movement proclaiming the gospel to all the world and resisting the powers of evil.

I am here in this service in my 85th year of life speaking to you as an elder. I am an elder that has been nurtured and equipped by the mothers and fathers of the Afro-Christian Convention, the Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ. They believed, as I believe, that God is the life force in you that refuses to be defeated; that faith is greater than fear, that good will triumph over evil, that while the storms keep raging in our lives, creating “billows that roll and breakers that dash” there is a God who is still speaking! There is a river of hope that is still flowing. And there are streams flowing from that river as movements of justice and equality for the world that God intends.

I am so glad I know what is temporary and what is permanent. Hatred is temporary but love is permanent. Trouble is temporary, however, the Holy Spirit working in us and through us knows no limits. Powers and principalities come and go, but there is a God who is permanent. It is what keeps me singing and dancing and shouting with joy.

The word from scripture: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble therefore we will not fear. Though the earth should change, the river is flowing! Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, the river is flowing! Though the mountains tremble with its tumult, there is a God, from that God is a river and from that river are streams that are making glad the city of God.

From our faith: Our statement of faith, God promises to all of us who are living in the “fierce urgency of this now,” courage in our struggle for justice

and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and in our rejoicing, and eternal life in God's realm which knows no end.

A word from your elder: As one of your elders at age 85, I don't feel no ways tired. I have come too far from where I started from. Nobody told me that the road would be easy. I don't believe that God brought me this far to leave me. There is a river! Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God. Amen and amen.

—Rev. Yvonne V. Delk

23 June 2024