

In his sermon "People Who Fly," Otis Moss III, pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, shares a story apparently originating in West Africa and passed down by word of mouth among the slaves in South Carolina's low country. As the story goes, a band of slaves was picking cotton one day under the blazing, hot sun. As was often the case, a young woman in the field tended her small son as she worked. Suddenly, overwhelmed by the heat, she fell unconscious to the ground. Fearful that if the slave drivers saw her, she would be severely punished, the little boy struggled unsuccessfully to awaken his mother and get her back on her feet. An old man called "Preacher" or "Prophet" by the slaves and "Old Devil" by the slave drivers, viewed the situation and came over to them. He leaned over the woman, whispering into her ear: "Cooleebah! Cooleebah!" The young woman immediately arose in dignity and taking her young son by the hand, began to fly. The slave drivers observed in astonishment what was happening and did not know what to do. Taking advantage of their confusion, the old man rushed around to all the other Africans and began to shout, "Cooleebah! Cooleebah!" They, too, took flight. Fearing for their lives at the hands of an angry slave owner, the slave drivers tore into the man. "Bring them back!" they demanded. "Bring them back!" "I cannot bring them back," the old man replied. "The word is already in them and since the word is already in them, it cannot be taken from them" [*30 Good Minutes*, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 2006].

What difference, Moss asks, does the church's message make in the lives of people today. Does the word we preach give the broken and discouraged people of our day, the dispirited and disinherited people of our day the power to rise up and take flight?

We are called to give voice to the spirit of hope. Rewind now two and a half centuries. Rewind to that moment in time when another people languished in a foreign land, ripped up from their roots, in need of a word of hope, but suspicious of any such word spoken to them. "By the rivers of Babylon," the psalmist recalls, "we sat down and wept. Our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137).

Coming alongside his people with a message of comfort, with a word of strength, the prophet Isaiah identifies their despair. "Why do you say," he asks, "'my way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God'?" "Think back," he urges them, "to the word that has been told to you from the beginning, from the very foundations of the earth. Think back to who God is and take courage!"

Had they forgotten? Or had they come to the point where they were no longer convinced that God could be trusted? Who was this God who had made such promises? Who was this God who let them fall into the hands of the Babylonian people and their gods? Perhaps this Yahweh, this God of their ancestors, was not up to the challenge. Perhaps this God was inferior.

"Look at the stars," Isaiah bids them—an interesting move in that the stars represented Babylon's host of deities. "Look to the stars, and do not be shy. Look to the stars and remember who created them. Remember who calls them into place every night. Remember who knows their names and has power over them."

"So you are discouraged?" Isaiah asks. "You feel God has forgotten about you and is unaware of your suffering? Remember, remember the word that has kept God's people from the beginning:

The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. The LORD gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

To be honest, it is more than possible that the psalmist's heartbreak alongside the waters of Babylon may not have been Isaiah's greatest challenge. Perhaps complacency had taken the place of despair; or more exactly, perhaps complacency was the most obvious manifestation of despair. Having been fed from the day of their birth the milk of their parents' longing to return home, perhaps the emerging generation had given up hope. Perhaps this generation that had never even seen the homeland had grown weary of the pain, tears and longing and had decided to settle in where they were. After all, captivity isn't such a bad thing, is it? You can adjust to it. You can make a new home and tuck the old ways, the old hopes, the old God safely away on a shelf somewhere.

Prophets, in case you haven't noticed, often go against the current. As a matter of fact, you might say that being a prophet, being prophetic, is just that. It is about calling people's attention to the way things are

and reminding them of the way things were meant to be. It is about having the courage to face the darkness others deny is there and becoming convinced, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, that “something is ‘on the move’ in that darkness”. It is about being encountered by a God of surprising freedom and finding ourselves possessed of an energy that takes us beyond weary resignation to daring hope. It is about imagining and living toward a different kind of future where the “hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and expressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there” become the engine that drives our lives [Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 23, 67].

We are called to embody our hope in the building of a community of hope. Lest we confuse the hope to which we are called with bland, harmless optimism, we should remember the course traveled by the prophet whose courage we have celebrated this week—this prophet who could not turn his eyes from the plight of his people caught in the terrible grip of racism, and yet who dared to imagine a different kind of future. This prophet, remembered for his “I Have a Dream,” showed up on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial only after having immersed himself in the hard struggle to confront the injustices under which that held his people down. He had confronted the Bull Connors of things as they were and he would comfort the mothers of the children massacred in the bombing of Fourth Avenue Baptist Church and he would walk the perilous path of Bloody Sunday. He had to go through the dark night of the soul as he sat at his kitchen table contemplating death threats against him and his family, and he would see the inside of numerous jail cells. And yet his dream lived on in anticipation of a beloved community where all of God’s children would be free. To be sure, it was a dream and it continues to be a dream toward which we still press; but it is God’s dream. It is what community lived in light of God’s Kingdom looks like. As with the Israelites long ago, it is a dream from which we cannot afford to turn away in discouragement.

If we sometimes feel overwhelmed at the task before us, if we feel tempted to give in to those inner and outer voices that counsel us to simply close ourselves off from the pain that is out there and focus on our own well being, we should hear the counsel of Isaiah: “Those who wait on the Lord,” those who give themselves to God’s mission of peace and justice, those who throw themselves the hard struggle, “shall renew their strength.” With the writer of Hebrews, we should remember the countless faithful who have gone before us “who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness.” We should remember those for whom faithfulness meant enduring “mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two [by tradition, Isaiah], they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented--of whom the world was not worthy.”

So, if you feel overwhelmed by the distances still to be traversed in resolving all of the inequities related to race, if you feel overwhelmed at the terrible scourge of hunger in our community, nation and world, if you long for the day when justice and peace will flow down like a mighty stream, if you long for a more hopeful day, a more beloved community in which all of God’s children are cherished simply because they are God’s children, then join the struggle of today and yesterday and every day. Don’t expect the results of your efforts to be instantaneous but know that you are joining a long line of God’s saints and take heart, for God is with you in the struggle. What more do we need?