

**BLACK IN CANADA – THE NARRATIVE & THE VISION**  
**St Mark the Evangelist Anglican Church**  
**Sunday, February 12, 2023**

Good morning, everyone! I am so honoured to be worshipping with you today, along with my daughter and a dear friend.

I bring you greetings from the **Algonquin College Spiritual Centre** and take this opportunity to personally thank you for the way you partnered with us last summer to support Ukrainian newcomers who were fleeing their war-torn country. You were a vital part of making them feel welcome to Canada and offering a hand of friendship through your generosity.

So many of you contributed your time, talents, and resources through homemade baking, supplies, teaching, financial contribution, and your presence as you took time to listen to them in spite of their limited English. You have been generous in every way, and I believe that God will reward you in equal measure.

I extend a very special thank you to Father Julian for showing up to help with the Ukrainian English initiative, including teaching on one occasion, without any advanced notice, and for sharing his pulpit today.

As a general expression of my gratitude, thank you all for this wonderful opportunity to celebrate Black History Month with you. What a tremendous statement you are making in this community, and in our city, as a congregation that values people of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds. It is no small matter that you have undertaken to show your support in this manner with a well-

thought-out program, thought-provoking theme, and esteemed guest speakers, in whose company I feel quite humbled.

Thank you to your BHM Committee Chair, Laurie, and her team for inviting me and for being so passionate and considerate about this year's celebration.

I tuned in to hear Dr. Joy Mighty's presentation from last week service, as I did not want to duplicate what she so eloquently shared with you about Black excellence, and where we ought to be heading as a community. What great insights she shared!

Like Dr. Joy, I too was thrilled to see that your Lectionary readings for this week so beautifully tie into the vision of what it should mean to be Black in Canada, actually to be Canadian and in particular, Christian.

Many of you would know that the Psalms can be broken down into three categories: Orientation, as demonstrated in such as Psalms 1 & 2, Disorientation, as shown in Psalm 3, for example, and Reorientation, as seen in the passage read today Psalm 119:1-8.

I believe that our vision as Canadians and the way in which we celebrate and integrate people who are different, needs to be one of Reorientation and I will speak more specifically to that later.

Your Corinthians reading of 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 is an admonition from the Apostle Paul to the church for the divisions that were brewing among them.

Finally, the Matthew 5 reading from verse 21 to verse 37, from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, addresses four key areas of sin: Anger, Lust, Divorce, and Oaths. And we can easily add the sin of racism to that list.

### **Why does this matter?**

Because in all these instances, the Bible is addressing issues that, once fixed, help us live lives that are pleasing to God, which should be what we are striving to do on a daily basis.

When I immigrated to Canada as a young lady, over forty years ago, I encountered racism for the very first time in my life and having no point of reference on how to deal with that, I chose to become involved in the community. First to educate myself and then, by extension, to educate my community on how to navigate life in a predominantly white world.

Through becoming involved with community organizing, we were, collectively, able to share experiences and provide support to each other in times when the racism was so subtle that you began to doubt yourself as to whether or not it truly happened. I believe a term that has becoming popular these days for that type of behaviour is called "gaslighting". It's when you start questioning yourself, your sanity, and your perception of an action.

But as I have grown older, I have learned to trust less in my own perception and more in God's plan for my life – every bit of it – the good, the bad, and the ugly – celebrating the victories, mourning the defeats, and learning from my mistakes. In

that regard, I will say that Winnipeg served to be a great training ground for me and how to navigate the rude realities of racism in Canada.

Community organizing was key to my understanding that this new reality as a Black woman in a predominantly white country was not going to be easy. There would be many factors stacked up against me and over which I had no control, Black and female, to name the obvious.

Thankfully, the Black community in Winnipeg, back then, was tight-knit and quite progressive. In the early 80's, we were the first community in Canada to establish a Martin Luther King Celebration Committee, and among one of the first to organize marches in support of the release of Nelson Mandela from a South African jail. As a young girl, it was invigorating to be part of such a movement.

And most of our organizing stemmed out of the church because traditionally, Black people have always considered themselves (and still do) to be very spiritual, understanding that the fight in the natural is first won in the spiritual realm. And Scripture backs that up. When Daniel was praying for his people, the angel Michael appeared to him on the 21<sup>st</sup> day, to let him know that his prayers were being heard, but there was a delay in the answer, as Angel Michael was battling with the Prince of Persia. (Ref. Daniel 10: 10-14)

History has shown that religion consistently plays a vital role in the lives of Black people all over the world. And research statistics have proven this to be the case time and again.

**In 2021, Pew Research Centre**, a non-partisan think-tank out of Washington, DC. released a research paper published on faith and religion among Black Americans and found that among Blacks, faith and religion play a prominent role in their lives. They also reported that Blacks are more likely than the overall public to be Christians. This study revealed the following:

- 83% of Blacks say they are completely certain that God exists.
- 84% believe in miracles.
- 83% believe in demons and angels.
- 83% attend church every Sunday,
- and of those who say they are not religious, 1/3 of them would attend church on special occasions like Easter and Christmas.

This is fascinating when you think that our journey as Black North Americans is birthed out of slavery. And as slaves, we were not allowed to assemble and pray. So, our forefathers would secretly get together late at nights, when their masters were asleep, they would create circles surrounded with wet sheets to drown out their prayers and worship – which you can imagine would be quite lively. If you've ever attended a predominantly Black church, you will see them engage in vibrant worship. Because our African heritage is one where we express ourselves, through movement and loud singing.

