

Faith and Hope
The Color Purple by Alice Walker
John 4:3-26
Colossians 2:6-10, 16-19
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The Color Purple by Alice Walker is a book that starts with "Dear God." That tells me it's a book of faith.

You see, Celie, played by Whoopi Goldberg in the movie, writes letters to God. There is nobody else she can talk to, or write to, or pray to. "Dear God," she starts, and then she tells her life story of abuse, first by her stepfather, the man she thought was her father. This man raped her repeatedly, impregnated her, and then twice took a baby away from her. And yet—she could write, "Dear God..."

Somehow, Celie's spirit survived. At her core she had a faith in God.

Celie's father married her off to a man, she called "Mister," Mister Albert. "Mr." forced her to take care of his children, work in the field, cook, clean, and take his beatings. It was more physical abuse, and it was also verbal and psychological abuse that nearly took all her self-confidence away. And yet—she could write, "Dear God..."

A woman named Shug Avery comes to visit Celie and her husband, Albert. Shug—short for Sugar—is a blues singer, a woman with style and self-confidence unlike anyone Celie has ever known. But, she figures out right away, Shug is her husband's lover. She moves right in to the household. And yet, Celie can write, "Dear God..."

Just when you can't imagine how a person could survive any more abuse, Celie begins to emerge as her own strong person.

Shug and Celie develop a close relationship, and Shug encourages Celie to stand up for herself. She takes Celie to listen to her singing the blues one night at an old tavern, and Shug dedicates a song to Celie, calling it "Miss Celie's Song." Celie later writes in her letter to God, "First time somebody made something and name it after me." That night Shug tells Celie not to hide her smile, but to let people see it: it's a beautiful smile. Shug's encouragement is a voice of affirmation and hope for Celie.

Another voice of hope in Celie's life is the voice of her sister, Nettie—but Celie didn't hear Nettie's voice, for a long time, because the sisters were an ocean apart: Celie in rural Georgia, and Nettie in Africa with a missionary family. Nettie wrote Celie letters, but Celie's husband intercepted them and hid them and wouldn't let Celie read them.

In the film, it is Easter, a time of new life. The men are drinking and carrying on. Shug goes to the mailbox and gives Celie the letter that has arrived from her sister Nettie. They go up to the bedroom to be alone. Celie rips the envelope open:

"They's alive!" Celie says. Her two children, taken from her as infants, are alive, living with her sister Nettie and the missionary couple that adopted them. Shug and Celie go on to find the whole stash of Nettie's letters—letters of hope that reveal details of a new life in Africa, a life where Celie's children are cared for and respected. Now Celie has hope for the future.

Celie had been in a kind of prison—she had no self-respect. And yet, she could always write, "Dear God..." God was the only shred of goodness she could hold onto. Somehow she clung to God and refused to despair. And then with acceptance from Shug and hope from Nettie— Celie found affirmation. She found her freedom.

Acceptance and hope, isn't this what everyone needs? This is what faith gives us: acceptance and hope.

When a nameless Samaritan woman came to the well, alone to fetch water, it was Jesus' voice that brought her acceptance and hope. "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Jesus accepted the woman, though she was a Samaritan, hated by the Jews. He spoke with her and asked her for a drink, though she had had many husbands and likely felt inferior. He promised her—and her community—eternal life, an ever-gushing spring of water from which one would never be thirsty. When the woman left the well, she left her water jar there. She left the water jar there! She didn't need the water she had come for; after hearing Jesus, she had the spring of water inside her.

The traditional reading of "The Woman at the Well" assumes that the woman is a prostitute and a sinner. But how do we know? Think of Celie—raped by her father and then by her husband. And Shug, the woman with many boyfriends, turns out to be Celie's mentor and liberator. We should not be so quick to judge.

Alice Walker wrote "The Gospel According to Shug," a chapter in another one of her novels, *The Temple of My Familiar*. Instead of the usual verses as we know in the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, Shug, this same character, who originated in *The Color Purple*, gives us what would be called a new version of Jesus' teachings. Like saying, "Blessed are..." she says:

"Helped are those who find the courage to do at least one small thing each day to help the existence of another—plant, animal, river, or human being. They shall be joined by a multitude of the timid. Helped are those who lose their fear of death; theirs is the power to envision the future in a blade of grass. Helped are those who love and actively support the diversity of life; they shall be secure in their differentness (289).

Do you hear the voice of hope in "The Gospel According to Shug"? This voice of hope comes to save us as individuals, and it also comes to save us as communities. This is why we say, "Hosanna in the highest! God save us!" And this voice of hope is here in us! In *The Color Purple*, Celie tells about how Shug told her that God isn't an old white man with a beard: "Here's

the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else" (177).
God is inside us!

The writer of Colossians says we have God inside us—or we are inside God—when he says in today's reading, "As you... have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith" (2:6). He goes on to say, "See to it that no one takes you captive...Do not let anyone condemn you...do not let anyone disqualify you" (2:8, 16, 18). Celie seems to have had God close at hand—maybe she thought of God inside her all along. She suffered more than a person should have to suffer—being poor, being a woman, being black, and being taken advantage of. And yet, she wrote to God, "Dear God..."

Celie could see beyond her immediate situation. When her life was literally falling apart, she picked up the pieces and began quilting—creating something new out of old fabric. She learned from Shug to notice *the color purple* in a field, to enjoy life, to respect herself—we might say to view herself for the first time as "royalty," as the color purple has always signified royalty throughout history. Celie learned to live in the present—and yet imagine a better life in the future. This is a vision of the New Jerusalem, in the words of John of Patmos in Revelation, "The Holy City," a future hope for those who have faith.

Howard Thurman—one of the most famous black preachers--recalls how his grandmother, who was a slave, would tell him what the slave minister said to her and her fellow slaves at the climax of each of his sermons: "You—you are not slaves. You are God's children." Thurman goes on to say, "This established for them the ground of personal dignity, so that a profound sense of personal worth could absorb the fear reaction. This alone is not enough, but without it, nothing else is of value. The first task is to get the self immunized against...the threat of violence. When this is accomplished, relaxation takes the place of ...fear (*Jesus and the Disinherited*, 50). The minister's voice of hope gave the slaves an immunization against fear and violence. It allowed them to see a picture of what could be, and it gave them a reason to hope.

I heard Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa speak in San Francisco two years ago, lending his voice in solidarity with the people of Tibet gathered together on a street corner in protest against China's treatment of the Tibetan people. Bishop Tutu said, "We have come to say, this is a moral universe ... that right and goodness and compassion and freedom are going to remain." More than a realized fact, his statement was a prophetic hope, the hope that our world might become truly "a moral universe"...someday. When you have faith, it immunizes you against despair. When you have faith, you can call forth hope.

It is the hope of a woman at a well experiencing a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.
It is the hope that you are not a slave; you are a child of God.
It is the hope that someday there will be a New Jerusalem—"The Holy City."

This is our hope. This is our faith.