

“Well Versed”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, January 31, 2021

Psalm 111

Psalm 111 says, “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.” Isn’t this a big part of why we gather today, in the congregation, to hear the stories in the Bible? This Psalm lifts up the joy and delight of studying scripture. The Message translation reads, “God’s works are so great, worth a lifetime of study – endless enjoyment!”

Some say that Psalm 111 is “a comprehensive, or A to Z, celebration of God’s works.”<sup>1</sup> The psalm is written as “an alphabetic acrostic: each line begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet.”<sup>2</sup> In a few short verses, the psalm writer has listed the things she remembers of the works of the Lord, stories that have become a part of her faith story. She is clearly excited about God’s work – with words like delight and majesty, endures and renown, gracious and wonderful, faithful and just, holy and awesome.

If you wrote a similar statement of faith, you would share your thankfulness for the presence of God in your life. And while we might share similar experiences, what you wrote, or what I wrote would be highly indicative of our personal journey with God, unique to our story! And your story is a product of the ways you were raised in your faith – some of us began that journey as a child in Sunday School, others later in life. Often the denomination we belong to has its own theology and interpretation of the scriptures that offers us deeper understanding and learning. For some of us, we have never thought to challenge what we’ve been taught along the way. We’ve accepted the interpretation of the scriptures that we hear in sermons, or present in our hymns, or held up by our denomination.

But scripture has also been harmfully used to give authority to the few over the many. When Christopher Columbus set sail from Portugal, he went with the authority of Pope Nicholas V, who awarded in a Papal bull of January 8, 1493, “regions of the known world to Portugal ... who [also] proclaimed that the church exists for the sake of the world, and the Pope lays claim to the entire world.”<sup>3</sup> Christopher Columbus had papal permission to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever... and the King justly and lawfully has acquired and possessed these islands, lands, harbors, seas, and they do of right belong and pertain to the said King Alfonso and his successors.”<sup>4</sup>

This papal edict became known as the Doctrine of Discovery. On our United Church of Canada website, we find that “the Doctrine of Discovery, which asserted that lands belonged to the Christian powers that “discovered” them ... continues to reverberate in the 21st century. As

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word Commentary, Exegetical Perspective, 297.

<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word Commentary, Exegetical Perspective, 297.

<sup>3</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 29.

the Truth and Reconciliation Commission noted in its final report, the Doctrine of Discovery has been cited in decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada as recently as the 1990s.”<sup>5</sup>

Sarah Travis offers this story that expresses the side of the colonized. “During a visit to Peru, Pope John Paul II met with representatives of a Peruvian indigenous movement who said to him: ‘John Paul II, we, Andean and American Indians, have decided to take advantage of your visit to return to you your Bible, since in five centuries it has not given us love, peace, or justice. Please, take back your Bible and give it back to our oppressors, because they need its moral teachings more than we do. Ever since the arrival of Christopher Columbus a culture, a language, religion and values which belong to Europe have been imposed on Latin America by force.’”<sup>6</sup>

Feminist theology was a movement that began during the 1960s. In particular, Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza pushed back against the ‘patriarchal norms’ of the Christian church, which silenced women’s voices through its interpretation of the scriptures. These women theologians read the scriptures through a feminist lens to uncover the patriarchal interpretations of a text that negatively portrayed women. For example, the story of Adam and Eve and the way the story is typically presented - where the ‘Fall of Man’ is Eve’s fault because she listened to the snake. That she tricked the blameless Adam into eating the fruit. Interpretations like this have gone far to condemn and stereotype women as deceptive, sly and not to be trusted. Margaret Atwood, in her book, ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ contains this story: “The mothers have stood the white-veiled girls in place and have returned to their chairs. The Commander continues with the service: “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.” Here he looks us over. “All,” he repeats. “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. “For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”<sup>7</sup>

Around the same time as feminist theologians were finding cracks in the ways the Church had interpreted scripture, another voice was percolating amongst the Latin American countries – the voice of liberation theology which lifted up the rights of the poor. The ‘father’ of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, would be joined by others, Archbishop Oscar Romero being one of them. These theologians read and interpreted texts in a very different manner from what the white Euro-centric Roman Catholic church had brought to their countries. The words of the Magnificat – Mary’s Song – became their rallying cry – “For he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” (Luke 1:52-53)

And in the recent decade, Indigenous, Black, Asian, Korean, and Chinese theologians are bringing their lens of interpretation to “move beyond the “norm” of mainstream readings.”<sup>8</sup> Brandon Robertson notes that LGBT+ theologians are revealing that “our theologies are rooted in the singular perspective of the European, straight, privileged, *man*. Robertson continues, “To

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<sup>5</sup> [Doctrine of Discovery | The United Church of Canada \(united-church.ca\)](https://www.united-church.ca/faith-life/doctrine-of-discovery)

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space* (Eugene: Cascade Press, 2014), 109.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Canada: McClelland & Stewart, 2019), 255-256.

<sup>8</sup> Nestor Medina, Alison Hari-Singh, Hyeran Kim-Cragg, *Reading In-Between: How Minoritized Cultural Communities Interpret the Bible in Canada* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 133.

be faithful to the heart of Jesus' teachings, how can we not be willing to allow the perspectives of the marginalized to inform and change our interpretation of scripture?"<sup>9</sup>

There is a deconstruction going on in the accepted norms of interpretation of the scriptures. It is challenging me to re-examine the ways in which I accept what a text is saying, given that most of the commentaries I read are written by people who have trained in North American theological schools and are mostly white men. My A to Z reading of the scripture has to become a redefined alphabet – where emerging different voices will challenge the interpretations that my Euro-centric tradition has placed within me.

Wehn-in Ng writes, "We need to enrich our reading with new perspectives, knowledge, and insights from fellow minoritized readings, as well as allow those to correct our own shortcomings."<sup>10</sup> Mihee Kim-Kort writes, "What they all show is that the song requires equal and effective voices from those in the center and the margins ... all the voices make the song rich and resonant."<sup>11</sup>

The Word is a *living* entity. It is infused by the breath of the Holy Spirit. It speaks afresh to each heart and mind that hears it, that reads it. No theological school, no church denomination, no preacher, can believe that they have the definitive interpretation of scripture.

For the Word *is* of God. The Word brings delight. The Word brings challenge. The Word brings Life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Brandon Robertson, *True Inclusion: Creating Communities of Radical Embrace* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2018), 68-69.

<sup>10</sup> Medina, Hari-Singh, Kim-Cragg, *Reading In-Between*, 134.

<sup>11</sup> Mihee Kim-Kort, *Making Paper Cranes: Toward an Asian American Feminist Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 94.