

Sunday January 31, 2021  
Scriptural Lesson: Deuteronomy 18: 15-20  
Sermon Series: Awakening Part 1  
Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

**We are wrapping up our Awakening Series; a series designed to help us to think about issues as it pertains to matters of social justice and matters that impact us as a human race as a whole; with a new set of eyes; with a new perspective; with a new positioning from the worldview that perhaps we were raised in; so that we may be able to take steps towards the necessary reform that it will take from us as both an individual and collective community; to achieve this beloved community that Dr. MLK spoke of;**

- **A community** where everyone is valued with the same intrinsic and sacred worth as God values us;
- **A community** where our differences whether it be because of race, ability, educational background,

socioeconomic status and more are not used as a justification for devalued treatment but on the contrary, our differences are received with open hearts and minds and dare I even say are even celebrated!

- I loved Corrae Scott King's example of what a Beloved Community is particularly; "The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members," Coretta Scott King said. To serve, she said, quoting her husband, all one needs is "a heart of grace and a soul generated by love."
- So church, the reason why I am taking the time to explore what the beloved community may look like, is so that we might begin to make active steps towards achieving the kingdom of God, that we began to touch upon last week.
- And so the part 1 of this message is speaking to the heart of the individual;

- And looking at our scriptural lesson today from Deuteronomy; a lesson that on the surface does not seem to have a lot of content;
- The awakening that I am drawing energy from this passage is to the promise of a prophet coming to this community.
- And so to unpack the role of the prophet; I believe that the theologian Mary Donovan Turner's explanation of the role of the prophet is helpful for our context.
- According to Turner, **a prophet's role** back in the biblical times was to bring a particular word to their communities, depending upon the political and social circumstances of their places and times.
- **The role of the prophet** made sure to use language and metaphors that reflected their observations of the daily living of the Israelites and the national, political situation of their rulers.
- So with this explanation of the prophet, my awakening as a preacher and the teacher of the gospel on a personal note is one of liberation;

- Because I touched upon this in last week's sermon; that in my preaching class that I just wrapped up this past Thursday; one of the common dilemmas that my cohorts; including myself has had, in spite of our gender, race and ministerial context, was preaching on matters of social justice.
- In fact, in the very first class of 10 students, the professor took a poll of the class and asked this question; when was the last time you heard a social justice sermon preached?
- The second question that my professor asked of us was, when was the last social justice sermon that you have preached?
- The outcome was essentially the same for both questions;
- Almost every one of my classmates admitted to scarcely hearing a sermon about social justice;
- The other staggering reality, was that the majority of my classmates admitted to a reluctance to speak on matters of social justice; out of fear that their message would not be received well;

- The overall sentiment was this fear of potentially losing their churches because of members not being able or not being willing or not being ready to broach such issues.
- Your spiritual leader on the contrary, was essentially the only pastor who shared that I typically preach about social justice issues every week.
- Now this does not mean that I feel comfortable preaching about social justice issues.
- Let's just say that I am terrified opening up my emails or opening up letters, out of fear of the potential words that might be written to me.
- Luckily, I am pleased to share that I have not received any of those letters;
- Admittedly, this may be a problem that perhaps my cohorts and myself had made bigger in our own heads;
- However, I am putting a plug in for the 10:45 sermon today for you all to watch; because one letter I am about to share will prove that our fears are unfortunately not unfounded.
- So why do I still preach about social justice in lieu of all of the fears and concerns that I have shared?

- Well as I shared in my room classroom a few weeks ago; in light of all that is going on in the world, I would not know how to preach a sermon that did not contain some element of social justice.
- Up until the professor asked this question, I just assumed that all of my cohorts from different denominations preached about matters of social justice;
- For from my perspective, when for instance the insurrection occurred at the Capitol, **how could a preacher not address this issue?**
- When swatiskas defamed our local Jewish temple roughly a year ago, **how could a preacher not address this issue?**
- When the country has been torn into two **because of the fact** that racism still exists and is very much alive; **because of the fact** that segregation may have been eliminated to the extent of signage directing whites only or black only; but the fact that black and brown bodies do not feel safe in white spaces; **how could a preacher not address these issues?**

