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*It is our choice how to observe this season of reckoning.*

### *Injustice Too Loud to Ignore*

Imagine the scene. A Virginia beach in late summer. The air fresh and bright. Imagine the ship on the horizon and, below the water line, the darkness, the stench in the hull. Twenty-plus persons shackled, weak, exhausted, sick, scared. Ripped from their homes and from their people, these many weeks on the sea an unthinkable, endless nightmare. Imagine their cramped bodies painfully unfolding as they emerged into the light to a new world, nothing left of life as they once knew it.

So began a story no one likes to tell. We can catalog the horrors that followed. Finally in today's modern times we have books, movies, TV shows, courses and the news which furnish details never taught to many of us in school when facts were glossed over lest they frighten us.

This very day, 400 years ago, set in motion systems of power and injustice so complex and ingrained in this society that the struggle to understand – nevermind rid the world of them and heal – is mighty.

What we can do on a sunny day, exactly 400 years later, is *relate* to this most somber of milestones. We can reach within, each one of us, for a connection to this old story. Though disappointed that it didn't make the news this morning, I think everyone should know about today's milestone. Without exception. In the coming weeks, we need to tell our friends, our siblings, strangers about it.

When I read last week that, in fact, *this date*, August 25<sup>th</sup>, was the very day in history that our awful story began all those years ago, it felt like an opportunity. A chance to go there in a meaningful way. I told two strangers about it yesterday and hope they told someone. We should make a season of telling.

Why? To make it come alive. To do this milestone justice, we have to go beyond studying it to living it.

Last August, Mindi Fullilove and her daughter Molly led a Community Evening here called "400 Years of Inequality." They challenged us to make time in the year ahead to consider inequality in its many forms, locally and far away. Our Fellowship's board made that a goal, and this year we've touched on many issues of human rights – in worship, in Community Evenings, in vigils in front of our building, in books we've read.

A year out, we've arrived at this milestone. It's up to us, all of us, to be curious and open as we observe, as a group, not just this day, but this season of reckoning. We begin this morning less with words and ideas and more with our own personal reactions. We have lit candles for the souls in the hull of that ship and for those in the hundreds of ships that followed. Candles for nameless, faceless men, women and children, though we know enough to *imagine* the sound of

their cries, to feel their aching bones, their bewilderment and misery and fear. We know enough to wonder, how did they keep going? It's hard enough for us to keep going at times, after all.

Today, in this season of reckoning, let us make room to respond deep within. "You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting," wrote Mary Oliver. "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves./Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine."

We can *know* about something for a long time. Sometimes knowledge stops there – facts and figures and history residing in our logical left brain. Other times, what we know gets under our skin and takes up residence in us. It changes us. Some might say it saves us.

My many years of living have offered me countless opportunities to change, but the truth is that for far too long I viewed the evils of slavery, the web of systemic racism and white supremacy from a distance, as if separated from real seeing, much less doing anything about it. We can be clueless about how our own experiences and stories relate to the bigger picture.

And you never know what will change you. A turning point came for me when I read African-American Ta Nahisi Coate's beautiful little book, *Between the World and Me*, a letter to his young son about growing up black in America. Coates described a simple thing: what it's like for him to go out into the world everyday. Every time he leaves his home, he said, heading out the apartment door and down the steps to the sidewalk, he carries with him a large measure of fear and vigilance, every day armed against the world. Every day, because of the color of his skin here in this country.

That image shifted my landscape forever. It also shined a bright light on my relative cluelessness, cluelessness not only about the fears and burdens of being a person of color in America, but about the strong wind I've enjoyed at my back from the start. Privilege, to be sure, and also cluelessness about the unearned ease and feeling of uncomplicated safety that comes with living here in white skin.

I'm grateful for having randomly come across that image of leaving home scared. Despite studying anti-racism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism, despite having lived a long time, that image helped me start to connect my dots. To hear anew dinner table conversations with my parents and siblings about my sister's black boyfriend in high school or our brother's black roommate in college – headlines in our house. I now recall anew what felt like anger from the girls down the hall in college ("Black is Beautiful"), and in later years shock at the southern planter heritage of the person I would marry, and only just this past year, our daughter's waking up in grad school to new understandings that have shifted her priorities and life goals forever.

We ride a continuum of awareness about race. It consumes some of us – lives at the top of our minds, front and center. Others of us spend relatively little time in the quagmire that white supremacy has wrought in this country. I was surprised a couple of years ago at how few churches, locally, were addressing white supremacy on Sunday. Why would we do that here in New Hampshire, someone asked.

Today is about connecting our dots. Using our imagination – the experiencing, feeling right hemisphere – to find resonance between what happened that day on a beach 400 years ago and our own stories – stories of growing up, going to school, serving in the military, working, having kids, nieces, nephews, grandchildren.

Today is about noticing what comes up for us when we look at these flickering flames. When we sing someone else's sacred song. Today is about noticing what comes alive within when we connect with lyrics and music that tell the story. Listen!

Recording: "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," known as the Black national anthem. Poem by James Weldon Johnson, 1900; music by his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, 1905. This rendition was performed by Davóne Tines at the 2019 Harvard University Commencement. Listen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxEPQiFUiiY>