

Holy Trinity Sunday, A
Genesis 1:1-2:4a
Matthew 28:16-20

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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Trinity Sunday is about the power of three – three names to call upon One God. God is **Creator**—who brings into being all that is, and never stops creating. God is **Savior**—who lived the human life, faced down human cruelty, and subdued the power of death. God is **Spirit**—alive since before the beginning, sustaining God’s life in all things forever. *Three* symbolizes unity and completeness, and also the beauty of loving relationship. Sacred artists have sometimes depicted the Holy Trinity as three people gathered around a table in conversation, each one different from the others yet communing and collaborating together. It’s a powerful model for us this week: how God can be active through a creative, dynamic community of people who are different yet united.

This week, God’s three names are informed by another set of three names: **George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery**. Protesters have called on everyone to say their names out loud, and I invite you to do so: **George Breonna ... Ahmaud**. These names represent the beauty of God-given human lives, but also the cruelty of systemic oppression. And these three names have literally brought the world together.

George Floyd was killed in police custody on Memorial Day (May 25), with a Minneapolis police officer kneeling on his neck for almost nine minutes, and four police officers now charged in his death. **Breonna Taylor** was an EMT first responder in Louisville, Kentucky who was shot and killed by police who used a battering ram to enter her apartment in March (March 19). **Ahmaud Arbery** was shot to death by white men who pursued him while he was jogging in Glynn County, Georgia in February (Feb 23). It’s reported that racial slurs were spoken over his body.

We’ve been viewing videos of racist brutality for too long. Now the dam of pent-up rage has finally broken, and people are spilling into the streets in a way that is raw and real and insistent, an uprising of protest in well over 150 cities across the United States and around the world. While the president was dispersing peaceful protesters to stage a photo-op, 10,000 Portlanders were staging their own photo opportunity, filling the Burnside Bridge to lie face-down, hands behind their backs, for 9 minutes, as George Floyd was forced to do. In response to protests in Virginia, an enormous monument to Robert E. Lee is now being removed from a city park in Richmond. In the face of “law and order” rhetoric, city workers from Washington DC painted a two-block-long mural on a roadway leading to the White House, with bold capital letters spelling out BLACK LIVES MATTER in yellow street paint that will last a long, long time.

Unprecedented isn't a big enough word. We hope we are living through a historic turning point. Already in this virus pandemic, the pace of change has people's heads spinning and stomachs churning. In two months we have seen social and economic changes it would take us two years to process in normal times. And now our hearts are beating even faster for the cause of justice.

The pandemic of coronavirus has revealed another pandemic – the pandemic of poverty and racism. And maybe somehow it was necessary for our whole society to be stopped cold, shut down and locked up, in order for people with white privilege to break out of their insulation and notice what life is like for others. To notice how years of neglect and unequal health care have left people of color more vulnerable to disease and death from this virus. To grieve how appallingly inadequate wages are for the essential workers we all depend on. To be shocked that even with shops closed and social gatherings called off, racist cruelty still finds a way to persist. Perhaps it took all of this to break our country open, for the purpose of good. To reveal what our brothers and sisters of color have lived with since slave times—a system stacked against them.

Because the chaos of this week – on the streets and in the White House – is not the point. The point is that systemic racial oppression cannot continue. Let's call it what it is: white supremacy. It is not just white privilege but white supremacy, and it is built into the structure of our nation.

Certainly this is true for Oregon. This state was founded as a haven for white settlers. In 1857, Oregon's constitution banned black people from coming to the state, living here, or holding property. It wasn't amended until 1927, and not until 1973 did Oregon finally ratify our nation's 14th Amendment, granting all races equal protection under the law. Oregonians of Chinese and Japanese descent were excluded and abused as well. Today Portland is the whitest big city in America, and there's a reason. People of color have been systematically deprived of wealth through a long history of real estate discrimination. Highway projects have leveled black neighborhoods. Racial inequity has multiplied through the generations. (from *The Racist History of Portland, the Whitest City in America*, by Alana Semuels 7/22/16 in The Atlantic. Also see the extensive *Timeline of Oregon and U.S. Racial, Immigration and Education History*, download at http://www.osba.org/-/media/Files/Resources/Improving-Education/CFEE_Timeline.pdf?la=en)

Here's the tragic truth about racism: *The system isn't broken. It was built this way.* And it has to be dismantled. It has to be rebuilt in a more just and loving way.