- When matters of women being valued in leadership roles within the country and the church; matters of our queer communities being fully received in our churches are still a question left on the “to be determined,” conference floor until this pandemic is brought under control; I ask again, **how can a preacher not address these issues?**
- What exactly are we supposed to talk about?
- This is why returning to Mary Donovan Turner’s work on what a prophet’s role is liberates my soul;
- Not to mention the United Methodist Book of Discipline that I happened to be reading one day on the role of the Ordained Elder (which is what I happen to be) ;
- Because all good Methodists happen to read the Book of Discipline in their leisure time for fun.....
- I was reminded about the call of the Ordained Elder;
- Our role as the spiritual leader of our appointed community is specialized in four areas; Word, Order, Sacrament and Service;
- So just a little Methodist Polity history for you;
- **The Elder Leads in the Holy Sacraments** of Holy Communion and Baptism; To prepare the parents and

sponsors before baptizing infants or children, and instruct them concerning the significance of baptism and their responsibilities for the Christian training of the baptized child.

(b) The Elder encourages reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant and renewal of baptismal vows at different stages of life.

(c) The Elder encourages people baptized in infancy or early childhood to make their profession of faith, after instruction, so that they might become professing members of the church.

And there is more involved in this area.

- Moving on, **The Ordained Elder manages the life and Order of the Church; the administrative duties, staff and all that pertains to the Church;**To be the administrative officer of the local church and to assure that the organizational concerns of the congregation are adequately provided for and more;

(a) The Elder involves giving pastoral support, guidance, and training to the lay leadership, equipping them to fulfill the ministry to which they are called.



(b) The Elder involves giving oversight to the educational program of the church and encourage the use of United Methodist literature and media.

(c) The Elder involves being responsible for organizational faithfulness, goal setting, planning and evaluation.

There is much more to this section of Order.

- Thirdly, **My role in this context is to lead all into Service**; To embody the teachings of Jesus in servant ministries and servant leadership.

(2) The Elder gives diligent pastoral leadership in ordering the life of the congregation for discipleship in the world.

(3) The Elder builds the body of Christ as a caring and giving community, extending the ministry of Christ to the world.

- (4) The Elder participates in community, ecumenical and inter-religious concerns and to encourage the people to become so involved and to pray and labor for the unity of the Christian community and more.

- **And finally the role of the Ordained Elder is to preach the Word of God; to lead in worship, read and**

teach the Scriptures, and engage the people in study and witness.

(a) To ensure faithful transmission of the Christian faith.

(b) To lead people in discipleship and evangelistic outreach that others might come to know Christ and to follow him.

(C) to prepare, plan, lead and oversee every aspect of the Worship; to ensure that the fertile ground for discipleship and spiritual growth is being facilitated; and again there is more to this section as well....

- But the **liberating part of this section** of my call;
- **The awakening portion of this section of my role** that mirrors the explanation of the prophet; is to preach and actively engage in the ministry of dismantling racism and promoting racial justice.
- **For the church** recognizes the existence of white privilege as an underlying cause of inequality.
- **The Church** supports the concept of affirmative action to guarantee more opportunities for all to compete for jobs.

- **The Church** opposes racial profiling, mass incarceration, targeting of migrants and sentencing that disproportionately penalizes people of color.
- So I don't know about you, but I am encouraged by the stance that the United Methodist Church has taken on matters of racial injustice;
- **I will be more encouraged** once stronger inclusive stances are made as it pertains to the other matters of our reconciling statement of our local church; for we are not as inclusive as we can be or should be as a global Church to all persons regardless of education, ability, economic status, gender, race, ethnic group, age or sexual orientation;
- What I do celebrate though, as it pertains to addressing the tension and fear that I along with my colleagues have shared in my classroom experience;
- **Fear of preaching** hard truths as it pertains to matters of social justice in the Church;
- **Fear of preaching** in a manner that is too political;
- **Fear of preaching** about relevant issues of social injustice out of fear of being deemed as too divisive;

