

Resistance, Reimagined

Readings: Excerpt, “We Are Not the Resistance” by Michelle Alexander; Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

SO: I’ve been thinking heavily about the word “resistance” lately. And since I started writing this sermon, it’s appearing in front of me even more – I even got a text message yesterday encouraging me to vote in the upcoming elections from an entity called ResistBot! Against the backdrop of the recent, very intense hearings prior to confirming a new Supreme Court justice, this idea of resistance to forces that seem overpowering, or the directive to actively struggle against, well, it seems an entire government that is stretching the rules as well as the truth, has become pervasive...with no irony given to the equating of resistance with the act of voting. At any given protest from family separation to women’s equality, the word “resist” will pop up at least 5 times, inviting a vague source of connection for a really diverse country full of people trying to navigate the wave of current domination. I don’t wonder where this idea came from, or why it’s so appealing – after all, the most famous figure in our collective western narrative is probably the greatest resister of all – Jesus of Galilee. Within his context, Jesus’ work was absolutely a counter-narrative to the powerful forces of empire, forces that knocked the scales of justice so far off balance that most people lived in a constant state of mere survival rather than anything resembling thriving. But he also declared that he came to “give life abundant,” a grand statement with a proactive bent. What’s interesting is that if we go back even further, we wind up with Jesus’ forebears doing the same thing – resisting enslavement under Pharaoh in Egypt. From this vantage point, we come theologically from a long line of resisters, buttressed by the tradition of the Hebrew prophets like Amos who were always there to put a check on forces of power that led to oppressive practice. But is what they were doing – from Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea, to Amos prophesying against the northern kingdom of Israel as it laid waste to its orphans and widows, actually about resistance? While I would argue that Jesus’ ministry was primarily characterized by opposing such forces, the point of origin for all these prophets is the same: they too were responding to a *primary* call, the call to liberation by a God that desired freedom for God’s people. Yahweh, the God of Israel, emerged for these people with the clear declaration that this was a God who was not okay with power used to oppress. And as this God delivered them from Pharaoh, so they became God’s people, called to be more than the empire that they escaped from. Oppression came

to refer to much more than a one-off situation encompassing Egyptians and Hebrews; as their relationship with Yahweh deepened, they too were called to free each other. Oppression was not limited to literal enslavement of one group under another; lying, cheating, exploitation and the poverty that followed ranked really high on the list. "I know how many are your transgressions," God speaks, through the prophet Amos. "I know how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate." It isn't vague. The God of Israel drives home this point with abundant clarity throughout the Bible, which brings me back to this question about resistance. When all else is cleared away, it appears that we, as people of this freedom-loving God, are not a force of resistance, but a force of deliverance. Or, put differently, when we agonize over children taken from their parents; when we rail against a tax system that concentrates wealth to a very few people and leaves the poor with less than nothing; when we weep for black and brown children poisoned in Flint and women whose abuse is denied, we're not the ones going against the grain; because guess what? The U.S. is, overall, more progressive than it is regressive. Despite attention paid by corporate media sources with exaggerated sympathy for working-class whites in the heartland, this so-called "silent majority" that right wing politicians claim they are speaking for is, in fact, a minority. For example: statistics reveal that at any given time, 2/3 of Americans polled desire stricter gun control. More than 2/3 support gay marriage, whereas 20 years ago barely 1/4 did. More than half the country supports legal abortion, with support for the landmark Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* indicating a woman's right to choose at close to 70%. At least 2/3 of Americans polled desire equal pay for women and men. We barely make the cut with recognizing race discrimination, but still, a little over half will acknowledge it still exists. And the surge of organizations and ordinary folks who are pushing this to the forefront is proof that the soul of America is destined for redemption. So no, we are not the abnormal ones; we are actually responding from a deep sense, perhaps a moral seed planted within us proceeding from the divine spirit, that a society characterized by gross power differentials and rampant suffering is abnormal, not normal. That power plays which trample upon our innocents and put profit over people are repugnant to the cosmic course of the universe, and a repudiation of the goodness of God.