Today we read aloud the very first chapter of the Bible, a creation story that grounds us in God's true intentions for earth and all her creatures. Scholars tell us it was written in a time of oppression and turmoil when Israel was overtaken by the brutal Babylonian Empire, which glorified violence. For example, the Babylonian myth of creation told how the god Marduk

killed his mother Tiamat, cut her in two and created heaven and earth out of her body parts. In Babylon's brutal and violent worldview, human life was cheap.

In contrast, Israel lifted up an orderly, joyful account of God creating the world step by careful step, in seven days. We could imagine God as a sculptor or even a creative child with playdoh fashioning a world that has everything needed for life. Seas and land, sun and moon, trees and animals, with human beings given the high responsibility to take care of it all. As God makes each new thing, God exclaims with delight – *This is good!* God creates every single person in God's image, bearing God's own essence and character. God calls every man, woman, and child -- *Good! Blessed! Cherished! Beautiful!* Every single one, in all our diversity. The Bible says this world is not an accident. It has meaning because God loves it, and we experience this meaning in our lives as we follow God's way.

The Bible also reminds us this world doesn't belong to us. It is God's world, and God intends creation to live in peace. The biblical word is *shalom* – which doesn't mean personal inner peace or rest or comfort. *Shalom* means humanity sharing a peaceable life together, with social and economic and political well-being for all. *Shalom* is a life of justice, where everybody has enough to live in safety and dignity. *Shalom* is not passive but active, a peace that cannot be complete until all people have what they need to live.

If that ideal ever seemed abstract, it does not anymore. Passionate social unrest is revealing how our system was built to serve the few and deprive so many – no wonder there is righteous rage! We are being called toward God's greater meaning of peace, a peace beyond ourselves, peace with justice that extends the good things in life to everyone.

Chaos and conflict can be creative. Today they are calling us to reclaim God's original intentions for creation. God's vision of *shalom* for everyone.

And things are opening up in ways no one could have expected. A poll on Friday said 76 percent of Americans now believe racism and discrimination are "a big problem" in the United States. That's up 26 percent over five years ago. (NY Times, *Why Most Americans Support the Protests*, 6/5/20) Not just African Americans but thousands of allies have joined together – something not seen before. The Oregonian reports that even small towns in conservative Eastern Oregon have held protests against racism and brutality. People are saying recent events have opened their eyes to a problem they didn't see before (*Oregonian*, 6/6/20)

And concrete responses are emerging too. An 8-point plan for police reform has long been circulating, and now it has been signed onto by cities including New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago (see Campaign Zero, #8Can'tWait movement). Minneapolis has agreed to ban the use of chokeholds and neck restraints by police (NYTimes 6/5/20). Dallas police have adopted a

“duty to intervene” policy so officers must step in to stop fellow police who engage in abuse or brutality (NPR, 6/5/20). It’s a start toward changing entrenched cultures and saving lives.

This is long, slow, steady work that needs to be done. It requires commitment and resilience and determination for the long haul. And quite honestly, this is white people’s work to do. White people need to change these systems. I wonder what part you and I will play in dismantling white supremacy. I wonder what pieces of this good and hard work belong to each of us.

So far, 2020 has been the most surprising year ever. As people of faith, we are looking for God’s hand of justice and *shalom* in all that is happening today. There’s a short poem circulating, which is attributed to Leslie Dwight (seen on facebook). It goes like this:

What if 2020 isn’t cancelled?

What if 2020 is the year we’ve been waiting for?

A year so uncomfortable, so painful, so scary, so raw—that it finally forces us to grow.

A year that screams so loud, finally awakening us from our ignorant slumber.

A year we finally accept the need for change.

Declare change. Work for change. Become the change.

A year we finally band together, instead of pushing each other further apart.

2020 isn’t cancelled, but rather

the most important year of them all.

We dare to hope, and ask God’s help to act. In Jesus’ name, Amen.