

Sankofa: Looking Back to Move Forward

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Guest Preacher

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Sources: Psalm 147

Praise the LORD!

How good it is to sing praises to our God;

for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

The LORD builds up Jerusalem;

he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

He heals the broken-hearted,

and binds up their wounds.

He determines the number of the stars;

he gives to all of them their names.

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;

his understanding is beyond measure.

The LORD lifts up the downtrodden;

he casts the wicked to the ground.

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;

make melody to our God on the lyre.

He covers the heavens with clouds,

prepares rain for the earth,

makes grass grow on the hills.

He gives to the animals their food,

and to the young ravens when they cry.

His delight is not in the strength of the horse,

nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;

but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,

in those who hope in his steadfast love.

Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!

Praise your God, O Zion!

For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.
He grants peace within your borders;
he fills you with the finest of wheat.
He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
He hurls down hail like crumbs—
who can stand before his cold?
He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.
He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and ordinances to Israel.
He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his ordinances.
Praise the LORD!

February is Black History month which is a time to acknowledge and recognize the contributions of peoples of African descent in Canada and the world. However when examining Black history, we see that it has been marred with violence, oppression, abuse, enslavement, discrimination, exploitation, and colonization. What can be learned from a past that is rife with such challenges, some of which still persist to this day?

I was particularly inspired by one of the scriptures that was read this morning.

The LORD is rebuilding Jerusalem

and bringing the exiles back to Israel. Psalm 147:2

This is a verse which evokes hope in a people. The Israelites, a group which had long since been oppressed, colonized, and enslaved was being promised by the Lord a return to a rebuilt homeland. After years of living in exile, years I imagine that were filled with suffering, anguish, and anticipation, the Israelites were being summoned to

Jerusalem. In essence, they were asked not to give up on that place, the past from which they came.

Like the Israelites, Black people have a place to go back to which can be both literal and figurative. A literal return may mean a return to Africa as many groups have historically done including the Jamaican Maroons via Halifax, ti-Bom people from Brazil, freed American slaves, and Rastafarians to Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, and Ethiopia respectively. Edifying an African past and mass return to the homeland was a greatly influential message of the late orator, journalist, publisher, and entrepreneur, Marcus Mosiah Garvey. Born in 1887 in St. Ann's, Jamaica, the parish my parents come from, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914. By 1920, the association had over 1,900 divisions in more than 40 countries. In fact, there was a UNIA chapter on Augusta Avenue in Kensington Market right here in Toronto. Garvey's ideas influenced many future visionaries and activists including the first president of the newly independent Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah and African-American Muslim minister and human rights activist Malcolm X.

Figuratively, however, the returning to a homeland can take on a myriad of meanings. Among these interpretations, I understand it to mean a return to the past. As I read the scripture, I was reminded of the Sankofa. According to the African American Studies website at the University of Illinois at Springfield, Sankofa in the Akan language is: "se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki" which literally translated means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot." Or "We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today." They go on to say "whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone, or been stripped of can be revived, reclaimed, preserved, and perpetuated." Most Akan peoples live in what is now Ghana and the Ivory Coast in West Africa and include the Ashanti who make up most of Canada's Ghanaian immigrants. The Sankofa is also an Adinkra symbol. Adinkra symbols have been historically used to communicate a concept or thought. The Adinkra symbol for Sankofa is a bird whose body is facing forward and head is backward as you can see on the cover of your church bulletin. Often, the bird may have an egg in its beak, symbolizing the future. According to www.people.tribe.net, some may interpret Sankofa to mean no matter how far away one travels, they must always return home. One's past is an important aspect of one's future and although it is advancing, the bird makes it a point of checking behind it periodically. On the other hand, our modern culture often promotes moving forward and not looking at the past. Unlike the fable of the "Tortoise and the Hare", when the

hare loses the race by looking back at the slow tortoise, he becomes lazy and overconfident by his lead, hence the losing the race. The Sankofa insists that looking back is necessary for advancement.

