

Diocesan Outreach & Advocacy Conference, October 19, 2019
“Grounded and Growing in Christ: Church as a Centre of Resistance and Hope”
Keynote address: Thea Prescod

I have an embarrassing secret to tell all of you. I hope you’re good at keeping things on the down low.

In the spring, when Elin asked me to give this keynote, I read her email at my normal “email reading” speed. Not incredibly quickly, but also without the devoted focus that I put into reading a deep treatise on faith or clinical research on trauma. And, as someone who spent a couple decades in the evangelical world before returning home to Anglicanism, I read the theme of this conference as “Christ as a centre of resistance and hope.” This is the sort of keynote I can give with ease. Jesus was such a radical, revolutionary figure, and his life gives so much strength to resist the forces of injustice, to live into a new kind of world. His life provides a guide into a way of life where those the world puts last can actually be first, and where we can together create radical communities pursuing change. Jesus is a powerful source of resistance in my life every day.

And Jesus’ willingness to submit to an unjust death and then turn around and defeat death through his resurrection is pretty much the only centre of hope for me in the midst of 2019.

2019: A year where the world seems to be brewing for war after war. 2019: A year where the climate crisis seems to be hurtling towards (or past) a point of no return. 2019: A year where my home community, Sanctuary, has

experienced 18 deaths, including two murders and the sudden death of one of my closest friends, Donna, just this past Tuesday.

In 2019, my hope is found in believing that the moment of the cross was the beginning of a radical and growing shift in human history. Where God chose to know the shame, pain, and weight it is to be a fully broken human, and then he smashed everything that caused that pain, promising it's not the final truth.

So, I had my keynote written in my mind.

And then, in August, I started seriously thinking about this keynote and reread the initial email. "**Church** as a centre of resistance and hope."

Oh.

I nearly called Elin to cancel.

Christ has been my main source of resistance and hope most of my life. Church, however? Church is where I go on Sundays and have awkward conversations at coffee hour that are basically someone very, very nice asking me how my week was, and my mind racing furiously. 'Well, we had 3 overdoses, but none of them were fatal. And one friend spent a couple hours with me talking about the abuse he experienced as a child, and another friend might lose her place if we can't find a way to get her abusive partner to move out, but if he moves out he'll be on the street, so she feels too guilty to kick him out. None of this is polite conversation, though, so what do I say?'

"Oh, it was a bit of a challenging week, but all fairly manageable, praise God. How about you?"

In other words, “Church as a centre of resistance and hope” is not my strong suit. But, I’m guessing, if you’re giving up your Saturday for an Advocacy and Outreach conference, you probably have some of the same feelings.

Justice work probably is central to your faith, and it’s probably very hard for you when it doesn’t always seem central to our church. And you probably feel a deep longing to be around people who feel like you do.

So, if this is you, welcome! And look around. You’re with your people. You can relax today.

“Church as a centre of resistance and hope” is a challenge. But, as almost every decision I’ve ever made in my life can attest to, I like a challenge.

And, I hate disappointing people, so I couldn’t cancel at late notice. So, this meant I was forced to spend the last two months trying to understand how church has been, in my life, a centre of resistance and hope.

Wish me luck!

When thinking about the challenge of my relationship with the church, St Stephen quickly came to mind. Particularly this passage:

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Acts 6:1-6

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith

and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The early church is starting to grow, and rifts are starting to appear. The widows of Greek origin were being discriminated against, not getting sufficient food each day. And so the twelve church leaders said, “Our ministry of prayer and teaching is way too important to demean ourselves with such a small issue as food justice for racialized women. Let’s find some other suckers to do it.”

And they prayed and chose seven leaders (rather than twelve) who would be focused on “waiting on tables” rather than on “serving the word.”

Which is how, in my worst, hardest, most distant from the typical definition of church days, I feel like our work is understood by our co-congregants. Feeding racialized women, doing ministry to families affected by gun violence, doing reconciliation work with the first people of turtle island, focusing us all on a greener future. It’s nice stuff, but it’s not actually “real church work,” is it?

But Jesus lived as if he believed differently, and I think Stephen’s life proved that justice work is “real church work.”

Immediately after the passage just read, the story moves on to the story of Stephen’s persecution and eventual martyrdom. It’s always stuck with me that the first martyr of the early church was not a great evangelist, but someone who was devoted to caring for those who struggled. It’s just like how the first

mention of religious leaders plotting to kill Jesus was not after the sermon on the mount, but was instead after Jesus resurrected Lazarus.