- **That every time** I do preach about systemic oppression;
- **That every time** I do preach hard truths as it pertains to racial injustice;
- **That every time** I preach about the awakenings of the marginalized communities;
- That by the Book of Discipline standards, I am fulfilling the work of my ordination;
- And by the Word of God, I am preaching the gospel....
- For this is what the gospel is about folks; addressing systemic oppression;
- This is what Jesus work is about; dismantling racism, oppression and all of the isms that dehumanize the sacred worth of humanity;
- This is why I chose during Christmas to preach about Holy Darkness;
- This is why for Easter, I will be beginning a series intentionally called “Holy Disruptions”;
- Because the Hallmark Jesus in the serene silent night **is not the gospel**;

- Jesus floating calmly ascending to heaven on the third day after being crucified and murdered **is not the gospel;**
- The work that Jesus came down to do and for us to continue is messy;
- The work is grueling;
- The work is uncomfortable;
- The work is disruptive;
- The work is dangerous;
- The work is warfare;
- Because the reality is that those who have worked many years to stay in power by every hook, crook and wicked intention and planning; will not relinquish this power without major devastation and opposition;
- Folks, those in oppressive power, will not willingly let go of this power without a fight!
- And although I need to say that I am blessed to be appointed to a reconciling ministry that makes it easier to preach on matters of social justice without much resistance;

- **The reason why I took** the time to break down the role of the preacher;
- **The reason why I took** the time to break down the role of the Methodist pastor;
- **The reason why I took** the time to paint this graphic picture of naming the problem at hand that we are charged to face, if we really plan to seek true reform;
- Is because this is the accountability that I am naming must occur first within the pulpit if we hope to begin the tough work that lies ahead;
- These are the types of hard conversations that must germinate in the church, because as I raised in last week's sermon during the 10:45 service, if not here then where?
- The other question that I would add onto this question; if not now then when?
- **And so unpacking this brief lesson in Deuteronomy; this is the type of prophet that the people were being prepared for;**
- **A prophet that was** about to raise the awareness that there is no Jew or Gentile;

- **A prophet that was** about to proclaim that there is no slave nor free;
- **A prophet that was** coming to declare that we are all children of the living God!
- For It was commonly agreed by scholars that this reference in the opening verse; *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet* has prophetic significance; not only for the immediate future in the succession of prophets but also with regard to the coming of Christ the Messiah.
- This is the clearest promise of the Messianic prophecies;
- That God had made it clear that there should come a Prophet, great above all the prophets, by whom God would make known Godself;
- The light of the World would come by the One we call Jesus;
- Jesus who is fully human and human divine;
- Jesus who would come so that we may all have life and life abundantly!
- So I have stated a lot...this I know....
- So what is our next steps?

- How do we move forward?
- To jumpstart this conversation, I think about that young poet who rocked the nation Amanda Gorman at the recent Inauguration;
- **Amanda as the world now knows, is the young American poet and activist.**
- **Her work focuses on issues of oppression, feminism, race, and marginalization, as well as the African diaspora.**
- **Gorman was the first person to be named National Youth Poet Laureate. She published the poetry book *The One for Whom Food Is Not Enough* in 2015. In 2021, she delivered her poem "The Hill We Climb" at the inauguration of U.S. President Joe Biden.**
- Before even hearing her poem, a week prior I preached on the importance of making spaces for our youth/young adults and their voices in every aspect of the Church.
- After hearing Amanda's powerful poem and then engaging in this new way of viewing the role of the prophet that I have shared today, I am confident why I



was lead to preach about the youth and young adults of our day in such a way;

- For folks I believe we are witnessing the modern day prophets of our day!
- The reason why we must make spaces for these courageous voices that are all around our communities;
- Is because folks; these upcoming generations are doing the Work of the Gospel;
- These young people are tackling the issues of social injustice as it pertains to race relations, women's rights, marginalization and more head on;
- These young people who many of us may even think have abandoned the Church altogether;
- I stopped by to suggest that they have not abandoned the church, they are here to reform the Church;
- They are here to hold the Church accountable;
- They are here to say no more!
- No more to Racism....
- No more to Ableism,
- No more to Marginalization,
- No more to Oppression,

