

"Listening When the Stones Cry Out"

Minnesota Annual Conference Sermon

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Rev. Nancy Victorin-Vangerud, Ph.D.

University Chaplain and Director of the Wesley Center
for Spirituality, Service and Social Justice, Hamline University

Sermon Scriptures:

Psalm 137: 1-6

Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down,

crying because we remembered Zion.

There we hung up our lyres in the trees, because that's where our captors
asked us to sing; our tormentors requested songs of joy:

"Sing us a song about Zion!" they said.

But how could we possibly sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?

Jerusalem! If I forget you...let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth.

Let me remember you: make the Holy City my greatest joy.

Luke 19: 37-40

³⁷ As [Jesus] was now drawing near, at the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ And some of the Pharisees in the multitude said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

I. By the River's Edge

Good afternoon!

Grace and peace!

Grace and peace in the name of Jesus Christ!

Wow! This day has finally arrived! Thank goodness!

Here we are, gathering at the River's Edge Convention Center, here
in St. Cloud. St. Cloud! (1)

Shall we gather at the river?

The beautiful, the beautiful river?

Yes! Let's gather at the river!

Let's gather and answer Charles Wesley's good ol' question in hymn
#553:

"And are we yet alive, and see each other's face?"

Yes! Here we are, face to face, gathering along the edge of the
beautiful Mississippi River.

2. River Wisdom

Hmmm...Interesting how being near water, near a river's edge
becomes a place of vision, of wisdom, where a confluence of people can
come for celebration and commemoration.

We come here...

from the east,

the south,

the west

and the north of this state of Minnesota.

Joining with us this year are two special teachers who will share with us their wisdom about becoming a missional church.

Welcome first to:

Rev. Anita Phillips, of the Cherokee Nation, and Executive Director of the United Methodist Church's Native American Comprehensive Plan. (2)

Also welcome to:

Rev. Jorge Acevedo from Grace Church in southwest Florida.

May we open our hearts to God's Spirit in this watery wisdom place. May being here, along the river, mean that we can glimpse the big picture, the whole beautiful view of what it means to be in mission today. May we dream--*God's dream*-- of becoming an authentically missional church.

3. Seeing and Hearing Sacred Presence

You know, there's a place I go, by the river to reflect on the big picture of things. It's up along Dayton's Bluff, in St. Paul. From there I can look out over the Mississippi, across downtown and then through the Minnesota River Valley. I walk the white limestone path and imagine I can see all the way to Big Stone County, out west, with the huge granite boulders looking back at me from the ancient glacial landscape.

Last fall, I was up walking along Dayton's Bluff and came to the usual viewpoint. While standing there, looking out across the river, my attention

was drawn suddenly to a vivid sense of presence nearby. Turning, there along the rim-path I saw the familiar low, undulating burial rises of Indian Mounds Park. But, in a lucid moment, I saw them as if for the first time.

The mounds were THERE.

They engaged my attention.

They inhabited my eyesight.

An insistent, rising voice addressed me:

"We are here. We are here. *We are yet alive.*"

Is this experience really so strange? To be disquieted by sacred presence? Across the Minnesota landscapes that ground our settler lives, we encounter unsettling signs of presence and personhood that remind us this land is not just "your land, my land". We live our lives embedded in the storied lands of peoples who have come before us and whose descendents continue to hold these lands sacred and inspired.

Can we learn to see?

Can we learn to hear?

4. *What are the Stones Saying?*

There's a story told by Dr. Thom White Wolf Fassett, member of the Seneca Nation, and retired elder in the Upper New York Annual Conference. Many of you will remember Dr. Fassett from studying his

United Methodist Women's School of Missions textbook, *Giving Our Hearts Away: Native American Survival*. This story is included in the book co-edited by Rev. Anita Phillips and Dr. Henrietta Mann, entitled *On This Spirit Walk*. (3)

The story Fassett tells is of his father, Spotted Horse, a traditional pipe carrier from the Standing Rock reservation in South Dakota. One day they were sharing a cup of coffee in his father's one room home along the Grand River. Fassett noticed a large pile of stones outside the front door. They weren't big stones, more like ones you could put in your pocket. Fassett asked his father--what's with all the stones? His father replied, "Well, people bring me stones they think are special, that may be saying something. So I try to listen. Those stones outside weren't saying anything." His father chuckled and then sipped his coffee. Fassett knew to wait and listen. Spotted Horse picked up some other stones from the table. He said, "Now I was listening to these stones for a long time and couldn't figure out what they meant. So I threw them on the pile. When I got back from town and unlocked the door, they were back, on the table. I'm still not sure what they are saying, but I'm working on it."

