

Patience and Prophetic Impatience

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 by Patty Friesen (Sept.29/19)

On a muggy June morning in South Carolina, a young black woman named Bree Newsome scaled the thirty-foot flagpole outside the state's capitol building and removed its Confederate flag. As police and protestors shouted at her from the ground, Newsome, just thirty years old and wearing a helmet and harness, shouted back, "In the name of Jesus, this flag has to come down. You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today."

Ten days earlier, white supremacist Dylan Roof had walked into a prayer service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston and after sitting among the congregants for nearly an hour, pulled a handgun from his bag. He killed nine people, including the minister. In pictures on his website, Roof posed with symbols of white supremacy and neo-Nazism, including the Confederate flag, so the massacre had reopened a debate among lawmakers about removing the flag from statehouse grounds.

But as the conversation droned on, and some white citizens pushed back against the potential change, Newsome's spirit grew restless. That flag had flown over the state when her fourth great grandparents were enslaved there. It had been reprinted over the statehouse in 1962 in defiance of the civil rights movement. Those white stars and blue bars had appeared at countless Ku Klux Klan rallies and lynchings over the decades before they made it to the back of Dylan Roof's car as a vanity plate. That flag was more than just a flag.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Newsome later recalled. “I sat awake in the dead of night. All the ghosts of the past seemed to be rising.”

Unwilling to wait through yet another round of bureaucracy, Newsome collaborated with other activists to formulate a plan of protest designed for maximum visual impact. Newsome scaled the flagpole at the beginning of the protest and the resulting photo of Newsome clinging to the flagpole with the dislocated Confederate flag in her fist went viral. She was arrested but by the time bond was posted, the protest had inspired a movement. The act of civil disobedience put pressure on state officials to remove the flag permanently, which happened, at least, on July 10, 2015 - 150 years after the Confederacy lost the Civil War and after Bree Newsome lost patience.

While patience is a fruit of the Spirit in the New Testament with relation to how Christians relate to each other in church, in the Old Testament there is God sanctioned impatience. In today’s reading Jeremiah isn’t a prophet known for his patience. Jeremiah uses shocking images to wake his audience up to the spiritual realities around them and the kings are always trying to shut him up by throwing him in prison. At the time of this story, Jeremiah is in King Zedekiah’s prison for preaching that Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians.

Israel has already been split into Israel the northern kingdom and Judah the southern kingdom. Israel the northern kingdom with its capital in Shechem has been invaded by Assyria and Judah with its capital in Jerusalem is now surrounded by Babylon and it is Jeremiah’s job to try to turn things around. So far he has bought a pot at the potter’s house and smashed it to show what will happen if Israel’s political and religious leadership does not enact justice. Then poor Jeremiah took a vow of celibacy

because there was no hope of marriage or children for him in Judah's future. He walked around with a yoke to show Judah's King Zedekiah to submit to Babylon's yoke and survive and not rebel and be completely destroyed.

The clincher prophetic act for Jeremiah, is in chapter 13 when God tells Jeremiah to buy a loincloth or in modern language underwear and wear it. Then God told Jeremiah to bury his underwear. So Jeremiah did and then God told him to dig up his underwear and he did but it was in shreds and good for nothing. The point of this dramatic act was as God told Jeremiah, "I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. This people who refuse to hear my words and who stubbornly follow their own will and follow other gods to serve them shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing."

It is the vocation of the prophet to keep imagination alive, wrote Walter Brueggemann in his landmark book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one. The prophets are moved to describe the world differently according to the gifts of their insight. And they are impatient for it to be so.

Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel owns a field at Anathoth, outside the Northeast wall of Jerusalem, land allotted to the Tribe of Benjamin which is now occupied by the Babylonian army. By Jewish law - if a relative is in financial trouble, the most senior male family member must buy the land in order to keep it in the family. It was called the law of redemption - redeeming land to keep in the clan. Cousin Hanamel comes to Jeremiah and asks him to buy the plot. It is useless with the Babylonian army sitting on it and cannot be farmed. For Jeremiah, it is like buying a slough in Laird - useless

property and a foolish investment. Actually it is worse than that because in chapter 11 the people of Anathoth tried to kill Jeremiah so my guess is they wouldn't be too happy with him being a neighbour. But Jeremiah knows this is the word of the Lord as a sign of hope and an opportunity for prophetic drama.

So he counts out 17 shekels of silver and summons his trusted companion Baruch to his place of confinement, along with a number of other friends, the witnesses. Jeremiah conducts the transfer of ownership in a dramatic fashion. Elaborate steps are taken to render highly visible the exchange of money and the execution of the necessary legal documents. Then in a commanding voice, now familiar to many in Jerusalem, the prophet orders Baruch to store the documents in a place where they will be safe indefinitely in an earthenware jar. This reminds us of the precious Dead Sea scrolls containing the gospels that were stored in an earthenware jar for several thousand years and discovered in 1948.

The city is soon to fall; Jeremiah himself has said so on the authority of God. But judgment is not the final word. Beyond judgment, beyond the justice of God there is restoration, mercy, salvation! Destruction will not prevail but God's compassion will and Jeremiah and all of Judah will return one day from their exile and Jeremiah will dig up that earthenware jar and claim his land deed in Anathoth.

This burial of the land deed is an enactment of death like a funeral. It bears mourning for what God hoped for in relationship with Judah. It takes the death of what was in order for a resurrection of what will be - a new heart and a new covenant, a new beginning. In the meantime, Jeremiah will continue with prophetic acts of impatient hope for that day. Jesus does not sound patient when he announces, "The Spirit of the

Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. The Spirit has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4). Bree Newsome's impatience for a new day for racial equality in South Carolina led her to climb a flagpole. The indigenous movement for racial equality in Canada is called by the impatient title: Idle No More. Young Mennonites who are gay grew impatient as they waited for the Being a Faithful Church Process to unanimously approve their lifelong commitment to another person, which they knew would never happen so they performed a prophet act by having a wedding in a Mennonite Church.

There is a time for patience and a time for prophetic impatience. May we hear God's call as we discern the path. Let us pray...

Gentle God, you have come near to us and have shown us your patience, compassion and love. As we go, O God, give us patience when people are indifferent to your Word, give us compassion for the needs of the world, and give us love which reflects your forgiveness and grace, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.