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2/7/21—University Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 40:21-31; **Mark 1:29-39**

DOING HISTORY

I was a history major in college. When I got to college I discovered, much to my delight, that history could be more than just the memorization of boring dates. Instead, I discovered that history is about stories. History is about human stories—about the good and the bad things that happen to people and about the good and the bad qualities that reside within people. History is about the defeats and triumphs that take place not just on battlefields, but to individuals and communities. History tells the story about the dreams and aspirations people strive to make a reality. History is the story of us—us strange, amazing, horrific, and complex creatures. We explore these stories from history so they will inform our understanding of ourselves and thus hopefully inform our present and our future.

The month of February is designated as national Black History Month. Black history should not be regarded as the story of just one segment of American society. Rather black history should be understood as *American* history. The stories about the African American experience in this country are relevant to *all* Americans. They are *American* stories—stories that reveal the failure of the American ideal of freedom and of the American propensity to oppress others, stories about the strength and determination of people who--in the face of suffering and injustice--demanded that our nation be better, stories of accomplishments and talents that have enriched our nation. Understanding the rich and profound and painful aspects of African American history is essential for understanding the very fabric of our nation.

In recognition of Black History Month, I attached some links in the congregational email sent to you this week. You can find in the email an attachment which highlights three very

noteworthy African American Presbyterians and the gifts they offered our nation. And you will also find two links to some of this nation's most celebrated African American poets. I encourage you to check out some of these very powerful poems.

The role of history is also foundational to our faith and our worship life. Just think about the very thing that our faith centers around: this ancient set of texts we call the Bible. All these many thousands of years later, we modern people still turn to these ancient texts to understand ourselves, to inform our present, and to guide our future. When you think about it, our worship services are organized around the telling of this history. In worship we rehearse the story of God's goodness to humanity, how God created this world and gifted us with abundance. In worship we rehearse the stories of scripture that recall humanity's failures and brokenness, the stories of God's condemnation of evil and wrong doing. And after recalling the broken nature of humanity, we in our worship services rehearse the story of God's mercy and steadfast love and how God reaches out to humans to transform us and heal us. We sing this story in our songs, we confess this story in our prayers, we read the story straight from the Bible, and we preach this story from the pulpit. In worship, we don't just study history, we *do* history. We re-enact this history every time we worship because in these ancient stories we discover *our* story.

That is what happened for enslaved African Americans. Forced to adopt the religion of their masters, the enslaved African Americans discovered that the Christian faith and the biblical texts resonated with their own story. There in the Bible is the story about the Hebrew people's enslavement in Egypt and God's acts of liberation. There in the Bible are the voices of the biblical prophets who repeatedly criticize the oppression of the powerless. In the Bible the psalm writers do not shy away from crying out to God about their pain and suffering and finding

comfort in God's steadfast presence. And the stories about the life and teachings of Jesus reveal a God who cares about the marginalized and who defeats the forces of death and oppression.

Our two lectionary readings today provide us further examples of how the biblical texts speak directly to people experiencing times of suffering with a message of hope. The prophet Isaiah writes to the Jewish people during their captivity in Babylon. They are held captive in a land where they do not want to be. And Isaiah reminds them about a God who is more powerful than any king or prince. Isaiah reminds them about this God who empowers the powerless, who gives strength to those who are faint with despair and sorrow. Isaiah offers them hope in this God who can help them soar like eagles.

In the passage from Mark, we hear the story of how Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law from a serious illness. This healing is remarkable for many reasons. Women held very little importance in the ancient world, so for a man of Jesus' stature to even notice or care about a woman was noteworthy. When Jesus touches the woman to heal her, he crosses all kinds of social barriers. A man was not supposed to touch a woman to whom he was not related. Because illness was thought to make a person unclean, touching an ill person was taboo because it was believed to transfer that unclean status to the other person. What Mark's story reveals to us is that Jesus notices and has compassion for the least members of society and that Jesus crosses social barriers to extend compassion and healing.

Moreover, the gospel writer of Mark wants us to understand that this story is not just about a healing. It is about a *resurrection*. The Greek word Mark uses to say that Jesus "lifted her up" is the same Greek word the angel uses at the empty tomb when he says to the women that Jesus has been raised. And Mark uses this same word over and over again in almost every

healing where Jesus touches someone and “lifts them up.” The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law was a resurrection to new life and a defeat of the forces of death.

And once she is healed, Mark tells us that the mother-in-law gets up and begins serving them. But it wasn’t just that she waited on them. A better translation of the Greek word used here is the word *minister*. We use this same Greek word for the word *deacon*. So another way to translate this sentence would be to say she *deaconed* them; she ministered to Jesus and his friends. She offered her gifts, her talents, to enrich their lives and to care for them. She ministered to them!

This story of Peter’s mother-in-law is just one story among the larger body of biblical stories that shape an understanding of who we are and who God enables us to be. This larger Christian story played a major role in the African American experience in this country. PBS will be airing a two part-series on the African American church hosted by Dr. Henry Louis Gates. It is scheduled to air February 16 and 17 at 9 p.m. And while I have not yet seen this series myself, I have to imagine that it will discuss not only the role the African American church played in nurturing hope and faith for a people greatly oppressed, but I have to imagine that it will also reveal how these communities of faith became the fertile soil for the development of African American singers, musicians, poets, writers, and artists, teachers and social workers, doctors and scientists, community and political leaders. In other words, the African American church and the story of faith it embodied, enabled its members to grab hold of Jesus’ hand, to rise up, and offer their gifts and talents to our nation--to *minister* to our nation: to enrich our nation, to care for our nation, to improve our nation with their gifts and talents. And that is a history for which we can be abundantly grateful.