Although I am a Canadian-born of Black Jamaican parents, I have sometimes wondered "what can I return to?" Although I do have some German and possibly Irish and/or Scottish ancestry, I am mostly of African origin as evident through my features and I identify as Black and society sees me as Black. Since slavery in Jamaica and the rest of the Americas involved the transport of millions of Africans, records, traditions, languages, and customs have been "lost, forgotten, forgone, or stripped" and truths have been distorted. I do not quite know where in Africa my ancestors came from. I try to guess from what I know of the ethnic groups that were brought to Jamaica. I scan and compare the faces of my family members and relatives with continental Africans – could my ancestors be Yoruba, Malinke, one of the Akan groups like the Ashanti or Koromanti, or a combination of the four? However, I do see that few parts of Africa still exist in very tangible ways – certain words from Africa like pickney and oonoo, African foods like ackee, plantains, and yams, practices like burying a baby's umbilical cord and in songs with polyphonic rhythms and "call and response" persist to this day but these are few and far between. There are also elements of an African spiritual tradition that remain. What is left to "revive, reclaim, and perpetuate"?

Black History Month was begun as Negro History Week by historian Carter G. Woodson in 1926. Carter G. Woodson was born in Virginia in 1875 in a large, poor family, a child of former slaves. He missed a lot of school and so he self-instructed until he was about 17 years old when he went on to earn a living as a coal miner. He returned to high school at the age of 20 and completed his diploma in two years. He went on to become a teacher, attend university, and eventually earn a doctorate from Harvard University, in 1912, the second African-American to do so. He eventually became a professor at Howard University. Recognizing a lack and misrepresentation of the role of Blacks in American history, he devoted his time to research the past of African Americans. He began the scholarly publication of the Journal of Negro History in 1916. His goal was to educate the American people about African-American history, focusing on African Americans' cultural backgrounds and reputable achievements. "Negro History Week", the second week in February, commemorated the birthdays of the late former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the late president Abraham Lincoln. Even though the reality for most American Blacks at that

time was dismal, Woodson still saw the importance of a Negro History Week. Eventually, the week was extended to a full month including all of February in the United States. The Ontario Black History Society initiated the first formal celebration of Black History Month in Canada with the City of Toronto in 1978.

A knowledge of Black firsts is helpful in deconstructing the present reality and going forth into the future. Often during Black History Month, we learn about a lot of heroes. Keeping in mind that slavery was only abolished in the United States in December 1865 and lasted into the 1830s in Canada, many of these heroes lived during the nineteenth century during the Reconstruction period, a time when the United States was faced with the challenge of a divided country both North and South, Black and white.

Elijah McCoy was born in 1844 in Colchester, Ontario, the child of fugitive slaves who escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad and returned to Michigan to resettle. At the age of 15, Elijah travelled to Edinburgh, Scotland for an apprenticeship to become a mechanical engineer. When he returned to Michigan, he could only find work as an oiler and fireman for the Michigan Central Railroad. Elijah did not let the discrimination of the time or the lack of access to jobs in his field stop him. He applied his specialized skills in a shop at home where he invented a lubricating cup to oil the steam engines of ships and locomotives. Patented on July 12, 1872, the lubricating cup technology was his first of 57 subsequent inventions. Essentially, the lubricating cup was replicated by others but no copies could work as well as McCoy's patented invention hence the reason we still say the "Real McCoy" when we want the real thing and no imitations.

In 1823, Mary Ann Shadd was born to free Blacks in Delaware. Her father, who was a shoemaker, had been a key figure in the Underground Railroad and sales of an abolitionist newspaper. Shadd Cary received six years of education and in 1850, when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in the United States and the threat of enslaving free Blacks and escaped slaves was apparent, Mary Ann moved with her brother to Windsor, Ontario. While there, she opened a racially integrated school. In 1853, Mary Ann Shadd Cary became the first woman in North America to publish a newspaper with the co-founding of the Provincial Freeman. In 1860, after her husband's death, she moved with her children back to the United States. In Indiana, she was a recruiting officer for the Union Army during the Civil War. She continued to teach in schools in Delaware and then she moved to Washington, D.C. where, at the age of 60,

she graduated from law school at Howard University in 1883, becoming the second Black woman to have a law degree at the time. Shadd Cary became involved in the suffragette movement and became the first Black woman to vote in a United States election. She passed away in 1893 but her legacy still lives on as many of her descendants still live in Ontario.

