

A Vision of Home

150TH Homecoming Celebration, September 8, 2019

Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips



*I looked over Jordan and what did I see ...
A band of angels coming after me,
coming for to carry me home.*

While this song about home may be familiar to all of us, it comes uniquely out of the African-American experience of slavery that began 400 years ago in North America.

There are conversations in that community about what this vision of home is. Is it a longing for Mother Africa? Is it the language of the Underground Railroad coming for to carry slaves north to a new home in Canada? Is it a cry for deliverance from the brutality of slavery to the freedom of a heavenly home?

I would not presume to know. What I do know is that the great African-American theologian, James Cone, says: "... what appeared to be longing for the afterlife in spirituals was actually a covert way of talking about freedom in this life."

Home wasn't a location as much as it is a subversive vision for what the world could – and should - be. As Dr. Hunter says, it's a vision we carry in our hearts.

And it is that vision that is deeply embedded in the soul of this community we have called Seattle First Baptist Church for 150 years.

It's what makes us not be able to celebrate our pioneer ancestors without recognizing that the land they settled and called "home" was already someone else's home. It reminds us that sometimes our vision of home can blind us to the reality of other people's lives.

Isn't that what "not in my backyard" is all about? That our vision of home disqualifies the reality of our unhoused neighbors?

Isn't that what's happening on the southern border right now? We are in the grip of a government whose vision of home turns a blind eye to the suffering of women and men and children who are, according to the biblical vision of home, members of our own family.

Isn't that what is happening when parents throw their gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender children out of the house?

Sometimes our vision of home can blind us to the realities of people's lives.

This is where the story of our spiritual ancestors is so inspiring to me. That vision of home we carry around is bigger than what we see being exercised today.

In 1890, when Deacon John C. Keith, an African American member of this congregation, had a vision for a faith community that African-Americans could call home – and we might well ask ourselves why that would be - our ancestors supported that vision. And Mt. Zion Baptist Church was born. Seventy years later, Pastor Gus Hintz told the congregation "we cannot be spectators" when red-lining where African

Americans can live makes segregation a reality. In 1969, First Baptist and Mt. Zion together founded a free day care center and the Seattle chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. In 1998, when Washington elected the first person of color to the State Supreme Court, it was Justice Charles Z. Smith, who called this church “home.”

When Chinese immigrants got caught at the dangerous intersection of immigration and labor – still part of the anti-immigrant playbook - and were denigrated and excluded, our ancestors stood with them, defended them, and created a partnership with a Chinese pastor from Portland to build a community that later became Chinese Baptist Church in the late 1800s.

When Japanese immigrants began making their home in Seattle, our ancestors made sure they had access to education and community so that by 1899, Japanese Baptist Church was formed. And, in the wake of Pearl Harbor, when President Roosevelt deported thousands of people with Japanese ancestry to internment camps, Pastor Harold Jensen took the government to court. He lost. But when those who had been deported began to return to Seattle and a local paper called for the formation of militias to turn them away at the city limits, Pastor Jensen said that there was only one thing to do. Meet those returning Japanese Americans on the way and say: “Welcome home!”

So if you think “welcome home” is some kind of naïve platitude about feeling warm and cozy, take it from our ancestors that it has some teeth in it. There is some commitment for it. There is some cost to it.

And I don’t know that we can talk about a vision of home today without talking about this planet. 15-year old Greta Thunberg says:

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. Then I want you to act ... I want you to act as if your house is on fire ... because it is.

Twenty-five years ago, Pastor Rod Romney’s vision for the future included a call for us to learn how to “work in teams to save this planet.” And, if we have a vision of home that means anything, that time is now.

I am well aware that this church is not – nor will it ever be – perfect. Our privilege has sometimes meant that our vision of home has been too much about “us” and “them.” Sometimes in our attempt to do good work, we have been blind to our own complicity in the wrongs that require good work.

Our story has not been perfect. But it has been powerful.

In the 1980s, a vision of home got catalyzed when Rod Romney met a young gay man. Alienated from his family and living with AIDS, Rod’s vision of home included him. And even though reconciliation with his family came too late, Rod wrote a hymn for his funeral.

Many of you have heard this story many times. But I hope you don’t get tired of hearing it. I hope you don’t take it for granted because I can assure you: that young person didn’t and those who have followed have not taken it for granted. I hope you don’t lose sight of it because it is a vision of home we carry around in our souls and it’s a prayer we offer on behalf of ourselves and one another and the world:

*Bring us home on love’s renewing tide to the place of our belonging
Bring us home to your redeeming side; bring your scattered people home.*

And today, as we sing, if you hear that voice calling you, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The conversation about African American spirituals and “Swing Low” can be found at www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/swing-low-sweet-chariot. That material includes the characterization of James Cone’s understanding. This historical information is from the new history being written about Seattle First Baptist Church, anticipated publication in 2020, and in *Our First Baptist Heritage (1869-1984)*. See Jensen, p. 111. Greta Thunberg’s quote was posted on Facebook. The creation care statement by Rod Romney is from his sermon, “Voices From The Past, Vision For The Future,” preached at the inauguration of the church’s 125th anniversary. Rod Romney’s hymn “Bring Us Home” is one of eleven Heritage Hymns of Seattle First Baptist Church, copyright by SFBC.