It's not that preaching, teaching, prayer, aren't important. They are. There are sermons that were instrumental in directing the course of my life. Great teachers have clarified my understanding of God and justice and myself. I'm sure that I've only been able to do this work for 17 years because of the faithfulness of a group of seniors from my parents' church who pray for me day after day after day. People who bring those gifts into our lives are essential. But, I truly believe, that if the "good news" Jesus talked about was at all radical, dangerous, or challenging of the systems of power, it's in the enactment of "Good News to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed." Living out those words is a direct threat to the structures, both visible and invisible, that prop up the rulers, both visible and invisible, that control our lives.

And that's the work that you, in this room, are doing, whether by serving food to those who can't afford it, creating community for lonely seniors, or supporting kids whose parents don't have the time or skills to help them with homework after school.

You, in this room, we together, are doing the work of the church, every day. Whether your title is reverend, deacon, warden - or whether you have no title at all - you are living out this calling every day.

And Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit, can be not just a reassurance that we're doing the work of the church, but, I have come to believe that he can be

an inspiration of how we do this work well, grounded in Christ, and connecting to the Church as a source of resistance and hope.

You see, quite quickly, the synagogue of the Freedmen found issue with Stephen. The synagogue of the Freedmen was, a temple of Jewish people who had been held in slavery in Rome, freed due to age or good service. And they were all freed slaves who had chosen to return to Jerusalem, the home of their ancestors. So, these freed slaves, after decades of humiliation and poor treatment from foreigners, return home and see this group of Jewish people, followers of Jesus the Christ, actively caring for Greek-speaking widows. How galling for them! *If the good news makes you care for our enemies*, they must have thought, *then it's not good news at all*.

I understand the perspective of these men more than I'd like to admit.

In my fourth year on staff at Sanctuary, I had a wonderful friend, California. She was a wonderful woman, smart and funny and beautiful. She slept outdoors, but always looked like she came off a runway. I mean, three other people would look in our clothing donation room and complain that there was absolutely nothing to wear, and then she'd walk in, pick up three things that looked like random rubbish, and then get changed and look like a fashionista.

One night, I'm pretty sure it was a Monday, I was hanging out in front of Sanctuary when California's boyfriend came by, looking devastated in a way I'd never seen him look before. He told me that she had been murdered the night before, and he had just found out.

I was shocked to my core. Murder was something you hear about in the news, but not something that happens to people I knew, much less to people I loved.

And as the details came out, over the next few days, they were more and more horrible and shocking. Things happened to my friend that shouldn't happen to any human being.

A few weeks after her murder, one of my coworkers, Doug, sent an email to the staff team. "I just got a call from a Mennonite church in the area. They've been working with the family of the perpetrator for years, trying to get him into psychiatric treatment, because he's been very unwell and unable to get through the hoops in our system to get appropriate care. What do you think we should do to care for his parents, and for the members of his church that feel so guilt ridden and powerless?"

I was furious. California was my friend, and we should not care about the person who hurt and killed her. That wasn't fair to ask of me. I knew who was the good person and who was the bad guy in this situation, and I wasn't ready to believe anything else.

But strong and wise mentoring brought me to a different place. California was my friend, and it was OK for me not to have the emotional readiness to bring support to those who loved the man who murdered her. But, the church, as a whole, can live out more than one truth, together. And that allows us to be a tremendous force for resistance to the brokenness of the world. The man who murdered California was harmed by a mental health system that didn't give him the care he needed, and he passed that harm to California. The answer to that wasn't to hate him forever, but was to trust that part of the church could love him, advocate for him, and hold the system to account for its crimes. And my coworker Doug was able to be part of that, enacting the prophetic

resistance of the church through working with his family while I was free to weep with California, her friends and her family.

The temple of the Freedmen were full of people who couldn't look at foreign widows with love, but what they missed was the calling to trust that Stephen might have been right in choosing to make sure they were safe and well fed. In the same way, I've realized that I sometimes feel distant from the church if I don't see anyone doing the same things I do, without remembering that we can be serving the same purpose from radically different angles.

I'd encourage you to consider the situations in your justice work where it feels like other churchgoers don't understand your struggles. Stop and strategize. Is there any way in which that situation can actually be broadened and opened up by people in the church that aren't specifically involved in the work you do? Where people who aren't actively interested in your justice work can be able to bring their gifts to dig at some of the roots of the problems leading towards your greatest challenges?

The temple of the Freedmen didn't consider that they could be allies with Stephen. Instead they lied about him and brought him to the high priest. And the high priest asked Stephen to defend himself.

And what Stephen did was unexpected. In quite a long speech, Stephen went through the history of the Jewish people in great detail. He talked about Abraham, and Joseph, Moses and David, ending with Solomon building the temple. He traced the themes of God's faithfulness to people in exile, who are strangers in strange lands. And those would have been comforting, reassuring stories to the church of the Freedman. As Jewish slaves, they would have lived

their lives reciting and remembering the stories of Jehovah's faithfulness to them when they were slaves in Egypt. They would have needed to hold onto those truths every day to make it to the next with their hope and their self-identity intact. And Stephen understood, and shared those stories with them. Those stories of God's faithfulness were theirs and were his, and they could share them together.