- They are here to simply denounce it all and say No more.....
- They are here to continue the great work towards achieving the kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven;
- They are here to stir up an awakening so apparent, that you or I can no longer ignore it;
- You and I can no longer dismiss it;
- You and I can no longer silence it;
- You and I can no longer contain the work of justice, reform and equity;
- So the role you and I must play is one of inquiry;
- The role you and I must play is one of mentoring;
- The role you and I must play is the role of listening;
- The role you and I must play is the role of learning;
- There is a powerful awakening occurring right before our very eyes;
- And like the Israelites of our text, it would behoove us to do the great work of learning, collaboration, listening and mentoring; so that we will begin to align ourselves with discerning what side of history we want to be on when it is all said and done;

- For just as the Israelites of this day had to be able to discern the prophets from the heathens that subscribed to idolatry, violence and evil;
- You and I must make some of those tough decisions ourselves;
- You and I must discern if we are to make spaces for those tasked to do the tough work ahead of justice, peace and inclusion for all or remain comfortably indifferent to the practices that will continue to divide us.
- For if not here, then where....if not now, then when?

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**Sunday January 31, 2021**  
**First Lesson: Psalm 111**  
**Gospel Lesson: Mark 1: 21-28**  
**Sermon Series: Awakening Part 2**  
**Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel**

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socioeconomic status and more are not used as a justification for devalued treatment but on the contrary, our differences are received with open hearts and minds and dare I even say are even celebrated!

- I loved Correea Scott King's example of what a Beloved Community is in particular; "The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members," Coretta Scott King said. To serve, she said, quoting her husband, all one needs is "a heart of grace and a soul generated by love."
- Looking at our gospel today, my awakening moment centers around the mentioning of this unclean spirit in our gospel this morning.
- And before weaving this gospel completely into this conversation, I am just going to make a public acknowledgement as it pertains to the Church as a whole.

- For last week I declared how much I loved the Church.
- I also in the same breath (as I take in this new language presented in our gospel this morning); raised a sobering reality that the Church also has some level of an unclean spirit in it.
- I didn't name it as this last week;
- I stated that reform must begin in our local churches first, if we hope to reform the world.
- However, how I'm seeing our gospel this week in many ways, is an embedded charge not to let the Church off the hook; although it would make my job easier if I could so.
- Instead, **this imagery of an unclean spirit** challenges me to go further into my dialogue that I started last week;
- **This imagery of an unclean spirit** although unpleasant; actually defined the problem that I raised

last week within the Church more accurately than I could have ever defined on my own;

- That there is indeed an unclean spirit within most churches if not all; that needs to be called out if we wish to embody what it means to love God and love neighbor;
- **There is an unclean spirit** that needs to be identified and named for what it is; so that we can begin to make spaces for God's inclusive love to permeate in our spaces of worship;
- **And for those who may be tempted to think that I may be making a metaphorical mountain out of a mole hill;**
- For those who may not be willing to see that the church plays a major role in perpetuating the global racism, marginalization and oppression epidemic that we are tempted to conquer;

- Allow me to share with you a letter that I promised to share in part 1 of this sermon in our earlier service for our time today;
- This was an anonymous letter sent to an African American young female clergy in another Methodist Conference whom I will not name her specifically; but this omission I pray does not omit the fact that there was an unclean spirit that sent this to her;
- So the letter reads:
  - Dear Pastor,
  - I and many other FUMC members, I believe, are dismayed by what we are seeing every Sunday. We are a progressive church, but we are NOT a “hippy organization.” I’m referring to your image with, most recently, a nose ring and blue jeans jacket as seen on our zoom church services. Too, your hair style leaves one wondering are you a teenager or an adult fanatic. When we were first introduced to you, via a family photo, you had long black hair-very attractive-now



however....Long dangly earrings may be the vogue, but they are uninviting as seen on the close-up screen. Your messages are excellent, if you could become one of us figuratively, our relationship will be much better.

