

Harris Athanasiadis
December 13, 2020

EMPOWERED TO BE

Psalm 74; Luke 1:46-55

Delores Werchola was a little girl when they took her away. They took her from her family, her home, her reserve. Delores was Indigenous – from Mistawasis First Nation in BC. They took her to a residential school. They forced her to forget her roots, her language, her culture. Their aim was to teach her the white man's language, culture and religion. Terrible things were done to Delores in that school, unspeakable things. Even now, many years later, she cannot speak about those years without breaking down. Delores, like so many indigenous people, are still living the trauma and still carry the scars, many years later.

But Delores is not a victim. Even though she was victimized by Canada and its system of residential schools, she refuses to accept the word 'victim' for herself. What does this mean? What does it mean to be liberated from our victimhood? What does it mean to be empowered to be? Some of us know what it's like for people to hurt us in some way, to take advantage of us, abuse us, mistreat us, neglect us, impose control over us, overpower us... Some of us know what it's like to be victimized by circumstances, by physical or mental conditions that impose themselves on us and won't let us go.

And some of us may feel like we're still victims of all that has happened or is happening. Maybe some of us have moved past that, but maybe we have not. We're all living under a Covid lockdown and fear of contracting the virus, after all. Many of us have family or friends or know someone who has been victimized by Covid and even succumbed to it in the end. Being a victim is something we can all understand in some way. So, how do we become liberated? How do we become empowered to be rather than trapped in a prison out of which we cannot be free?

Let us explore our scripture readings for some guidance. First our Psalm. The psalmist is speaking not only on behalf of himself. He is speaking on behalf of his people too. They are victims. But victims of what? The enemy has destroyed them. The enemy has destroyed their homeland. And in order to make them forget their very identity, culture and faith, the enemy has destroyed their sacred places, even their temple. The Psalm is composed as a prayer to God: "The enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary. Your

foes have roared within your holy place; they set up their emblems there. At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes. And then with hatchets and hammers, they smashed all its carved work. They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrated the dwelling-place of your name, bringing it to the ground. They said to themselves, 'We will utterly subdue them'; they burned all the meeting-places of God in the land. We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long."

All hope seems to be lost. The enemy has utterly crushed the people and brazenly vaunted themselves as the new masters.

And isn't that what happens when we are victims? The enemy, whatever form the enemy takes, vaunts itself over us imposing itself on us, demolishing our sense of self, our identity, our confidence, our stability, our health, all that matters to us that is precious and sacred. We are violated, humiliated, undermined and defeated... At least that's how we can feel in different ways at different times of life.

So what does the psalmist do... what can he do? He can pray and sing. Psalms are both spoken and sung, and this psalm is composed for group expression. It is an invitation for the whole people to pray it and sing it together. So what does it say?

Well, it challenges God. It provokes God. It appeals to God. For what? It demands that God act. Does God no longer care for God's people? Will God put up with those who will vaunt themselves and scoff at God by destroying the people? Will God let the oppressors go on oppressing without bringing them to account?!

I find this psalm both powerfully liberating and troubling at the same time. I find it liberating because it can cry up to God, even in an accusatory way. "Come on, God, act! Are you sleeping or something?! Do you not care?! Are you paying attention to what's happening, to what's being done?! Come on?!" This is not the language or approach of a victim. Somehow, the psalmist is trying to rouse the people to outrage, to protest, to resistance and action. Victims live in a prison of defeat and despair. To cry up, to react, to protest in outrage is empowerment. Whatever happens we will not be silent or quiet about it. We will resist in some way, whatever way is available to us. Black

lives matter! Indigenous lives matter! Me too movement! We will be silent no longer!

But I also find this psalm troubling. I find it troubling in how it conceptualizes God. The opening verses say it all: “O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?” What is the theology here? The theology is that God is ultimately responsible for the people’s fate. The enemy has overpowered them, oppressed them and destroyed them because God has let them do it. The idea is that God is ultimately in charge and God has the power. God can protect them, deliver them and destroy their enemies if God so chooses. Listen to verses 12 onwards: “Yet God my king is from of old, working salvation on earth. You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of dragons in the waters and crushed the heads of Leviathan... you cut openings for springs and torrents...Yours is the day, yours also the night... You have fixed all the bounds of the earth; you made summer and winter.”

What is this saying about God? It is saying that since God is in charge and in control of everything (even the natural world and all that happens), God can act to save God’s people and destroy God’s enemies. If God is real, God has to have power and force in the world, influenced by our prayers and by our victimhood turned into hate projected onto God so that our enemies are destroyed.

