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Isaiah 40:21–31, Psalm 103, Ephesians 3:14–21, Luke 6:17-26

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Grace and peace to you all from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – Amen.

A few years ago the General Assembly of the United Nations declared 2015–2024 to be the International Decade for People of African Descent. In proclaiming this Decade the UN recognized “that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected.”

But long before this decision was ever made, in 1926 historian Carter G. Woodson announced that the second week of February would come to mark a period of time for the community to learn and study Black history together. This week was chosen because it coincides with the birthdays of both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass - whom had each come to work towards the end of slavery in the US.

Over the years, this event was met with much enthusiasm and came to be celebrated throughout the month of February in many nations – including Canada.

As people of faith, and Christians we have long held that all of humanity is a reflection, an embodiment of the very likeness of God.

Yet, within our collective history – we as the body of Christ, have diminished and ruptured this fact through the enslavement of African peoples and the colonization and exploitation of those same people’s land.

Chinua Achebe, a prolific Nigerian novelist, poet, professor at Brown University - best known for his 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart* once shared an African proverb on this troubling truth. The proverb says, “*Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.*”

I’ll say that once more - “*Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.*”

And I’ll be the first to admit that this may be an unsettling proverb for many of us to hear as it disrupts our very notion of history before it offers to set us free to see a fully picture of our life of children of God - because the truth behind this proverb, asks us to reorient our narratives, actively calling us as people of faith, to work to listen and hold space for stories that have long been lost due to our own privilege throughout history as white Christians.

So it has become important for us as the church to hold space for people of African descent to tell their own truths, stories and histories. Which is why we have chosen to mark black history month this year at Holy Spirit.

It is important for us all to work together to protect and preserve, to celebrate and uphold the wisdom and beauty of God in our siblings of African descent, and by doing so, know God and ourselves in a deeper way.

So this morning I thought we could take some time to actively do that together.

Has anyone here heard of the Athabasca community of Amber Valley?

In the early 1900s the Canadian Prairies gained some unanticipated migrants through their US advertisements for new Canadian settlers. European migrants from Germany and Ukraine were moving across Canada in droves, and many had already settled in Northern Alberta, but a different wave of migrants were about to embark upon Alberta. They were post-slavery African American migrants from Oklahoma, and they were headed for Amber Valley, which lied just on the outskirts of Athabasca, AB.

But before I share anymore of their important story, I would like to honor their history by turning over the mic to the community of Amber Valley tell you about their lives living as the northernmost Black community in the world.

*Storyhive documentary on Amber Valley - Secret Alberta: The former life of Amber Valley*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxXJubB2cPQ&feature=youtu.be>

In Isaiah chapter 40 this morning, we hear a powerful message of comfort and hope. It had long been prophesied that the people of Israel would need to hear the messages of the prophets as a reminder of the power of God and of God's ultimate love for them while they were in exile.

And this prophetic message does just that - by focusing on the empowerment of God's people to combat their weariness and fragility to a position of strength and hopefulness, much like the pioneers of Amber Valley.

While many of us do not know what it means to live in exile – we have come to know what it's like to feel weary and worn from problems that plague us. And sometimes our tiredness comes from watching the world around us fall apart, and we become overwhelmed with helplessness.

But Isaiah's message to us today is that we shouldn't lose heart - we need to encourage each other to stay the course, just as Isaiah was encouraging his people to stay the course – trusting in the hope and grace of God.

*Do you not know that God can do all things?*

*Haven't you heard how God has brought oppressors to their knees?*

*Do you not know that God will lift you up?*

As members of the body of Christ we are invited to take up this call to encouragement for ourselves – but also for people of African Descent, siblings and cousins within our community and throughout the world.

Encouragement that can mean offering support when a community member faces injustice or racism because of the color of their skin. It can mean making a personal pledge to stand against bigotry and oppression we come to see in our lives and world each day. It can come in the form of spiritual encouragement as we remember our Black siblings and cousins in our prayers. Or it can simply mean holding space histories and stories that may not be our own – but that are just as important and central to us if we are to be one in the body of Christ.

Because the truth of this body that Jesus lifts up for us in the gospel of Luke this morning is that we certainly will not come to fully understand the kingdom of God unless we come to know and bear one another joys, struggles and pain in this life.

Or in other words we won't arrive to see the glory of God made manifest in our world unless we arrive together.

We will never know the fullness of God until we can all meet on a level plain where our songs and stories, gifts and blessings, can be lifted up in equality, equity, and hope.

Which is why it's important for us to continue to make room for all the amazing stories of God's people that have come to gather in this community.

People gathering from different cultures and backgrounds, differing abilities, orientations, and socio-economic status, and across generations, all coming together to see, hear, and feel the love and acceptance of God.

And it is my prayer that we would continue to make more room for others to join us here too.

That we would strive to be a people willing to listen – continuing to open our hearts to others stories.

That we would continue to make room at God's table for all to find grace.

That we would be a community where we can continue to grow and refract the love, encouragement, and care of God among us all.

And may this be so among us – Amen.