I hadn't quite thought of it in these terms, because I too have felt this sense of resistance. But then I came across a prophetic word from one of my favorite American women of all time. Michelle Alexander was an attorney who found herself defending a disproportionate number of people of color charged with crimes that very few white people were going to prison for. It prompted her toward several years of national research about the nature of the criminal justice system and whether its statistics are racially driven. As you might conclude, they overwhelmingly are, and Alexander shared this research with a powerful analysis of what it means to call ourselves post-racial in arguably the most important American book of our time, entitled *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*. It's not an easy read, for its subject and our history, and neither does it divide neatly along partisan political lines. However, even with the inherent gravity that lawyers bring to any reality, Alexander's writing is filled with prophetic hope, a strangely theological voice from a woman who is not particularly religious nor came from a religious background. And two years ago, Alexander chose to leave her position as law professor at Ohio State University and become a visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary. She made a public statement explaining her decision because she believes political work toward a more just society is not enough. "Who am I to teach or study at seminary?" she mused, but then answered her own question: "I know," she says, "that there is something much greater at stake in justice work than we often acknowledge. I no longer believe we can 'win' justice simply by filing lawsuits, flexing our political muscles, or boosting voter turnout. Without a moral or spiritual awakening, we will remain forever trapped in political games fueled by fear, greed, and the hunger for power." Seek the Lord, and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it...*you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate*. As religious folks, the spiritual element is already there; it's part of our framework for what it means to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. But it is surprisingly parallel to the language that Alexander uses too. In the midst of the events of the past few weeks, Alexander published a kind of surprising piece in the New York Times. She turned the word "resistance" on its head, and with it, offered a much-needed respite from the spiritually exhausting task of constantly engaging a state of resistance. What if, she suggests, we realized that the U.S. is not in a state of collapse, a culture so stained by the

history of genocide and enslavement that it cannot be redeemed, but rather that it IS the dream? What if, I suggest, we admitted that the tireless effort to push forward for all human rights, to claim the good life for everybody, is an example of what it looks like to get to that mountaintop vision of God's realm on earth? Biblically, that vision is described as all the nations coming together, residing side by side without warfare, without famine, without strife. While we clearly are far from achieving this, what other nation on earth has such diversity – of color, of languages, of cultures and traditions – and also has moved forward with such grand aspirations in such a short period of modern history? What other nation has pushed so relentlessly forward, declaring, as a whole, we must be more than what we have been?

During her time researching and analyzing justice movements since the 2016 election, Michelle Alexander has found the idea that all these masses of diverse groups banding together can be described as a force of resistance to the current administration. The problem with this has two layers: the surface one being that resistance itself is a reactive, rather than a proactive, state. To resist is inherently defensive, which isn't problematic in and of itself – but there is a spiritual dimension here that cannot be ignored. We face a spiritual conundrum when we, individually or collectively, have to operate primarily out of a place of rejection. Since we are creations of a forward-moving, ever-creating Spirit, we cannot help but grow weary maintaining a constant state of opposition. It goes against our very nature. In Alexander's estimation, "while it can be necessary for survival and to prevent catastrophic harm, it can also tempt us to set our sights too low and restrict our field of vision to the next election cycle, leading us to forget our ultimate purpose and place in history." What she points to is the second layer, which reflects the larger reality that there is a longer vision for the arc of what it means to engage in a morality that includes everyone. When we look at where we are now, a nation that truly wants more liberation, not return to some iteration of patriarchal oligarchy driven by plantation thinking, then we no longer become the resistance. We become the norm. How does that change our spiritual and physical location? What does it feel like to lay claim upon a force of love so grand that it envisions that no one might go hungry again; that no illness or injury go untreated; that class not only ceases to determine education and opportunity but ceases to exist altogether, giving way to a new mode of living? Oh, it's a

grand vision indeed: but it is based not only on our highest moral aspirations within a philosophy of justice, but the soul of the Jewish and Christian teaching called *imago dei*: all people are created in the image of God. Of course, this vision, this reaching, this continuous pushing does not take away that fact that we are, sometimes, in a position characterized by resistance; Alexander even concludes, “does it matter?” and “can’t we be both?” True to the vicissitudes of love and justice, she aptly answers, yes and no. Because we are absolutely in a tide that is pushing against the hegemonic forces that control our nation right now. We are in a moment that feels like we are the anomaly. But don’t let this become the narrative. As she puts it, “there’s a reason marchers in the black freedom struggle sang, ‘We Shall Overcome,’ rather than chanting ‘We Shall Resist.’” The goal, the endgame, can only survive if the vision of what we want to achieve is held above what we want to tear down. The last prophetic word doesn’t end with “Resist these forces of evil,” but “love the good, and establish justice in the gate.”

At the end of her book *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander doesn’t close with her favorite legal solutions and political strategies, though they are certainly there. No; she closes with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision of a renewed America. King, the minister. King, the preacher. King, whose resistance to unjust laws was rooted in the spiritual genius of Amos, and of Micah, of Jeremiah and Isaiah. Of Jesus. The spiritual witness that lives within each of us, whether is fully awakened or simply lies dormant, awaiting to emerge. We close now with her words infused by this same spirit: “refusing to care for the people we see is the problem. We should hope not for a colorblind society but instead for a world in which we can see each other fully, learn from each other, and do what we can to respond to each other with love. That was King’s dream – a society that is capable of seeing each of us, as we are, with love. That is a goal worth fighting for.”

May God sustain us through it.