And that's another way I've realized the church can be a wellspring of hope in my life. One of my favourite things about being an Anglican is listening to the recitation of the Eucharistic Prayer each week. The story of the cross is the story of our lives is the story of the world.

Just listen to this beautiful poetry we get to hear week after week:

Through Moses you led your people
from bondage into freedom;
through the prophets
you renewed your promise of salvation.

And

In the fullness of time,
you sent your Son Jesus Christ,
to share our human nature,
to live and die as one of us,
to reconcile us to you,
the God and Father of all.
He healed the sick,
and ate and drank with outcasts and sinners;
he opened the eyes of the blind
and proclaimed the good news of your kingdom to the poor
and to those in need.
In all things he fulfilled your gracious will.

Or

He chose to bear our griefs and sorrows,
and to give up his life on the cross,
that he might shatter the chains of evil and death,
and banish the darkness of sin and despair.
By his resurrection
he brings us into the light of your presence.

Or

At your command all things came to be:
the vast expanse of interstellar space,
galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses,
and this fragile earth, our island home;
by your will they were created and have their being.

Or, my personal favourite:

We give you thanks and praise, loving Father,
because in sending Jesus, your Son, to us
you showed us how much you love us.
He cares for the poor and the hungry.
He suffers with the sick and the rejected.
Betrayed and forsaken, he did not strike back
but overcame hatred with love.

This is beautiful, life-giving stuff. Hearing these truths, week after week, can centre us in hope for Christ in the world. And, hearing these truths, week after week, can help us understand the story of our people in ever deeper ways.

My friend Ramsey (Rammstein) once tried to explain to our Actor-in-residence, Lyf, how the soliloquy in Hamlet, “To be or not to be” was connected to the narrative of the gospel, and connected to the story of his life on the streets. He understood Jesus because he knew what it was to be left

alone, abandoned, in pain and feeling forsaken by God. They ended up making this video together:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=UiqxVGMCPms&t=26s>

Ramsey's life story was hard, full of pain, basically from beginning to end. But he was also deeply able to understand that the story of Christ's passion was his story. And he might not have been able to grasp that beautiful, painful truth if it wasn't for his experiences at Sanctuary and at Church of the Redeemer. But because he "got" the passion, he was able to say "*miigwech*" to the Creator in the midst of his tears.

When I started at Sanctuary, we used to talk a lot about "being and seeing Jesus" in our community. Particularly seeing Jesus. As largely middle-class people of faith, we had all grown up with a picture of a calling to "Be Jesus in a Broken World," or something like that. What we had to work to grow an awareness of was the art of "seeing Jesus." How could we see the stories of our faith within the stories of our community?

In a community with as much death as ours, the first way to understand ourselves is often within the context of the cross. Jesus was described by Isaiah as "a man of suffering." Many of my friends could definitely be identified as women and men of suffering. And seeing all of our pain through the picture of the cross at least gives a little relief. But over time, we learned to see ourselves in other stories as well.

We had a couple that lived out the book of Hosea. She would leave him to go after her other lovers, but always returns, and he would cry and rage as she left, but his heart was too big to turn her away. Seeing them as that, a picture of the prophet, made it easier to be present, easier to truly and deeply listen, easier to try to understand, than if we had just called them codependent.

And similarly, the story that you have the most challenge with in your ministry is actually reflected in our shared story of faith. Maybe it turns out that you're living out a gospel story, modernized to look quite different from the version you learned in Sunday school. Maybe your struggles mirror a parable of Jesus. Maybe the pain of your justice work is similar to the horror of a Hebrew Testament war or the pain of a prophet of old. Either way, your story is our story, your story is our song.

Stephen was able to know the story of the Jewish people, and understand that our God is the God of the outsider. But while the Freedmen Jews were the outsiders when they were slaves in Rome, in Jerusalem, they were the insiders. And so, instead of finishing his speech by comforting them, Stephen ended it with a twist.

He ended it by saying that the people listening to him were on the wrong side of the story of God's redemption, keeping people out instead of letting them in. He reminded them that the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands, but rather beyond and above. And that made them angry enough to stone him. But for us, I think, it can actually be a deeply joyful and true reality. When I struggled to figure out how the church was a centre of

resistance and joy I eventually realized the truth. The call had been coming from inside the house. We were the church, all this time. And it's you, my sisters and my brothers, my fellow workers for justice through faith, that my strength to resist and my hope is found.