



Tell the Story, Write It Down, and Make It Plain

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Highlighting the resilience and perseverance of Africans from 1619 to this present day, 2019 marks the 400th Commemoration of the arrival of Africans into North America. Across the country many African American communities, churches, and organizations are planning celebrations to mark this significant and historic event. The importance of the commemoration is important for all people, but it's particularly important for people of African descent.

The enforced enslavement of my ancestors is a constant reminder of why I pursue the history of our precolonial existence. My studies are embedded in research that enables me to speak, teach, and write a different story than the colonized versions I received in public schools. The colonized version boasts of European conquests sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to “explore” South and North America with the support and blessing of the Catholic and Protestant churches. As students, we received the message that Europeans and their descendants had divine rights that allowed them to steal other people’s land, convert indigenous peoples, and enslave Africans. We were taught that if the European foreigners were met with resistance, their only recourse was to exterminate and perpetuate genocide.

The unwilling and forced migration of Africans into the Virginia colony in 1619 is a reminder that they arrived before the Mayflower, which arrived in 1620. However, “until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter.”(Igbo, Nigeria) In other words, if the stories of African descended peoples only begin with enslavement, the distorted history reduces a very powerful people group to that of property held by Europeans.

Historians, theologians, and anthropologists of African descent must continue writing, preaching, and teaching about the first humans to evolve and walk the planet over 200,000 years ago. These modern Homo sapiens left significant historical markers as they circumnavigated continents. Among the first human beings to explore other lands, their explorations and encounters were often peaceful to other humans, but fraught with fending off predators in terrain geographically different from their Sub-Saharan lands.

As I reflect on my Black church experiences growing up that valued the spirituality and faith traditions of my ancestors, I remain forever thankful for the valuable research, stories, wise elders, matriarchs, and Black liberation and womanist theologians that have poured our history into my life. The kind of history that comes out of communal rituals that teach us how to pass on what we've learned.

The Christian church has an opportunity to benefit from leaning into different narratives. If the Christian faith is going to survive the changing demographics and ever - growing population of people of color across the globe, the church will need to relinquish a white and Western centered model of Christianity. The Good News is that the doors of the Christian church are wide enough to encompass multiple narratives of diverse people groups. There is room for fresh interpretations of scripture and theologies of inclusion. The resulting cultural narratives will examine stories of origins and histories of beginnings prior to colonialism and white supremacy.

I believe the Christian church should be leading conversations that not only dismantle the deep structures that support racism, but also challenge and work towards correcting policies that continue to tear families apart, traumatize children, and grieve parents who want to live and thrive. These government tactics are not new. They are used to dehumanize and create fear and terror among its citizens. When Christians remain silent and refuse to act with and on behalf of vulnerable communities, those who incite evil are emboldened by the silence and inaction.

Now is the time to become a collective and cohesive community of radical followers of Christ. Now is the time to learn and participate in the Commemoration of 400 Years of African descended people within the Americas and the United States. Now is the time to also learn more and plan events to engage your church in the UN International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024. For more information and resources contact Rev. Dr. Velda Love, UCC Minister for Racial Justice, and follow Jesus by being part of God's human family. God delights in the equity of all cultures and ethnicities. Ashe and Amen!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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