This psalm is liberating and empowering in its cry of protest and outrage, resisting and refusing to accept oppression silently, subserviently, in despair and defeat... yes! But don’t we need a better theology to go with our activist spirituality?

Here is where Mary’s song in our gospel reading can help us. Mary’s song, or the “Magnificat” as it’s called in Latin, is a powerful piece of revolutionary and subversive theology. What it has in common with our psalm is its resistance to and protest against oppression, its crying out and singing out the possibility of liberation: “The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name. God’s mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with God’s arm: God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped God’s servant Israel, in remembrance of God’s mercy...”

But the tone of Mary's song is quite different from that of the psalm. Even though it declares a reversal of fortunes between, on the one side: the proud, the powerful and the rich, and on the other: the lowly, the hungry and the downtrodden, it also expresses no animosity against enemies or belief that God is the cause of the bad situation the world is currently in. It declares great changes as if they have already happened in principle. It declares that God is on the side of the downtrodden. God is with the victims and will help them triumph, but not by using the same methods as the oppressor! The powerful will be toppled from their thrones, but nothing is said about the use of force or violence to achieve this. There is no hate in Mary's song. It is full of freedom and hope.

So what's going on here? Is Mary expressing wishful thinking, some fantasy or dream of a world she hopes will someday be?

Well, actually, Mary sings this song with these words after she has been visited by an angel telling her that she is to be the mother of the messiah. He will open a door to salvation and liberation for his people and the world. But already there is a picture that the salvation Jesus will bring about will be quite different than the typical one that people have expected all along. If God is on the side of the victims, God will also achieve a victory quite different than what oppressors expect.

How do the proud get scattered, the powerful brought down from their thrones and the rich sent away empty? It is not by trusting in a God who has even more power, more strength, and more force to defeat them. It is not in a God who has more success, more prestige, more of anything like that... no. The only way to defeat oppression in the world is by what we may call a re-evaluation of values. If what matters in the world is wealth, power and might to control and dominate people, circumstances and the natural forces in the world to do what we want, then Jesus will have no salvation to offer. But, if the solution to life's challenges, oppressions and limitations of mind, body and heart have to do with a different kind of power, the power of love, then everything changes.

Already in Jesus' birth the message of liberation and empowerment to be human is revealed differently. He is born to a young peasant woman, to poor parents, in utter vulnerability. He will come to defeat oppression and sin in the world not by force, but by forgiving justice. As the great Nelson Mandela,

for one, taught after his many years of oppressive imprisonment: "To be free yourself you have to work for the freedom of others." The way to fight your enemy is not to hate them, but to seek out ways to work together. Forgiveness is necessary for that, even before accountability is demanded.

Also, whether it's human oppressors or the oppression of debilitating disease, financial crisis, relationship conflict or failure, or a pandemic, forgiveness is a creative response to the loss of control in life, the fact that we are not in control and only time and circumstances will show us this. Forgiveness is a way to open up space in our heart and spirit, to be empowered to be in the face of all the oppression, the unfairness, the misfortune and the pain that life can bring. We can't always change the world around us and sometimes the path has to involve letting go and walking away. But we can change within ourselves, growing into the kind of persons who can empower others because we ourselves have become empowered. And out of such empowerment growing from within outwards, we can also create positive change in our world.

We can call oppressors to account, confront them, imprison them, kill them and do all kinds of things to them outwardly or in our hearts. But until we learn to forgive and let go inside, we will never be free. Mary's song is a song about freedom. It's a song about being empowered to be. It's a song about a great reversal where the oppressors of life will be brought to account and their victims will be vindicated. But this will happen in a way quite different than the world typically expects it to happen. It will happen only when vulnerable love is held up and treasured as the greatest power for positive change.

Nelson Mandela and others have taught us something of this kind of power in love as forgiveness. But what about Delores Werchola? Even though she still carries deep wounds of her many years of oppression in a residential school, Delores integrated her painful experiences into deeper compassion and commitment to justice and to education. She became a social worker and educator supported by the Presbyterian Church in Prince Albert BC. She has worked part time out of the church and part time in the Mistawasis high-school as a chaplain/educator. She has offered a rich ministry that has built a bridge between both communities. She is a mother and grandmother. She can say honestly that she has tasted joy and gives thanks to God for it. She is grateful that Christ was given to us not in power and might, but as a vulnerable Child who empowers from within.

May you and may I too, find creative ways of heart and spirit, to be empowered to love this Christmas... With Mary, may our souls magnify Our God because God's gift of the Christ child is given to us through utter vulnerability rather than power and might. Even as we are victims of a raging pandemic, may we be liberated from our victimhood through the power to be and to love who is God... Amen.