**We are a Sign**

**Lent I February 21, 2021**

Genesis 9: 8-17 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Mark 1: 9-15

This week we begin the season of Lent, 40 days of spiritual and self-reflection to deepen our relationship with God. It reflects the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness discerning his ministry, and being tempted about what kind of leader he was going to be. There are many kinds of wilderness and as we approach the one-year anniversary of this pandemic and being online for worship, there are many elements of our lives that can feel like wilderness. Has the whole past year felt like a wilderness? Some ministers reflected that last years’ Lent felt like the Lentiest Lent, we have ever experienced. For some however, everyday life can feel like a wilderness, a challenge that never ends. As we continue to mark Black History Month, let us acknowledge that living with racism day to day is very much a wilderness experience. For those of us who are white, it can be hard to fathom how difficult this can be. When we read Austin Channing Brown’s I’m Still Here, Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness, in the craft/study group last year, I was struck by a section where she described her day and the number of experiences of racism she described. It is a little long, but it is such an important understanding that I share her whole experience with you here and give her voice to most of my time this morning.

Here’s how all this plays out if you’re a Black woman trying to survive in a culture of professional whiteness:

8:55 am: I arrive at work and walk through the lobby to get to my office. On the way, I am asked three times if I need help finding the outreach center. My white co-worker, whose footsteps I hear behind me, is never asked this question. *The message: I am a Black woman, so I must be poor and in heed of help.*

8:58am: I set my purse down in my cubicle. The white co-worker who was walking behind me stares in shock. She has never seen me with my hair in a pineapple fro. She reaches out to touch my hair while telling me how beautiful it is. When I pull back, startled by the sudden act of intimacy, she looks hurt and isn’t sure what to do next. *The message: I am different, exotic. Anyone should have the right to my body in exchange for a compliment.*

9:58am: An hour later, I am asked to see my supervisor. When I get to her office she asks me shut the door. She tells me she received a note saying that I made someone uncomfortable when they were just trying to be friendly and kind. She suggests that I work on being more of a team player, and not be so closed off. I look at her incredulously. I now wonder if this is just about the one co-worker, or if my supervisor gets e-mails about me every week from awkward white people. *The message: I am responsible for the feelings of white people and my boss will not defend me from these accusations.*

10:05am: I attempt to respond, but before I can finish, my supervisor asks if I don’t mind changing my tone a bit. I sound angry and she was trying to be helpful, trying to make sure I can stay here long-term. I mumble something about my own frustrations, but they are dismissed with a wave of her hand and a promise to work with me. *The message: My tone will be interpreted as angry, even if I’m just feeling hurt or misunderstood. My actual feelings are irrelevant and could be used a reason to fire me.*

12:00 noon: It’s lunchtime now, and I desperately need to talk to my girlfriends in another department. I find a seat among this group of women of colour who use the lunch break to offer support and encouragement to one another. After talking with them for a little bit, I feel like I can breathe again. Even though we don’t work in the same departments, they are the reason I’ve survived this long. I return to my office.

1:00pm: I have a project due at the end of the week, so I put on my headphones to block out the office noise while I work. Another team member comes to my door. “Austin, Can I talk to you for a second?” “Sure”, I respond. “I noticed that you wear your headphones a lot in the office,” she says. “It sometimes feels like you don’t want to be around us.” I take a deep breath. Because we work in cubicles, many of us wear headphones when we need to focus. Mine aren’t on more often than anyone else’s. *The message: My body is being scrutinized in ways that others are not subjected to, and the worst is being assumed of me.*

1:05pm: I respond to the co-worker but quickly turn the conversation to the project we’re working on together, hoping to discuss the changes I made that morning. Thirty minutes into the conversation, I realize I am answering questions about Black music, a news segment on “urban violence” she saw the other night, and something her adopted Black nephew said the other day. She emphasizes the word *black,* clearly not used to saying the word. I am tired. I am not sure what led us here. *The message: I am here to educate my white co-workers when they are confused about a racial issue in their lives.*

1:40pm: I take a deep breath. “hey, I need to stretch my legs. I’m going to get some coffee, you want anything?” I don’t like coffee, but I will get some anyway, if it helps end the conversation.