The knowledge of these historical figures and accomplishments remind us to continue to strive for better. According to University of Toronto Professor George Dei, "a 1993 report on the old Toronto school board found that the graduation rates for black students was 44 per cent and the dropout rate 42 per cent." As a result of this startling fact and systemic discrimination in the school system, there have been groups of concerned parents and community members who have lobbied for a school that is focused on the needs of Black students. The advocates refused to accept these abysmal statistics as fact. A knowledge and history of achievement, heroes, and the potential and brilliance of Black people meant that Black students could do much better and must do much better. 42% was not good enough.

Finally in September 2009, the Africentric Alternative school opened its doors in order to meet the needs of Black students and I was part of its inaugural staff. The summer prior to the opening, I spent several weeks preparing, envisioning, purchasing books, setting up my classroom, meeting with staff, and reading work by Black educators. I asked myself questions, namely: What would an African-centred approach to education look like in a Canadian classroom in the 21st century? What curriculum would be taught so that Black students would be more successful?

By looking at the past and studying the contributions of the Marcus Garveys, Elijah McCoys and Mary Ann Shadd Carys to the world and even going back further to the practices of the Ancient Egyptians, Zulu warriors, and kingdoms of Timbuktu and Benin, children learn about the successes of Black people. At the school, we teach the children the Nguzo Saba or the Seven Principles developed by Dr. Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa, an annual seven day cultural celebration. Dr. Karenga describes the Nguzo Saba as being "a communitarian African philosophy," consisting of "the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world." The seven principles are: unity, self-determination, collective-work and responsibility, co-operative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. African ancestors have valued and implemented these concepts historically and traditionally. If you think of Marcus Garvey, Elijah McCoy, and Mary Ann Shadd, they have each applied many of the

Nguzo Saba principles to their work. For example, Elijah McCoy applied self-determination, purpose, and creativity to his inventions. While Mary Ann Shadd Cary also applied these as well as collective work and responsibility, unity, and co-operative economics when opening schools, advocating for women's voting rights, and enlisting Blacks for military service during the Civil War. The goal in teaching these concepts to the children at the Africentric School is to develop resilience, a strong sense of self, high expectations, and constructive critical capabilities. We want the students to overcome challenges such as negative stereotypes, misrepresentations in the media, and racism, develop social responsibility, and become successful.

Many people turn to reading the Bible and other ancient scriptures to understand their present realities. Throughout my life, going back to the past has provided me with a way of navigating through the present. Sometimes when I am having a difficult time making a decision about my future, I will go through my diaries. Over the course of my 34 years, I have accumulated almost forty diaries, if you include the ones that were lost or destroyed – from my teddy bear and flower-covered diary in sixth grade to my velvety chocolate journal filled with tales from my 2003 tour of films across Canada. In 2004, I created a visioning book full of sketches, pictures, quotes, and reflections. Going back to read these books helps me to put my present in perspective. I am reminded about all of my past dreams and aspirations, especially when times get really tough. As I went through my cancer journey last year, I was reminded of the strength and faith that I had through many obstacles before the illness and I could get through this one too.

The verse in Psalms, the Sankofa, the heroes, and the Nguzo Saba remind us that amidst the things that were left behind, "lost, forgotten forgone, or been stripped of", there is something to learn. The past must be reconsidered, revived, and reclaimed, and we can discern what can be preserved and perpetuated for the lessons they can teach us today. Throughout the history, there is a theme of overcoming great obstacles to strive for success. Possessing this knowledge of the past can be quite liberating and so this may also lend to why February is also called African Liberation Month. Black History is a living reality, full of knowledge of the past which creates a more positive future.

I close with this verse from the Black national anthem "Lift Every Voice" by James Weldon Johnson, which is sung daily at the Africentric School:

Sing a song full of the faith
that the past has taught us.
Sing a song full of the hope
that the present has brought us;
facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.