

**Rideau Park United Church – Ottawa
November 21, 2021 – Elizabeth Bryce**

Reading: Isaiah 9:1-7

Sermon: Faithful Resilience (Reign of Christ Sunday)

A couple of weeks ago, I was away from Rideau Park on a week of study leave. I attended a gathering of ministers, online of course, and because no one had to physically travel anywhere – there were participants from all over North America, some from Europe and even one from Australia. One night we were supposed to be hearing a presentation from a very famous American preacher, but unfortunately that day he had a family emergency.

So one of the planning team immediately arranged for us to have a zoom meeting with his friend Andrew Young, an open session where we could ask questions and hear his perspective on ministry in the 21st century.

For those of you who already know the name of Andrew Young, you probably think of him as a politician, or a civil rights activist. He was a congressman, a mayor and the first African American Ambassador to the United Nations, where he sometimes got in trouble for his “plain speaking.”

Perhaps what you did not know about Andrew Young, however, was that before he became all those other things, before he walked alongside Martin Luther King Jr at Selma, before he was thrown in prison for organizing protests in Florida, before he dined with Presidents JFK and Jimmy Carter, before all of that Andrew Young was a Sunday preacher, an ordained minister of the congregationalist churches in the US.

Retired now at almost 90 years, we had a great conversation with Andrew Young. One thing that rang true in all that he said was that he has always identified, first and foremost, as a minister in Christ’s church. He understood all the things he did, all the battles he fought, all the groups of people he served, as part of his Christian mission. He never left the church, or the ministry, he just expanded his ministry to include the work of protest marches, and diplomacy and political leadership.

One of the first questions someone asked was if he ever felt like giving up, and what was the secret to his resiliency over the decades.

His answer was this: “You have to believe that Jesus Christ is on the throne.” And then he added: “When you can’t believe that, you just have to open your heart to the Holy Spirit.”

Now if you know me, and you’ve been listening to my sermons for many years, you might be surprised to hear me quote that kind of royal imagery – even on the Reign of Christ Sunday.

Personally I don't place much importance on the hierarchies of this world, whether it be monarchies or chains of command or apostolic succession. Images of Jesus seated on a throne, wearing a crown, sceptre in hand, surrounded in golden glory – these are not images of Jesus that I am likely to be promoting as part of the Christian faith story.

I am much more likely to speak of Jesus as a peasant prophet, or a humble shepherd, or the rejected stumbling stone to the proud and mighty.

But there was something about the deep faith of Andrew Young, his infinite courage and his profound call to ministry that really struck me. That deep cornerstone at the base of his personal faith and call to ministry shaped his whole sense of purpose and vocation and determination. He did not give up when he was thrown in jail, he did not give up when his friend and ally Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, he did not give up when he lost the president's support for taking an unpopular stand at the United Nations.

He believes that Jesus Christ is on the throne, and so he persists. He persists too, because his heart is open for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and so he carries on.

As someone said afterwards, "It was a powerful conversation with a powerful man."

But for me, that was a different understanding of power than I am accustomed to.

We have been raised in a society that believes power is exercised when we hold it over others – whether it be other people, or groups. There is the power of force, when we coerce someone to do things our way. There is the power of influence, when we convince them they always wanted it that way. There is power in guilt and shame, there is power that is extremely subtle and there is power that is obvious and absolute. There is power that is given on the basis of gender or physical appearance, race or social status.

In Biblical times, power was claimed and exercised by military might. Just listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah from today's reading as he described the current situation in Judea:

*the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, ...
all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood.*

The people of Israel knew only too well how power was used and abused, how it could be taken from one terrible warlord only to be claimed by an even more brutal one. By

the time of the prophet Isaiah, the kingdom of Israel, while still an independent nation, had no real power over their own future.

Their only way to maintain some level of religious freedom or security for the people was to pay tribute to other, much more powerful empires, in the hope that they would not be overrun.

Yet sometimes they were overrun – in the memory of Isaiah's people, the Northern Kingdom had been destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. So the people of the Southern kingdom knew what it meant when a foreign army took power by force.

The tools of war that Isaiah describes brought humiliation to the losers. A yoke and bar were placed across the shoulders of those who were being carried off into exile – causing them pain, shame and physical control by their captors. A rod in the hands of their captors was used to beat those who did not keep up or talked back or disobeyed. The boots of warriors marching towards one's homeland was an audible forecast of what was to come. Only blood-soaked garments would remain.

Into this backdrop of fear and violence, Isaiah proclaimed a very unlikely vision of hope. The very tools and remnants of war would be destroyed – the rods and yokes, the boots and the bloody garments would be broken, burned up, and buried under the overwhelming power of God's peace and shalom.

Ironically their hero would NOT be an even more powerful warrior, but hope would arise in the birth of a child. And that child would lead, not through violence, but through empowerment and cooperation, gentleness and generosity.

The term Counselor in biblical times often referred to a king's advisors – and throughout the biblical narrative they are not portrayed with much sympathy – often leading kings and queens astray instead of following God's priorities.

This child, this new leader, will not listen to the advice of those who would worry more about their own survival than the welfare of God's people. Reading from the Inclusive Bible translation:

For a child has been born for us, an heir given to us; upon whose shoulders dominion will rest; this One shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Strength of God, Everlasting Protector, Champion of Peace. ⁷This dominion shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace. Isaiah 9:6 Inclusive Bible

Was Isaiah prophesying an actual child to be an actual sovereign? Was he foretelling a messiah, who would be a gentle child, a wise king and a strong hero all rolled into one? Given the political weakness of Israel at that time it is hard to imagine that Isaiah was proclaiming to the people that their hope lay in yet another war for power.

Instead, Isaiah's vision proclaimed that their hope for empowerment was in their resilience. Not in weapons or crowns or kingdoms, but in the resilience to withstand the harm that human beings do to one another, and somehow still maintain their faith in God. Isaiah foretold that their power would come from faithful resilience in the face of war and suffering.

Indeed, we know the kingdom of Judea was destroyed first by the Assyrians, who desecrated their temple and holy places. But even the mighty Assyrians were beaten by the Babylonians, who completed the siege of Jerusalem and dragged the exiles off in slavery. The Babylonians were taken over by the Persians, and so on and so on.

Political and military power could only last so long, with one empire replaces the next. Isaiah could see that. So he called his people to look beyond that understanding of power and find their own power in their resilience. Which they did. In the 21st century it is hard for us to imagine another faith family which has withstood so much persecution and still survived.

Unless it's the indigenous people of Canada, who survived disease and residential schools and injustice – also powerful in their resilience.

Unless it's the people of Africa, - colonized, enslaved, enduring prejudice and poverty – the people of Andrew Young – they are also powerful in their resilience.

It's a message for us as Christ's church – once powerful, but now in serious decline, particularly in North America. To us, Isaiah proclaims that our power come not from having the highest numbers or the most wealth. Its in our resilience. When we are resilient in our faithfulness to God, then we too will be empowered.

"You just have to believe that Jesus Christ is on the throne."

Thanks be to God for Isaiah's vision, for Andrew's witness and for our resilience. Amen