

February has been noted as Black History Month since the United States' bicentennial year of 1976. Then, President Gerald Ford and others raised the visibility of an observance known as Negro History Week – the second week in February – begun in 1926 related to the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln (Feb. 12, 1809) and Frederick Douglass (Feb. 14, 1818). Often I have attempted in February to read of African-Americans who have been engaged in the journey for civil rights and racial equality, and to read of “white folks” who have also been engaged in the journey for civil rights and racial equality (although “white folks” have not always been so inclined).

During their General Assembly in 1863, (white) Southern Presbyterians voted approval of a statement: “We hold the proper condition of the black is slavery.” A year later, the Assembly declared, “It is the peculiar mission of the southern church to conserve the institution of slavery.” Ninety years later, however, in 1954, the Southern denomination's Assembly voted approval of the opposite understanding: “Enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics.”

For a church body which had so seldom recognized a conflict between “segregation” and “theology and ethics,” this declaration was as combined “overhead lightning, ear-shattering thunder, and an underground earthquake” to local churches in communities of the South. The tensions within Southern Presbyterian congregations increased between the many who were committed to customary outlooks and the fewer (but slowly growing number of members) who – based on the Biblical stories from the life of Jesus and the declarations of faithful prophets who preceded Jesus – understood the need for segregation's dismantling.

In 1965, Donald Shriver published “The Unsilent South: Prophetic Preaching in Racial Crisis.” It presents the preaching efforts of nineteen Southern Presbyterian leaders through those

nine years (1957-1965) of change and resistance in churches and communities, following their denomination's identity-altering 1954 General Assembly statement.

While I've been re-reading "The Unsilent South" in 2019, a Presbyterian pastor living in the South – but who was born twenty years after 1965 – preached a sermon from Exodus 14:21, "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided."

He commented: "Grand images attract our attention. Those Red Sea waters rolled back create a grand image. Involved in this grand image, however, are human lives. The Hebrew former slaves are vulnerable and terrified. The pursuing Egyptian soldiers are vulnerable if and when the walls of water come crashing down – which occurs. When freedom evolves, death can happen also." The preacher then suggested that another grand image is "the eyes of another" – the eyes of people similar and different, of children, teens, and adults. Jesus taught this. Jesus lived this. For persons of every generation and background, stepping out with faith that God is creating freedom and newness of life is parallel to the Hebrew former slaves needing to step onto the drying ground between the walls of parted water, as God makes new life possible.

Parted waters make a grand image; yet it's the grand image of every other person's eyes that engages us for stepping out as God makes newness of life evolve through this journey, always with the diverse family of God's people who are all former slaves to masters of different kinds – including racism and discrimination.

It gives me hope that younger preachers and church members are stepping out in the Gospel as certain others have risked and stepped out before them.