The experience is very similar for Black Canadians though there is not as much available research. There is some misconception, even today, that Blacks are new to Canada, denying our existence for generations and the over 400-year presence and contribution of African Canadians in this country. Dr. Joy has already spoken

to these issues. Yet, it must be noted that this is one way that systemic racism is reinforced, and our children are made to feel marginalized and insignificant.

In their book, "Victorious in Defeat: The Loyalists in Canada", Professors Wallace Brown and Hereward Senior said this: "The Blacks' greatest success was religious organization, by which they developed as a distinct and separate community."

It is safe to say that our religious experience continues to evolve in environments where racism, classism, and sexism (for women) are prevalent. What this has done is to cause the Black Church to develop leaders and create space for their members to celebrate human dignity as members of the body of Christ.

You've already heard that Canada, as part of the British Empire, had its own history of enslaving Africans from the late 1620s to 1834. Consider what it would have meant for an enslaved Christian, to have second-class status, not just by law and custom, but enforced through the church that taught about God's love. It would have been hard for Blacks to reconcile those two extremes and would cause them to question their faith.

The history of the Black Church in Canada mirrors the same racism that what was happening in society. When Black Loyalists arrived in Nova Scotia in 1783, the Church of England, immediately ensured there were White Anglican Loyalists to assume the positions of prominence within the church, relegating the Blacks to second-class status.

Back then, Blacks believed that if they were baptised in the Anglican Church, it would make them equal with the whites. But even after many hundreds of them were baptized, they realized that though they could attend services and receive communion, they were segregated from white parishioners and forced into galleries set apart for Blacks and the poor and kept behind a partition.

Eventually, they were even encouraged to gather in their own homes. Since it was obvious that they were not welcome and would not receive the support from the Church of England, the Nova Scotian Blacks determined that their spiritual needs were best met by their own lay preachers and teachers. So, in segregated communities, and in independent churches they held their services, and these became important to meet their spiritual and social needs.

In 1854, a Reverend by the name of Richard Preston founded the African United Baptist Association (AUBA), which was an independent denomination for Black Nova Scotians. Preston, who had been born into slavery in Virginia, had purchased his freedom in 1816 when he travelled to Halifax. It was there that he met other Black Christians who were encountering segregation, such as having curtains to obscure the view of Black people in the balconies. He decided that enough was enough and formed the AUBA. Today, AUBA consists of 19 churches across Nova Scotia.

So, what about those Lectionary readings and what we've just discussed?

I would say that it is God's desire that we figure out how we can live together, in unity, celebrating our differences and the richness added to our lives through our diversity. Jesus modelled this throughout his earthly ministry; we see it throughout the Gospels.

I want to leave you with a challenge of one more reading this week from **John's Gospel**. This is the account of Jesus going out of His way to have an encounter with the Samaritan woman who was shunned by her community, and wrong on so many levels for Jesus to do – speaking with a woman, unaccompanied, let alone to a Samaritan. Read the account in **John 4** and as you do, note that it is the longest recorded conversation with Jesus and anyone in the Bible.

*And as I wrap up, I share a prayer from a valued resource that sits in my library. This book, CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD records over two centuries of African American prayers dating from 1760 to 1994.*

**O God, I Get So Tired of Racism Wherever I Go (1992)**

**William Donnel Watley**

*O God, as a black man, I get exceedingly tired and so filled up with confronting and fighting racism, that formidable foe.*

*It passes its poison from one generation to another. It has polluted all of the wellsprings of the nation's institutional life.*

*More widespread than the drug scourge, more explosive than nuclear weapons, more crippling than germ warfare – racism has washed upon the shores of every nation of every continent.*

*O God, I get tired of racism wherever I go – abroad and at home.*

*From shores that let me know that I have gotten "out of place"; from looks of fear that my black manly presence engenders in some, from small insults to major offences, from polite, subtle, condescending paternalism, or maternalism, to outright, open hostility; from insulting jokes about my intelligence to curiosity*



*about alleged black sexual prowess; from caricatures and stereotypes to the “you are the exception: syndrome” – racism rears its many heads and shows its various faces all the time.*

*Yet as I bow before You, O God, I pledge to You, to my ancestors who sacrificed greatly so that I might enjoy whatever rights and privileges – however limited or circumscribed – are mine to experience, and to my children and to their children that I will keep up the noble fight of faith and perseverance.*

*I will not go back to the back of the bus. I will not accept the invincibility of racism and the inviolability of its mythical sacred precepts.*

*I know that greater is the One that is in me than the one that is in the world. May the Spirit’s Presence and Power direct and inspire me now and evermore until victory is won for my people, and all people, and until the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. Amen.*

And may I add my own prayer:

Father, may we see a day when there will be no need to dedicate a month to Black History because every day of every month, we are celebrating ALL people, Black, white, yellow, red, because we are ALL Your image bearers, created in Your image and in Your likeness and for which You declared was, Very Good!

Amen!

References:

*Victorious in Defeat: The American Loyalists in Exile.* Wallace Brown and Hereward Senior. 1984

*Conversations With God, Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans.* James Melvin Washington. 1994

Pew Research: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/07/blacks-more-likely-than-others-in-u-s-to-read-the-bible-regularly-see-it-as-gods-word/> Accessed February 11, 2023