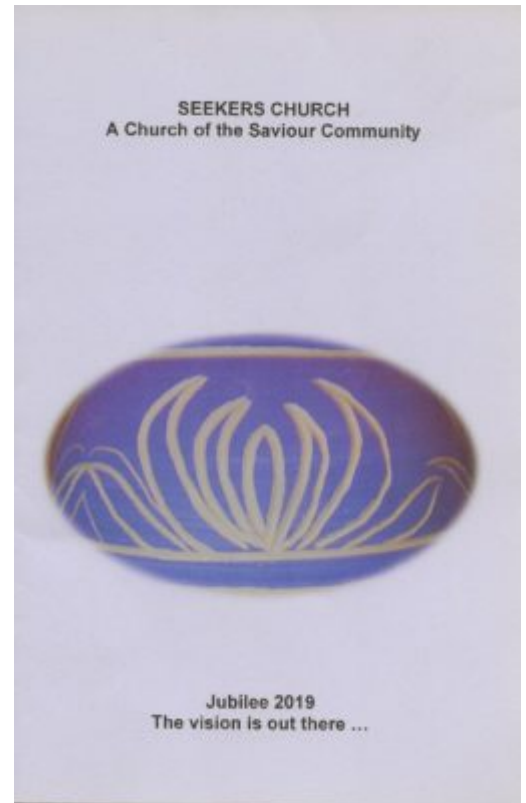


“Open My Eyes” by Okima Bryant

November 3, 2019



Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Never ever have I imagined that I would stand in front of any congregation to deliver any type of sermon, but the speed of the good Universe happens on its own time and here I am. Randomly, I chose November third to deliver my experience of Wise, VA to you, not knowing the lectionary, a word that I only learned of recently. (Thanks Pat!) Once I was finished reading Habakkuk, these words that spoke of, patience, and hope gave depth and meaning to how I view communities and Wise, VA.

In chapter 1, we hear the Prophet's prayer 1:2 "O Holy One, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to Violence! And you will not save?", and Habakkuk, 1:3 "Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?"

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.”

For most of my life, my solution to this was to simply turn off the TV, but that's not a fix all. Now my spirit tells me, it is virtuous to witness these afflictions because we have an ethical role to stand up and speak for those whom are unwilling or incapable to act for themselves. SAMS (Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards) along with others in similar mining areas speak for the mountains, streams, and lives within their communities.



What came to my mind was how Appalachia's communities began their crisis with prescription opioids over twenty years ago, but no one listened nor cared about the crippling aftermath and lives lost. A community cried for help, in 1997, America was at a

crossroad, their cry was ignored and now we are a country in devastation. At that time, this small mountainous community tried to challenge Purdue Pharma and their attempt fell on deaf ears. Over the decades the epidemic has only gotten worse, and this community, like others, need support.

Some of their support comes from the Faith and Money Network. Almost every year for the past ten years or so Michael Little of Faith and Money Network has made a trip to unite like minded individuals. Those who share a passion for much improved communities. This year I was invited to go along.

It was an offer I couldn't refuse. I wanted my eyes to open beyond the propaganda and negative stereotyping of our

neighbors. We know what they are, so I will not mention any of them. I wanted to experience firsthand individuals of all walks of life coming together openly, Divinely, and respectively working for a community that each and everyone of them believes in

What exemplifies the best community? When you hear people speak of Bees, do you think of community? You should because Bees are the founders of community. Each Bee has a role and a purpose and works in pursuit of it. Their existence has a purpose and they all work together in order to fill the ikigai of the whole entire community from Queen B to Worker Bee to Drone Bee to Offspring. I was able to recognize this familiar purpose within the SAMS community.

August 8, 2019, a well collected group of nine very diverse in age and gender arrived in Wise, VA. I was awed by the impeccable landscape of mountains. It was full of greenery and beckoning me to come and venture. It was a beautiful daydream



masking the nightmare of how corporate America rapes mountains just to scrape them bare. Not to mention the devastation to local communities of Appalachia, like non-drinking water and the skeletons of dried upstreams that wiggle down mountain sides. So sad, luckily there exists a good side to this story.

Faith and Money Network and the members of SAMS met up our first night at a Mexican restaurant for dinner. As we entered the door, we were welcomed with hugs and smiles and definitely in that order. It was like an audio of open books. Everyone willing to share their stories.

I was really touched by the individual stories of the SAMS community. Mrs. and Mr. Love, a devoted husband and wife, who works diligently to keep diversity and history known and active in their community, by running the African American Museum.

Mr. Love's Grandmother was one of the first women barbers of Color, and she could not cut the hair of People of Color or she would lose business. He shared many stories of his family history. One familiar one of how his Grandfather was a miner, and it paved the way for later generations to be able to go to college.