- So bear with me Church, because this type of letter is bringing all sort of emotions within me and so it may appear that this sermon is going to jump all over the place;
- But I promise if you just stay with me, I am going somewhere....but I need to let you know that my heart is pounding so fast, because this is the type of microraggression I was alluding to experiencing on some level last week as a black female pastor serving in a cross-cultural context;
- Because the temptation for hopefully only a small portion of you listening online, is to assume that this letter is solely about church attire and nothing more;

- **On the surface**, one who is not awakened to the nuisances of microaggression and how it reveals itself; it could appear that this letter is simply addressing long dangly earrings and naming it as distracting....
- **On the surface**, one who is not awakened to the nuisances of microaggressive language and statements; one could even get hung up on why a clergy person would choose to wear a jean jacket over her clergy shirt in the first place and even deem it as inappropriate for church attire; especially for a pastor;
- **On the surface**, an antagonist to the notion that microaggression even exists or is even valid, would make the claim that a pastor should look a certain way, speak a certain way, carry themselves in a certain way and if by some chance that said pastor does not fit that mold, then he/she/they would have every right to have a letter of this nature served to them.

- Well let me just attempt to calm down enough to relay to you what I mean by microaggression;
- An article that my hubby sent me as he loves to collaborate with me on sermon planning from time to time; Steve sent me an article entitled, “Are you a Microaggressor?”
- In this article, it revealed that the term “microaggression” was originally coined in the 1970s by **Chester M. Pierce, a Harvard professor** who first identified this type of frequent and negative — albeit unintentional, due to unconscious bias — behavior toward someone of a marginalized group.
- **Studies** show that microaggressions are far more dangerous than many realize.
- For the seemingly innocuous and sometimes unnoticed slights come at a high cost to our mental, physical and emotional health.
- In fact, we’re discovering that for people of color, it causes real trauma.

- Furthermore, people fed a regular diet of microaggressions display signs of depression, lack of confidence, failure to thrive, anger, helplessness and even hopelessness.
- Finally, from all of this, the million dollar question could be to ask, is a microaggressor racist?
- According to this article, this behavior isn't straight-up racism.
- Microaggressors often however, constitute off-the-cuff quips and conduct that causes someone to feel discouraged or like an outsider; for any number of traits, not just race.
- So what is the awakening moment of this article?
- According to the article, because microaggressions are often committed without the perpetrator being truly aware of their offenses, a lack of diversity (be it LGBTQ+, women, people of color or any marginalized group) — contributes to these hurtful scenarios.

- So in my book, microaggression in many ways is worst than racism.
- Because often times, since the microaggressor is not even aware of how harmful the language and biases are; one can see how this makes for a debilitating environment for the marginalized community.
- Because during the times of segregation that I was not alive during;
- From my perspective, at least a person of color knew where they stood;
- At least the biases were being named directly even though it was wrong.
- But in this world of microaggression, **one could easily** dismiss that this type of discrimination is even happening.
- **One could easily** justify these types of seemingly unintentional quips as being nothing but a simple misunderstanding.

- **One could easily** dismiss the one who is offended as just being too sensitive.
- **This is why** I am grateful for the educated pursuers of social justice giving this type of discrimination a name.
- **This is why** in unpacking this letter, I stopped by to suggest that microaggression is the culprit that undergirds this letter.
- However, I need to also name that this letter is racist as well.
- For when the letter addresses the pastor's hair, let me just name that for me that part was just downright racist.
- For the hair that my colleague sports, is her natural hair that she was born with;
- This is why there are laws passed; condemning businesses and organizations from discriminating against women of color because of their hair; hair

that they were born with; hair that is part of their race and ethnicity;

- Furthermore, the reason why I deem this letter as coming from an unclean spirit; an unclean spirit that the church as a body needs to seriously examine, is particularly because of the last line of this letter; (although the entire letter is atrocious and unfathomable for me to even wrap my head around that this is actually coming from the local Church);
- But the last line of this letter says it all for me; ***Your messages are excellent, if you could become one of us figuratively, our relationship will be much better.***
- 
- **If you can become one of us;**
- Yes, this is why I now can name why that story of the ten lepers that I raised again last week bothers me so much;
- **If you can just become one of us;**

