

**2018 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women**  
**Ruth F. Santana-Grace**  
**August 2, 2018 Evening Plenary**

*Rise Up!*  
*Isaiah 60:1*  
*Exodus 3:7–8a*

Have you imagined him out there? I have. Moses—out in the fields, minding his flock and his business, content—thinking “life is okay.” Then God breaks in, burning bush and all, disrupting the calm by compelling Moses to see and understand what is happening outside his little “life bubble.”

With 5 verbs, we get profound insights into God’s heart and into our call. God declares to see and observe the misery of humanity; to hear the cries and to know the suffering of a people he loves. God’s heart is so deeply moved that God says, so I have come down—not to simply hang with them in their pain, but to deliver them. I am breaking in to bring them up out of that place. The Hebrew word here is “kumi,” which means to restore. God is saying to Moses, “I have entered this space so that my people might be restored; that they might rise beyond all that has imprisoned them spiritually and physically and be led into a new land. And I am calling you Moses to serve as my ambassador.” Wow!

Friends, I am feeling the presence of a burning bush here today. God is breaking in upon the complacency of our comfort bubbles in order to rise with God’s resurrection spirit and lead others to the hope and light of Jesus. Is this not our call, to allow our hearts—worn as they might be—to be touched? To observe and name the misery of men and women? To give voice to the cries we hear? To know and claim the suffering around us?

So where do you hear God saying rise up from where you are, prompting you to be an ambassador of restoration? And if you are not sure of the cries and the suffering, just pick up your cell phones right now and look at the news feed. For every one story of hope, there are countless other stories reminding us of the brokenness around us. This over-saturation of negative news has impacted the spirit of our society, threatening to entomb the hope we claim. Even when we catch our breaths, the newsfeed presses in on us, reminding us of yet another senseless act of violence, children in detention camps, natural disasters that defy our understanding. This is amplified by the new normal on social media—unleashing the now-acceptable language of hate, polarization and violence—tempting us away from the language of hope and possibilities, encouraging us to hide behind our screens or our thumbs.

And that’s just the public narrative. Let’s add our own stuff: the fears that cause us to stay in the darkness of tombs that threaten to enclose us; the concerns carried in our hearts—broken relationships, illness, unemployment, the losses, church membership, church buildings, church giving. And the beat goes on, threatening to entomb us over and over again, thrusting us into despair and darkness. The truth is these moments of pain and loss are as much part of living as breathing. The question becomes how do we respond? How do we rise up? How do we renew hope when we feel exhausted and powerless and at the mercy of other people or circumstances?

I suspect you recognize these kinds of moments—moments when we just don't know (as individuals or as a larger church) if we can find the strength to rise up and take one more step; to respond in a manner that reflects the faith we claim. After all, we are a people of the resurrection, a people who literally rise up from the ashes of doubt, from the despair of death, from darkness into the resurrection of new life.

It is to this kind of despair and exhaustion that the prophet Isaiah calls out to a people in exile, to the city of Jerusalem. Centuries after the exodus from Egypt—and some 700 years before the incarnation of Jesus—the identity and destiny of God's children are again defined or controlled by their oppressors. This time, it's the Babylonians. The exiled can now return home to their beloved Jerusalem. But what they find is different than the images in their hearts and minds. Their sacred temple is destroyed and there is much to rebuild—physically, emotionally and spiritually. Where will they begin? And for those who had remained in Jerusalem waiting for the return of those who had been forced to leave—the numbers of people returning did not match the great return they had envisioned. In his commentary on Isaiah, Paul Hanson writes that the “numbers returning from diaspora looked like a trickle as opposed to a mighty stream.” Can you imagine their thoughts? Is this all that is coming back?

It is to this exhausted and disappointed people that Isaiah says “Arise, your light has come.” The prophet is clearly referring to the fulfillment of God's “breaking into all of creation” in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus. This hope-filled prophesy—this reassurance of God's power is calling the remnant, the faithful to rise up; to not surrender to the doubts, disappointments and despair. Isaiah is saying “I know that this may not quite look like what you were hoping, but it is precisely here where you are called to rise up.”

Isaiah is calling the question: you must choose in favor of faith and grace of the Lord OR place your confidence in the powers of the world.