Mrs. Love spoke about the high illiteracy rate for Lee County. Which is surprisingly sad because they have a community college and a university within its reach. I suppose intellectual kids, would not want to become miners.



Black Mountain straddles the state/county line between Wise County VA and Harlan County KY [ed]

Adam, the administrative for SAMS, exemplifies his passion and willingness to stand up to the government and corporate America on Mountain Top Removal. Despite coal mining enabling his father and his brothers to care for their families. His eagerness to hold a double-edged sword is empowering. Fighting the industry that feeds his family, in order to dull one side of the blade and hoping to secure other means of employment for his family and community on the other.

My most favorite SAMS member is Jane, of how she moved away, came back to visit the familiarities of her childhood to find these places were stolen and/or neglected. Her spunk is amazing! Even at her glory, she still bears a sweet innocence of hope for her community.

Growing up in Oklahoma Taye, the President of SAMS was already familiar with how Big Companies make promises never intended to keep. Specifically, how they molest Mother Nature day and night for gas, to benefit their bottom line. School relocated her to Appalachia. While there she found a cause worth staying for, one that she hopes to one day prevail.

Others also shared their stories of how they left cities to visit and decided to stay. I get it, I did not want to leave. Who could ignore a call to become devoted to a cause that would withstand the test of time? Water to drink, swim, and play in; mountains to get lost in; people to love, honor, dream, and play with. This is what America should reflect. Instead we resemble crookedness.

Returning to Habakkuk, 1:4 "So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surrounds the righteous—therefore judgement comes forth perverted."

Habakkuk might as well have predicted 21st Century America. Politically, Spiritually, Morally, Traditionally, Ethically, and Humanly we are a nation divided. The majority is more focused on hers, his, and mine desires and agendas. The fallacies of existence. Propaganda in any form is just a distraction from the truth and yet we allow it to impede



our minds and safely tuck us into bed at night. Stalking our dreams just to alter our perceptions of visions that we are not willing to question. Instead we just believe the propaganda.

Knowing our elected officials welcome slacked laws and perverted judgement, we are content with them idled in their positions, because we are proud voters. Looking for answers to the wrong questions when instead we should be telling the right stories. Pushing the stories front and center. The stories that individuals do not want to believe in anymore. Like those of what would an Earth be like without bees, or trees? Jesus engaged many in his stories, better to tell a story of persuasiveness than to debate. Technology cannot be the replacement for the natural occurrences of Earth. Would it ever make sense to have an Earth on life support? Nothing



about Earth's vanity and we watch her being stripped of her beauty.

In chapter 2, Habakkuk speaks of readiness to hear what the Holy One has to say: "I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me and what he will answer concerning my complaint." Call to action the spirit of hope to each and every SAMS member and those alike to continue their patience.

SAMS have benefited from rulings in their favors, small battles won. The biggest prize is yet to be accomplished, for the reclaiming of mountains and waters. Why won't the whole of America dare to the injustices done to Mother Nature? It appears that everyone some way or another fancies a forever. And yet Big America refuses to see Earth's forever. Like many of you active against climate change, we all wait for Earth's very own "Me Too Movement".

I will move forward in wanting a much-improved Earth. In addition to my already existing beliefs, understandings that consist of warm and welcoming individuals, diversity, misinformed, and devastation. Individuals of Wise, VA were not much different from urban dwellers. My Faith and values have

me hoping that one day, we can all open our eyes long enough to witness we are all not that much different from one another. If we lay down our own bigotry, we would be able to unite the masses. Jesus knew this and like him, I hope to penetrate at least one mind from this trip.



Just as my untraditional family structure penetrated mine. My Anglo British Mom learned how to braid my tight curls. She did not have to, but it was an effort that she willingly made. It did wonders for our relationship. How different America would be if we just all made an honest attempt to love, welcome, and hold dear to those that oppose us? Yes, we opposed one another, She wasn't ready to be a mother and I wasn't ready to be her daughter. A little effort of nice can go along way. Too often we hold true to our mechanisms that falsely provide us with comfort.

Jesus stated many false prophets will arise and deceive many. Into today's era that would include media and social outlets, your smart phone, and officials in many categories. Jesus did not concern himself with the rank, status, or title of anyone. He did not allow labels or colors to separate him from his

will and most days I embrace his attitude, and so did the like-minded individuals I was with in Wise, Va

What I enjoyed most about this trip was the breath of fresh air. It was amazing being on top of the mountain where our hotel was located. Two mornings we went for walks. The first morning, we walked by a stream. It was saturated with vines that had baffled me. Their shapes were alarming, and I was willing to get lost in their embrace. No life was seen in the water, no surprise there. Since the waste from Mountain Top removal contaminates the water supply. Despite the circumstances, the scenery of this trail is unforgettable.