He's working on it! Fassett's story invites us to consider that listening to the stones may take a long time. We have to work at listening. We have

to open our hearts to the reality that there may be something to hear. Why not this week, here at Annual Conference, we ask ourselves, "What might the stones (across our state) be saying to the churches?"

5. Listening to the Pipestone

Down in the river valley of Ft. Snelling State Park, there's a stone at the end of the winding road that I have been trying to listen to for several years. This stone is a large disc of pipestone encased in the middle of a memorial site. (4) Last year, our Native American Ministry Action Team visited the memorial with other United Methodists as part of a learning experience led by Native American teachers Bob Klanderud and Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs. They're with the organization "Healing MN Stories." (5)

The memorial site stands near the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, called *Bdote* by the Dakota. The pipestone was placed at the memorial by Amos Owen, of the Prairie Island Dakota during a ceremony in 1987. The stone is engraved with the names of the bands of Dakota interred there over the winter of 1862-63, as part of the aftermath of the Dakota-US War. Up to 1700 Dakota--mostly women, children and elders-- had been force-marched 150 miles to the site. That winter, the imprisoned Dakota suffered severe hardship--up to 300 died. (6)

Engraved upon the pipestone are the words,

Mitakuye Oyasin, "All My Relatives."

Nearby, the Dept. of Natural Resources' Thomas C. Savage Visitor Center lists all the names of the Dakota interred, in a display that acknowledges the site as a concentration camp. (7)

Can we listen to the pipestone?

Last month, descendents of the marchers gathered at the memorial to remember how in early May of 1863, the 1300 survivors were forced onto three steamboats-- the Davenport, Northerner and Florence. By government sanction, they were removed along the rivers to Crow Creek, South Dakota. After Reuben Kitto recounted this dispossession story, Dr. Chris Mato Nunpa, *Two Bears*, shared how the loss and trauma was the result of policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Then healer Janice Bad Moccasin led the ceremony. First she invited the children and women to come around the pipestone, with the men around the outer circle. After singing and praying, she called the men into the center, with the women and children encircling them crying and singing.

Some of us gathered there could imagine the pipestone lamenting in a language we could understand...

*By the rivers of Bdote here we sat down
crying because we remembered our homeland.
Here, amongst the trees we handed over our medicine bundles,*

*that the missionaries of our captors required of us.
They requested joyfully, "Sing us one of the hymns of Jesus!"
But how could we possibly sing their Lord's songs in our
homeland?
Mni Sota Makoce! If we forget you, may our hands wither, our
tongues stick to the roofs of our mouths!
Let us remember you: Make your memory our greatest joy!*

It is difficult to hear the words of the pipestone.

It is difficult too, to hear the words of some of our ancestors:

Governor Alexander Ramsey, listed in history books as a Methodist, addressed the state legislature on September 9th of 1862, declaring...

"Our course then is plain. The Sioux Indians of MN must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state." (8)

Jane Grey Swisshelm, the journalist, abolitionist and women's rights advocate here in St. Cloud published these words upon hearing that the Dakota marchers reached Ft. Snelling:

"Every Sioux found on our soil should get a permanent homestead, 6 feet by 2, ...Shoot the hyenas,...exterminate the wild beasts." (9)

After the boats, our ancestors unleashed...

the bounties,

the boarding schools,

the broken treaties...

--the 4 horseriders of the Dakota apocalypse.

Can we bear to listen to the pipestone?

6. *Listening to the stone from "the river of memory" of the 2012 General Conference in Tampa, Florida.*

David Bard: (rising up and coming forward from his seat to the stage)
Nancy, Nancy...wait a minute. Hold on! There's another stone here today we need to listen to. I've got it in my hand. I brought it here for this week. I think this stone has something to say too. This stone is trying to speak with us too. My name is David Bard and I serve as pastor of First UMC in Duluth.

(David comes up to the table and joins Nancy, holding up the stone.)

Nancy: Hi David! Welcome! What's this all about?

David: (explaining) This stone in my hand comes from 2012 General Conference in Tampa, Florida. I was a delegate that year and I attended the Act of Repentance worship service "Toward Healing Relationships with Indigenous Peoples". Dr. George "Tink" Tinker from the Iliff School of Theology in Denver preached the sermon about repentance. In the middle of the worship space, there was a long blue cloth--a flowing "river of memory" laden with stones. As part of our response and commitment, each of us was invited to come to the river, pray, and choose a stone to bring back to our Annual Conference, as we commit ourselves to join in the journey of repentance in our own missional context. (10)

Nancy: I remember. I understand that Jim and Sharill Allen, of "All Feathers Spiritual and Community Center, were there too, from Leech Lake. (11)

Thank you David for bringing this stone to us. Would you place it on the communion table so that throughout the week we can listen to what the

stone is saying to us. I know that Bishop Ough is encouraging us to join the journey towards repentance and healing.