Isaiah's words echo across centuries to us today—Rise Up! Choose in the favor and the grace of our Lord OR place our confidence in the ways of the world. I am grateful for this message, but it is disruptive and inconvenient and there are days when I am weary; where the darkness can seem more like a sanctuary than a tomb. But Isaiah's message convicts and encourages me forward. How can my spirit rise? How do I lead a people when I am I can be overwhelmed by the images of misery and suffering and the cries of pain?

Several years ago, a young writer of Puerto Rican descent, Lin Manuel Miranda (like me, he is what we call a Nuyorican) won a Tony Award for Best Musical on Broadway for “In the Heights.” It was the first Broadway production that speaks to the experience of the Latino community in the United States. The drama takes place in a small neighborhood called Washington Heights in northern Manhattan. Miranda weaves together the aroma of coffee, sounds of music with the universal themes of family, community and hope, as he tells the story of the multicultural Latino community in that neighborhood, a people who feel powerless before the cultural reality around them.

At the center of the story we find *Abuela Claudia*, who like other immigrants, came to the U.S. as a child. Her mother came from Cuba and worked cleaning houses in order to raise and care for her little girl. Now elderly, Abuela Claudia serves as a link between the heritage and courage of the past and

the movement beyond the present to a new future. Her words of wisdom are central to the theme of the musical. She says “ay paciencia y fe,” which translated means, “have patience and faith.”

It is a patience and faith grounded in intentional and determined action, not in paralysis or inaction. They become words important to the residents in the neighborhood—the workers in the hair salon, the owner of the grocery store, the owner of the car service. She is the emotional anchor amidst daily challenges—of not having enough to pay college tuition, of not being able to find a job because of the color of the skin, of the inability to afford to live in a better place. Like a queen on her throne, Abuela sits on the steps of her tenement building; offering words of encouragement to all in this, her world—“*No pare, sigue, sigue.*” (Don’t stop. Rise up and keep going.)

“*No pare, sigue, sigue*”—words that inspire action and hope for the characters in the play, as well as for the audience. For me, “*No pare, sigue, sigue*” is reflected in my family history. My late parents—my father, with an 8th grade education and my mom, with a 6th grade education—came to the mainland from Puerto Rico to build a life. (And yes, Puerto Rico is part of the United States). My dad fought in the Korean War; his point of entry was Gary, Indiana, and my mom worked at a factory making party hats, saving her pennies to bring her three sisters to New York City.

Three daughters later, at the age of 40, my dad left his job of 20 years and went to college and seminary. My mom left the life she knew and loved. I thought they had lost their minds. So my parents moved to the state of Maine where my dad—whose first language was Spanish—studied Greek and Hebrew in English, and my mom worked at the seminary cafeteria, feeding the hungry souls of the seminarians. With no guarantee of money, they would rise up. Where the world would have contained them; where the world said “no” because of language, accent, skin tone and culture, they could hear the voice of God compelling them forward, “Rise up!” “*No pare, sigue, sigue.*” My dad became a Presbyterian pastor serving Spanish-language communities of faith. My mom served as an elder and she quietly pursued her high school equivalency. Their witness humbles me. They courageously allowed God’s voice to break in to the complacency and comfort of where they lived, spiritually and physically. They chose faith over the messages of the worldly power around them.

But I know, here today, there are many stories like this one—stories marked by moments when you felt the world entombing your spirit but you found the courage to rise up, to get up and go on. Friends, these are the stories and spirit that need to be exhumed and embraced, that need to fuel our witness and counter the cultural narrative, as we seek to serve the church of Jesus Christ at this time and place. Who are the prayer warriors that have encouraged us across time to rise up? Who lifted us up when we were discouraged, despairing? Who were the women whose faith and courage emboldened your faith and courage? This is the cloud of witness on whose shoulders we stand as we seek to respond to God’s call to us and to the church today.

And friends, today, we the church find ourselves at a historical and critical crossroads (yet again). These crossroads are defined when Christians of all backgrounds, cultures, races and traditions come face to face with a fork in the road that requires believers to choose a way forward—the way of holy defiance or the silence of cultural complicity? As a nation, the importing of a people from western Africa and enslaving them is one example of the church’s dance with silence, complicity, and ultimately, the church’s reluctant, but faithful movement to decry slavery as a sin. These critical intersections have occurred over and over again throughout history. As people after people are

reduced to a place of non-being or second-class citizenship, the church has been called and compelled to rise.