- Yes, this is why it feels difficult for black and brown bodies to be able to exist and thrive in white spaces...
- **If you can just become one of us;**
- Yes, this is the judgment that keeps those that identify as spiritual but not religious from entering into the Church...**if you can just become one of us!**
- Lord help us Jesus.....
- For I pray that this type of unclean spirit comes from a place of unintentional ignorance and not willful evilness;
- Wherever it comes from, I stopped by to decree and declare...that this type of unclean spirit needs to be denounced!
- For I can empathize with this pastor on many levels;
- So much so that I began to wonder how could this pastor continue on with ministry?
- How can this pastor go onto serve this church community?



- To attempt to answer these questions; I go back to my earlier sermon this morning ; Part 1 of this sermon that I invite you to listen to, because in it I talked about the role of the prophets in our Deuteronomy lesson.
- I gave a modern day definition for a prophet of those times that especially fits our context in today's time;
- I mentioned how according to theologian Mary Donovan Turner's that I have recently studied, a **prophet's role** back in the biblical times was to bring a particular word to their communities, depending upon the political and social circumstances of their places and times.
- **The role of the prophet** made sure to use language and metaphors that reflected their observations of the daily living of the Israelites and the national, political situation of their rulers.
- Furthermore I identified the youth and young adults of our day as being the modern day prophets of our day.

- I am furthermore identifying this unnamed pastor that this horrific letter was written to; a modern day prophet of our day.
- Because instead of her buckling to the demands of this letter;
- She chose to turn this letter into a movement towards dismantling racism and oppression;
- A movement that invited hundreds of clergy women to wear dangly earrings in the pulpit when they preach;
- As a side note, I would wear earrings as well, but for me, I can't wear a lot of jewelry in the pulpit as it feels restrictive to me;
- But **what I can do** since this pastor is an associate pastor and does not get to preach often; **what I can do** is share her story in the pulpit as I have done;
- **What I can do** is to continue to use my voice, in spite of my fear; which I have done and will continue to do

until thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven.

- Most importantly why I am in awe of this strong woman of God, is that to continue this movement of dismantling racism and oppression; she is holding her Conference and her local church accountable for allowing this unclean spirit to contaminate the Gospel and the Spirit of the Church;
- She has lead a ministry of transparency where the letter I read; along with another similar letter addressed to her of the same fashion, was posted for all to see and witness.
- Also in solidarity, **there is a letter** that will be circulating amongst clergy to sign, stating that essentially microaggression and marginalization of all kinds will no longer be tolerated;
- **A letter that will** let these anonymous unclean spirits know that their scathing words would be exposed and denounced;

- **A letter that as soon** as I get my hands on it; I plan to sign as well;
- **So you see Church it may have seem as if I did not address our gospel at all today;**
- For I gave no historical account of this passage for my aspiring theologians it may seem;
- But as verse 25 of our gospel reveals Jesus doing;
- Where it says ***But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”*** <sup>26</sup> ***And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.***
- I would suggest that I perhaps revealed more history than one might think;
- For history like this does not need to be researched, for it is still our story today;
- That there are unclean spirits still unapologetically operating from places of marginalization, racism and oppression and more;

- Furthermore, there is a generation of youth and young adults just as the unnamed pastor that I shared;
- There is a new generation of modern day prophets that some antagonist would call the “cancel culture,” that are doing the very thing that Jesus is doing in our gospel today;
- They are rebuking microaggression, oppression, racism and marginalization with the same type of boldness and authority as Jesus is doing.
- 
- Leaving many of us from the former generations like the disciples of our gospel, amazed, asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching — with authority!
- This is why I suggest that **there is a lot we can learn** from the Amanda Gorman’s of our day...the beautiful, poised poet at the Inauguration ceremony.

- **There is a lot we can learn** from the nose ring wearing, blue jean jacket wearing, natural hair wearing ,modern day prophets of today....
- So let our prayer continue to be as the church desiring for our spirits to be made clean again;
- Tell us More!