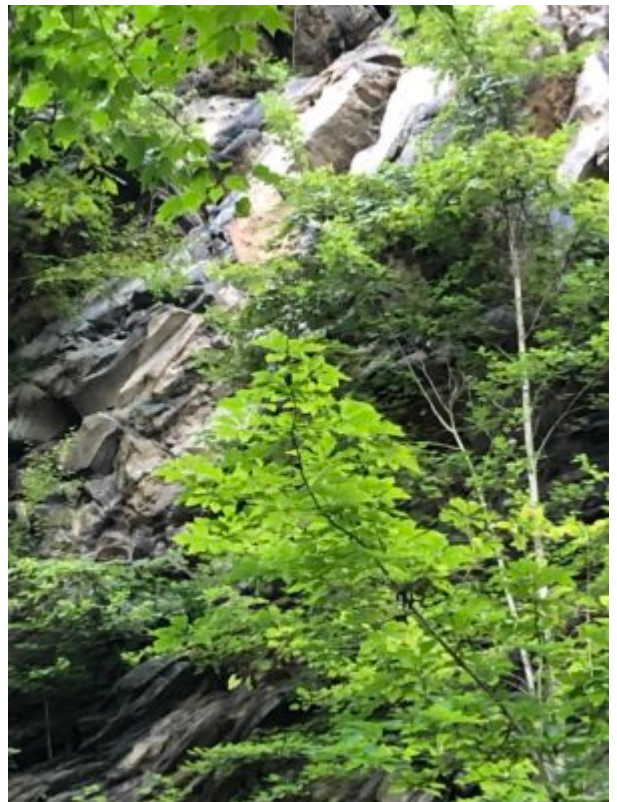
On the next morning we went for a walk closer to the mining communities. On this walk I saw two caves. I was interested in exploring, but my walking mate was not so willing, so I gave in to her "It might be a bear waiting for you" notion. Instead we sat for a moment, to be still in silence, to watch nature in its own habitat, is a truly awesome opportunity and a guide for spirituality.

Being present in the silence my spirit gave way to desperately wanting for those un-pleased with others to forgive in order to begin the process of healing. Healing births new life and genuine relationships of all kind. How do I unite the masses of the unfortunate? This question haunts me and has ever sense I was a little girl. Going back and forth between Catholic, Baptist, and Pentecostal, recognizing how one would cringe at the other. I was so confused, especially since I knew Jesus

was and still is, the common denominator. This trip to Wise, VA made me want it more. To pierce the hearts and minds of the individuals that allow America's history to maintain its segregation. That's a big leap of faith. For now, I will take baby steps.

One Sunday, I met Shawn of Save the Children while I was walking to Michaels. I asked Shawn, "Why are we always advocating to save the children in Third World countries and not the ones in Third World America?". He stated, there had been changes made and that I would be able to sponsor an American child. I chose Chloe, a red headed little girl from Missouri, who reminded me of strawberry shortcake. Her favorite color is blue, she would like to be a doctor one day. And if Chloe could go anywhere, it would be to Florida. Sponsoring Chloe is a baby step for me.

Let me close with this prayer:



OPEN MY EYES TO GOD'S DIVERSITY

By the women of WISDOM

Open my eyes to ...

Peaceful things in life.

Songs of peace.

Seeds of understanding.

Goodness in all people.

The spirit of each human being I encounter today.

Open my eyes to ...

The world around me.

Needs around me.

Outer appearances that can mislead.

Dangers of injustice and misunderstanding.

People we need to understand.

The hunger and thirst of our sisters and brothers.

Open my eyes to ...

The larger world.

The value of women everywhere.

Open my eyes to ...

All the people God loves.

All the species God cares about on this earth. □ The beauty and abundance of God's creation.

The grandeur of God's creation in every person, place and thing.

Open my eyes to ...

Love around us.

The face of God in those we meet.

The Divine source of goodness in all peoples.

The Good that is available everywhere.

The power of forgiveness.

Guide me so that I don't stand idly by.

Guide me to help according to Your will.

Guide me to know the difference between what I want and what I need.

Dispel the delusion that someone else is responsible for my community, my nation and my world.

Open my eyes to this new day and free me from the limitations of yesterday.

Open my eyes to ...

The warmth of interfaith gatherings that build respect and understanding.

The potential in each of us to cross divides and build new friendships.

Open my eyes to ...

God's diversity.

**Editor's note: The photographs in this posting are a few examples from a slide show that was projected without comment while Okima spoke, a visible record of her pilgrimage to the coal mining town of Wise, VA.*