Consider the dislocation of our indigenous north American siblings; the internment of our Japanese American siblings; the inhumanity of our current immigration reality, the rise of modern slavery through human trafficking, forced labor and child slavery, the promotion of fear as a way of vilifying one another. And the list goes on. And the church is called out of its comfort bubble – more often than not, with some resistance. I was reminded recently of a Kris Kristofferson song I loved when I was 18: “Jesus was a Capricorn. He ate organic food. He believed in war and peace and never wore shoes. Long hair, beard and sandals, and a funky bunch of friends. Reckon they’d just nail him up if he come down again. Lord knows if he’d come back now, we’d nail him up again.” I suspect there is truth to these words even today.

The truth is that we Christians—not unlike our ancestors who were exiled to Babylon—have a high tolerance for coexistence with the culture around us. We like our comfort bubble. It takes a lot for the larger church to hear the voice of our contemporary prophets; to choose between faith and grace AND the powers of the world. It takes more than it should for us to respond—“to see, to hear, to know, to enter the darkness in an effort to deliver; to ‘rise up’ to claim our counter-cultural voice.” But here is the good news: when the church does claim its voice, when we break our silence, history has proven that mountains can be moved.

I believe this is one such moment, when we can join God on the journey to see and hear the cries of the suffering. And this is not about popular politics and political parties; this is not about red, blue or even purple states. I love and serve people across these states and shades. This is about reclaiming our Jesus state of mind and heart, to let that voice be heard at a time such as this. Martin Luther King Jr called the church the conscience of the state. I believe our corporate conscience today is telling us that something is not right, that something is broken, that something must change; and we realize (perhaps reluctantly) that as a Jesus people, we are called to be part of that change. We can no longer let words that shape our identity be hijacked by interpretations that are not of Christ. Like Moses, God is calling us up from where we are. Like the prophet Isaiah, God’s voice is breaking into our reality, calling us to rise up and invite others to rise up with us.

So friends, using the tempo of Hamilton - we are called to rise up; *when we’re living on our knees, we rise up. Tell our sisters that we’re gonna rise up; tell our brothers that they have to rise up; when are folks like you and me going to rise up?* So may we rise, like colorful kites adorning the sky. It was Winston Churchill who reminded us that kites rise highest against the wind, not with it.

- May we rise up against the wind—and be church, who in hope faithfully grow and disciple our children of all ages in the ways of Jesus, clearly affirming what we do as part of who we are, because of whose we are.
- May we rise up against the wind—and be a church that embraces evangelism not as a program but as the incarnation of the proclamation.
- May we rise up against the wind—and in holy defiance, take our teachings out into the world.
- May we rise up in hope—embracing all humanity across gender, sexual orientation, age, race, nationality or culture.
- May we rise up in hope—affirming the uniqueness of our races and diversity as an expression of God’s love for the beauty of colors and threads that together weave the full tapestry of creation.

- May we rise up in hope—giving voice and presence to those who cannot speak nor stand for themselves.
- May we rise up in hope—providing food and shelter to all who are hungry and homeless.
- May we rise up in hope—breaking the silence in the world and church that has perpetuated the abuse of so many children, youth, women and men
- May we rise up in hope—embracing the stranger, building bridges instead of walls.
- May we rise up in the hope of the resurrection—trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit as she compels us forward into new life.

This is our call—our *“no pare, sigue sigue”*—as we together rise up from our pews, standing for a world that God wants, a world of love, mercy and justice. May we rise boldly in divine defiance of the brokenness around us. As Maya Angelou reminds us in the midst of all the challenges, “You may trod me in the very dirt. But still, like dust, I’ll rise.”

Rise up women of faith; Arise for your light has come! One thing about that light—it is more like the aurora borealis than the white light of the scorching noon day sun. It is a light of many colors, that dances and sings in the night sky that cannot be contained.

May we use the theme of this sacred time together to renew our relationships, to celebrate the gospel in our lives and to encourage one another to stand together. Because when the world is entombing us, silencing us, pressing in on us, we are called in the name of Jesus Christ to rise up—we are a people of the resurrection. I leave you with the song in my heart: in the language of my ancestors, “No paren, sigan, sigan.” Amen!

Ruth F. Santana Grace is executive presbyter to the Presbytery of Philadelphia. She delivered this keynote during the 2018 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women, held in Louisville, Kentucky, August 2–5.