

Feb 4, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: Isaiah 40: 21-31; Matthew 11: 28-30

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“It is better to die for an idea that lives, than to live for ideas that die.” So said Steven Biko, founder of the Black Consciousness Movement during the days of apartheid [in South Africa]. He understood. He spoke so eloquently, that the chains of oppression are here [pointing to the brain]. They're in our minds, and what oppressors always want to do is to control the minds—and in apartheid South Africa that meant that black people were meant to see themselves through the eyes of white people. *'You see, black friends, you're nobody. You account for nothing. You are inferior. You were born to be a slave. You don't matter. You're weak. You're helpless. Give up now.'* And once you've done that to a human being, they become very submissive. Oh, angry, and filled with hate, sure, but submissive to power.

You ever think we get those kinds of messages in our society? Or is it only other people on the planet? Can we recognize them—when they are browbeating us down? Why are we so weary and tired? Hmm, haven't we got it all? And we know the gap??, don't we? That's what this is all about this morning, all kinds of gaps right here.

Our friend, Tshenu Farisani, was a member of the inner circle of Biko's Black Consciousness Movement. Get that, okay? He was on the inside of that circle, and he began to take this insight and wisdom into theology and its study, into church and practice, into worship and prayer, and especially into Partnership, because he knew we need to be as liberated as the people in South Africa. We need to be set free.

Mogopa was a little village in South Africa [near Ventersdorp, North West Province] back in the day, which was being destroyed by the apartheid government for no reason, no reason. A bulldozer just simply coming in, taking down half the homes, the Community Center and the School—gone—and the next day they're going to destroy the rest of the village. So the villagers gathered that night for prayer—all-night prayer. They had nothing else but prayer—because the next day they were going to be scattered, they knew not where. (Imagine never seeing any of our friends here again, for no reason at all.) And deep into the prayer, after midnight, one of the elders stood up and said, *'God, thank you for loving us so much—for loving us so much.'*

You see that old man, and Biko, and Tshenu were praying, and acting, and living in the spirit of Isaiah, who said, *'Have you not heard? Has it not registered who our God is—the One whose wisdom is beyond all fathoming. The Holy One looks down at the princes of the earth, sees mere nothings, looks at those rulers of power and might, and knows they are mere emptiness. They, like the people of the earth, scatter about like grasshoppers, hopping this way and that, flailing away, not knowing where they're going.'* [Isaiah 40: 21-23] Do not fear those who kill the body; fear those who kill the body and the soul. That's who's dangerous. Who's doing that to us?

Our God has come to set us free here and now—not in the afterlife—come to set us free.

The powers over us have been broken. That's what the Gospel is about. The powers which seek to control, and dominate, and oppress our lives and our friends, those powers have been broken. Now, are there consequences? You better believe there are consequences.

That's what the world is always trying to tell us: *'Stand back. Don't get involved. Be cool, but do nothing. Don't live your own lives. Don't claim who you are. Don't think you are somebody. Just stay low and off the radar and get by.'* (Can I get an Amen?)
'...lower, lower, disappear. The important ones don't act up.'

The heart of our faith used to set us free, free to live the lives we've been given as whole people in community. It is better to die for ideas, for grace, for Gospel that live than for us to live for ideas that died.

The power over Steven Biko was broken, chains of oppression broken. But when the day came that he was arrested, thrown in jail, kept naked and chained to the wall, tormented, and tortured, and, eventually, the [South African] government said he caused his own brain damage. (Ha, mercy!) So, then he rotted in his jail for five days naked, chained to the wall without medical help. And then, they decided, 'We'll take him to the hospital.' They put him in the back of a van—furniture removed, of course—naked, chained to the van, not the local hospital—750 miles away in Pretoria—oh, I guess he was 'Dead on Arrival'.

This is how fearful the princes of this world are—terrified by one being telling the truth. These are the odds. Terrified.

That old man in Mogapa? He lost his village. And the prophet Isaiah, like all good prophets, is killed.

Powers over us—the powers of sin and evil and death—have been broken. That's what the crucified Christ, and that resurrecting compassion is all about. It has broken those powers. But the cost remains heavy, doesn't it? A crucified Christ—the crucified path of love before us.

The powers over Gandhi were broken. The British, the greatest Empire on the planet, voluntarily walked out. He knew the people of India were free. He made it happen—and paid the price.

Martin Luther King set people free, and he told us, *'All wars are games of profit for the powerful.'* We don't want to hear it. He paid the price—made it to the mountaintop, but not the Promised Land.

James Baldwin, he could see through the ignorance in the arrogance of white supremacy. Do you know that he never hated white people, because the first person to awaken his heart and mind was a white woman at the library. *'I think you'd like this book; have you read this book?'* You see, the gap is closed. His heart was touched; he could never bring himself to hate white people. How close we are—[or] can be.

And the powers over us have been broken as well. This is what we're celebrating in Baptism, friends. It's not a 'naming ritual'. We immerse even our children and the elders into the death of

Christ and that resurrecting love. It's our first death—celebrating that the power of sin, death, and evil has been broken. Now how should we live our lives? How shall we mature into becoming creative beings.

'Do you reject the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the people and creatures of God?' 'Yes we do, with God's help.' At every Baptism we say that, so that with mutual encouragement, we enter the energy which creates new life, community, beauty, truth-telling, compassion. It's what we need. It's what the world needs.

'Have you not heard? Do you not know the vastness of God's wisdom for us, the whole cosmos given us without asking?'

Oh, I forgot. We're tired. *'Whew! If you'd only known what my last week was like!'*

We are so weary. And we are (some with good cause)—but *"God does not grow weary. Young people stumble and fall (have you ever noticed that) and they get older, and they get weary—but not God. [Isaiah 40: 28b-39]*

God is always there for us, to keep setting us free, to keep breaking those powers, to open our hearts to the new possibilities of who we are becoming—not even the big agendas—to live the love that we've been given.

"Come to me," Jesus says, *"all you who are weary, and I'll give you rest. Take up my yoke, the yoke of freedom, because it's easy. Pick up my burden, the burden of compassion, because it is light."* [Matthew 11: 28-30]

Mother Pollard was an elder in the community of Montgomery, Alabama, senior member of the church. And she, like everyone else, was participating in the Montgomery Bus Boycott all those years ago. elderly woman. For weeks and months, she had been walking because those buses were a symbol of oppression, and nobody was getting on them. And here she is, poverty-stricken, and, by our standards uneducated, a true nobody on the planet. But she understood what was happening. A reporter came to her one day, after the Boycott been going on for months, and asked, 'Mother Pollard, aren't you tired of walking everywhere?' And she said, *'My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.'*

God, thank you for loving us so much. Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.