We can learn from what Bishop Elaine Stanovsky, of the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference said last June, in Pueblo, Colorado. They were acknowledging the Sand Creek Massacre, led by their Methodist ancestor, Col. John Chivington. As Bishop Stanovsky lifted their stone, she said: “None of us Methodists in this room personally participated in the events of 1864 and yet we are who we are, we are where we are, we have what we have, we live where we live, because of this history... And we participate in patterns of privilege and poverty that are shaped by this history. And so we are called to repentance.” (12)

My sisters and brothers, this stone cries out to us, "repent"! May we hear the word as good news. The river of memory flows with us in our present, but it flows from the divine well-spring of all possibility, open to a different future than the past. But the first step on this journey toward healing is to turn, see and listen to the cries of other's truth Repent! (13)

7. Hearing the mission anew

So where are we left? After all this listening, where are we now? Are we done? Fortunately, there's more good news, there's good news here

along the river's edge. There's another teacher joining us. There's another teacher with wisdom to share. Should we welcome him? In one sense, he has never left us. But through the centuries it's been difficult to see him and hear him due to our ever-ancient/ ever-new infatuation with power, acquisition, and ownership. But there he is -- can you see him, can you hear him? He's coming to join us, entering our worship once again with his band of jubilant singers.

Not on a white steed...

Not with shields, armour, or insignia flying,

Not with slaves, but with friends.

He is yet alive.

His kin-dom mission--still the same...

"God's Spirit is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to those who cannot see, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's land-Jubilee." (Luke 4:18-19)

Welcome him to the table.

He calls our names. *His name...* is Jesus.

8. Closing

All my relatives, all my *Methodist* relatives, we are here because God calls us to mission. But if we are to become an authentically missional

church, we have some very difficult listening to do. We are called to repentance. Will we be silent, or will we cry out? We are yet alive, and so are Native American sisters and brothers who walk this Spirit Walk. May we walk and talk, listen and speak these next few days, together, by the river.

Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna! AMEN!!!

Notes:

(1) St. Cloud is named after a small town in France--and that small town is named after the 6th century "wonder-working" abbot, St. Clodoald, of Paris (560 ce). What 'wonders' might we hope for with this Annual Conference?

(2) <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/native-american-comprehensive-plan-nacp>

(3) <http://www.amazon.com/On-This-Spirit-Walk-Indigenous/dp/1426758413>. Permission to refer to this story from Rev. Anita Phillips.

(4) The name of the site in Dakota is "*Wokiksuye k'a Woyuonihan*"--which can be translated into English as "Remembering and Honoring".

(5) <http://spinterfaith.org/healing-minnesota-stories.html>

(6) <http://heyevent.com/event/6tmkyh7beyqkua/wokiksuya-ka-woyuonihan-remembering-and-honoring>. See also, *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors: The Dakota Commemorative Marches of the 21st Century*, edited by Waziyatawin Angela Wilson (St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2006). Also see *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota*, by Gwen Westerman and Bruce White (Minnesota Historical Press, 2012). For image of pipestone, see <http://www.nickcolemanmn.com/?p=3914>.

(7) http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/fort_snelling/things_to_do.html

(8) <http://www.usdakotawar.org/history/alexander-ramsey>

(9) <http://www.nickcolemanmn.com/?p=3914>

- (10) <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/gc2012-starting-along-the-path-of-repentance>
- (11) See page 7 of <http://bemidjiumc.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/SEP-2014.pdf>; also recently, <https://minnesotaumc.org/news/north-star-district-churches-provide-500-shoeboxes-to-children-in-need/>
- (12) <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/pilgrimage-to-sand-creek-brings-healing>
- (13) Several resources on public commitments the UMC has made to the "Act of Repentence":
- (a) <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/letter-act-of-repentance-not-a-one-time-event1>
- (b) June 1, 2014 "Letter to All United Methodist Bishops Serving in the US", by Bishop Robert E. Hayes Jr.,
<http://spinterfaith.org/uploads/Open%20Letter%20Bishop%20Hayes.pdf>
- (c) May 22, 2014, Open Letter to the Members of the United Methodist Church, by Rev. Anita Phillips Ms. Cynthia Kent Rev. Chebon Kernell,
<http://spinterfaith.org/uploads/Methodist%20Act%20of%20Repentence%20Letter-1.pdf>
- (d) 2008 General Conference Resolution 3323: Healing Relationships with Indigenous Persons, <http://spinterfaith.org/uploads/Methodist%20Act%20of%20Repentence.pdf>
- (e) May 1, 2012, General Conference Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery
<http://calms2012.umc.org/Text.aspx?mode=Petition&Number=831>