

May 10, 2020

Mother's Day and Phillis Wheatley Sunday

In our scripture, which is taken from Psalms 137, the situation is dire for God's people. God's chosen people have been taken, enslaved, captured, taken away into exile. They went from the Promised Land (Jerusalem) to a foreign land. A strange land called Babylon. They went from being landowners to homeless, overnight. They lost their freedom, the comforts of home and what was familiar. The magnificent Temple built by King Solomon is destroyed. The Temple, the place of worship, glory and national pride was now gone.

The psalmist tells us that they "sat and wept." And as if that is not enough, their captors tortured them, asking them to, "Sing, sing us one of those songs of Zion."

"Oh, how can we sing God's song in this strange land?"

The question is asked and answered by persons who have been displaced, beaten, ostracized, and dismissed. How easy it might be to just "throw in the towel." And that is what they did, they hung their harps on the willows.

Phillis Wheatley did not hang her harp on the willows. In other words, she did not sit down, **she sung out loud and clear in a strange land and her voice continues to ring out to many.**

She was kidnapped from her family and home in West African by slave traders at the tender age of 7. She belonged to a people with a culture, a spoken language, who worshipped a deity, who observed ritual and customs and work to achieve the common good.

Phillis survived the cruelty of the Middle Passage arriving in Boston aboard a slave ship named the Phillis. She was purchased from an auction block located in what we now call Chinatown by the Wheatley family, a liberal and prominent family in Boston. They were kind to Phillis and treated her well and afforded her learning opportunities.

Sixteen months after arriving, she learned the English language. On from there, she mastered Latin, Greek, and English literature at a time when enslaved people could be condemned to death for learning. It was a time when most women from the dominant culture were not even expected to know how to write their name.

How do you sing in a strange land?

Phillis Wheatley learned to sing by listening, watching, and reading everything that she could get her hands on. When the young writer felt the urge to express her fascination with something, that she saw in the world around her she turned to poetry.

She used Words... She loved words like... **liberty, imagination, freedom.** Poetry was her freedom and she used it to assert her very being as a beloved Child of God. For her freedom was a universal desire, a longing that comes from the human heart and the spiritual world.

Phillis Wheatley, a confident young poet, wrote to “His Excellence George Washington in 1776” expressing the ideals of freedom and liberty. She turned the heads of leaders, using her pen and voice to share a vision which helped to fuel the American Revolution.

She criticized the impact of slavery not just on the enslaved but the enslavers as well. This idea has a prophetic ring to the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King who said we are all caught up in a web of mutuality.

The institution of slavery was unacceptable and unsatisfactory to Phillis Wheatley. So, she built into her poems another acceptable world. She wrote 20 some odd elegies for friends and acquaintances as an escape from this world with the conviction that the next world – heaven – would be far greater. This world was unsatisfactory and temporal.

You do not sing long in a strange land without trouble.

Phillis Wheatley’s poems showed a command of the western literature and classical mythology. As her writings gain notoriety, the male dominated white society who regarded blacks as inferior and lacking intellectual abilities, summoned her to court to defend her literary knowledge and ability in 1772. The judges were some of Boston’s “best and brightest” including faith-leaders, the Governor, lieutenant governor and John Hancock.

She proved herself in court. However, she was unable to get a publisher in America for her first and only book. “Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral” was published in London.

Phillis Wheatly continued to sing in this strange land....

In spirit of being subject to the stresses and emotional suffering that she had to face she excelled. She traveled to Europe and continued to write and share her thoughts and heart.

How do you sing in a strange land?

Back in the day, Phillis sat in the seats reserved for the enslaved people at the Old South Meeting House. It was there where the scriptures came alive and sparked the idea of freedom and equality.

While the old preachers might have quoted Saint Paul's instructions for slaves to obey their masters.

You might know that two people can be in the same conversation and have two different interpretations of what happened and what was said.

Phillis Wheatley heard about a God who gave Abraham a new direction, she heard about God who led Moses and the slaves out of bondage in Egypt. She heard Mary's song, and saw a man named Jesus who loved, and suffered, died, and rose on the third day to give us "new life."

Phillis Wheatley found inspiration and freedom in God's word. This is how you sing in a strange land.

"Hold on just a little bit longer, everything is going to be alright."

How strange it is for us to lift up the life and light of Phillis Wheatly this morning as one who does not come from a majority people, but comes from the line of a disinherited and disallowed people.

And Here is the Good News... God comes to us in unexpected sources to bridge history. The God of history teaches us that with any struggle comes a certain and strange light, that enrichment that nothing can or will destroy. There is something that is just splendid, strong, and dignified in Phillis Wheatley's spirit – something that would not die in the face of hate, oppression and evil.

May we be warmed by her witness and inspired by the God of history... to look to God in this season to plant seeds of hope, love, and justice, so that we too can sing in a strange land.