1:50pm: Standing in the line at the coffee shop next door, I quickly notice a man who stopped me in the hallway and referred to me as “colored”. He had come to one session of my Tuesday night class on race and thought it appropriate to pepper me with questions about Blackness (well, “coloredness”) since he’d decided not to continue coming. Rather than answer his questions on the spot, I’d told him he should come back to the class. But now here he is behind me. Maybe he won’t speak up, or maybe he’ll think he has me confused with another Black person. He doesn’t say anything, but my body is stiff with anticipatory tension.

2:07pm: As soon as I get my coffee and turn toward the door, it happens. Someone I have never met insists that she emailed me and can’t wait to chat more. She is right that we work at the same organization, but I have never seen this woman. “I think you have me confused with someone else,” I say. She insists I am wrong. “Oh no, don’t you remember…” I stare at her blankly , my warm coffee reminding me that I am not in the sunken place. I let her finish, then I repeat slowly, “I think you have me confused with someone else.” The explanation continues until I am given enough information to know which Black person she has me confused with. “Nope, that’s not me. You’re talking about Tina, in the communications department. She is amazing you two will have a good talk, I’m sure.” Her eyes grow wide, embarrassment climbing her face. “I’m so sorry, I have to run!” I say, before the apologies get messy. *The message: My body, my person is not distinct; I am interchangeable with all other Black women.*

2:17pm: I’m back in my office; preparing for an afternoon staff meeting in which I will give a short presentation. I feel good about my content – I’ve worked hard on it, knowing my perspective is often different from my co-workers’ – but my heart still beats fast. How will I be received by my team?

2:30pm: I’m in the staff meeting. I give my eight minute spiel. There is a pause, and then some pushback. I knew this was a possibility, so I hear them out, trying not to form a response as they speak. Another co-worker pipes in before I can respond: “I think what Austin is trying to say is…” Suddenly everyone is nodding in agreement even though I’m pretty sure she repeated me almost word for word. *The message: I need white approval and interpretation before my idea will be considered good.*

3:30pm: The meeting has closed, and some co-workers race back to their cubicles. Even though I am behind on e-mails, I know that I must stay and chat. If I race back to my cubicle it will be interpreted as me being antisocial. I stick around and make small talk, leaving with another co-worker so that my body doesn’t stand out. 3:40pm: I’m back in my office. I glance at the clock. There are still two more hours in the day.

These are the daily annoyances, the subtle messages of whiteness.

These daily annoyances are what racial theory calls micro-aggressions. Small annoyances based on racial bias, that when added up, really weigh a person down. Austin talks about Black women developing life hacks to survive. Things such as helping one another write e-mails to supervisors or co-workers which they know will be scrutinized for tone; keeping folders in in-boxes of all praise and support for their work, not for their own self esteem but as an insurance policy because they know there are e-mails sent to bosses saying the opposite; and finding cohorts of support, people who are safe to talk to and debrief with. These realities are the result of 400 years of oppression, enslavement, genocide, and colonization. Any assumptions we have about a group of people need to take these realities into account.

Our scripture reading today takes place following the genocidal flood. In it, we hear about the Covenant God makes with all of creation following the flood. God realizes that this genocidal flood was a mistake and promises to never do it again. That’s right, God made a mistake and changed God’s mind. This covenant is sealed with a reminder of the rainbow, that anytime there is rainbow we are reminded of God’s promise, that life is valuable and not to be destroyed. As followers of God, we are to be the sign of that rainbow as well - living out God’s love for all creatures, for all people, for all races, and all diversity.

In the gospels we find Jesus as the rainbow personified. He was the sign that God is present and showed us that God is our advocate not our adversary.

We are the sign of the rainbow as well.

When we challenge the racist ideas and policies that diminish life for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, we are the rainbow.

When we commit ourselves to understanding white supremacy, white privilege and the cost is has on all of us, we are the rainbow.

When we are open to hearing other people’s stories and experiences, especially those who are different from us, we are the rainbow.

When we support one another as we move through this pandemic, through calls and grocery runs, and helping those in need, we are the rainbow.

When we support those who are lonely or grieving, we are the rainbow.

When we show more concern for the lives of others, rather than the success of business or profits, we are the rainbow.

When we support changes to address climate change and care for the earth, we are the rainbow.

As we move through this Lenten season, may we find ways to be the sign of love and hope in midst of the challenges and despair we and others may feel. May we remember God’s rainbow promise of hope and care for all of creation, and may we be the sign as well of that hope and love.