

When the Spirit Says Do

Theodore Parker Church

April 5, 2020

The theme for this month is “liberation”, with the accompanying word, “surrender.” This week I want to talk about both Moses and Jesus in terms of what they were called to do during difficult times, and how they each struggled with their decisions to respond. How is it we each struggle to respond? What are we afraid of losing if we were willing to change as a result of this pandemic?

Opening Words **To Surrender** *Rev. Gretchen Haley*

What's going to happen?
Will everything be ok?
What can I do?
In these days we find ourselves
too often
stuck with these questions on repeat.
What's going to happen? / Will everything be ok? /What can I do?
We grasp at signs and markers, articles of news and analysis
facebook memes and forwarded emails
as if the new zodiac
capable of forecasting all that life may yet bring our way
as if we could prepare
as if life had ever made any promises of making sense, or turning out the way we'd thought
as if we are not also actors in this still unfolding story
for this hour we gather
to surrender to the mystery
to release ourselves from the needing to know
the yearning to have it all already figured out
and also the burden of believing we either have all the control, or none.
Here in our song and our silence
our stories and our sharing
we make space for a new breath, a new healing, a new possibility
to take root.
That is courage
forged in the fire of our coming together
and felt in the spirit that comes alive in this act of faith:
that we believe still, a new world is possible
that we are creating it, already, here, and now.
Come let us worship together

Story, pt. 1 Rev. Anne Bancroft

Last week we used one story, and told it across the service in three parts, inspired by the idea that it was Week Three of our on-line services. But we have to be careful about using that idea too far down the road, since we may be sharing on-line worship for a while and I can't quite imagine 8 parts, or 14 or . . . well, you get the idea.

This is Week Four - which happens to fall just before the beginning of Passover and just near the end of the season of Lent. In the Christian tradition, today is celebrated as Palm Sunday, when Jesus returns to Jerusalem at what has become the beginning of Holy Week, in anticipation of Easter.

So, we have two leaders to think about today - Moses and Jesus - people who responded to the Spirit's call to help their people. I am hoping we can remind ourselves of how their challenges have things in common with our own, and how we might appreciate that even our most revered leaders struggled with the changes they were being asked to confront.

Let's begin with Moses - who might have looked this, but maybe not. Moses' story is long and complicated, and we can't cover all of it today - though it's helpful to be reminded he was saved as a baby, and raised in the shelter of Pharaoh's home in Egypt. It was not until later that he acted on his identity as an Israelite. And not until after he had gotten into some trouble as a result and had to leave Egypt that he encountered the Holy, who said to him - in the form of the burning bush - go back, Moses, go back to Egypt and get Pharaoh to release your people from bondage. To which Moses responded, "Who, me?"

"Oh, my Lord, I have never been eloquent, either in the past nor even now that you have spoken to (me) . . . I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exodus 4:10) By which he likely meant he wasn't a quick thinker, and may have stuttered. "O my Lord, please send someone else."

To which God replied, here comes your brother, Aaron . . . he can speak fluently, he can go with you, but Moses, you hold the staff . . . you're in charge.

HYMN Let My People Go

Meditation/Prayer

Let my people go — amen.

I invite you now into a time of quiet, of mediation.
A moment to feel into your body, to notice your breath.

To feel into the solidness of whatever is holding you.

This morning, old stories are reminding us what it is to begin a new journey, an un-chosen journey. They remind us how often our journeys are un-chosen — and yet, here we find ourselves.

We find ourselves faced with so much newness; every day, the world turned upside-down, and again. Every day, crisis unfolding in new ways.

And yet, do the old stories not ring true?

We are still being called to understand ourselves as holy, as chosen in each unfolding moment for the task ahead of us.

We are still calling for our people to be let go — we are all still yearning for true freedom.

Do our old stories not still ring true?

And in that — beyond all of the newness, beyond the sense of a world once again upside-down — perhaps, we may find that we are not alone.

This, then, is our prayer: to know that in each step of this new un-chosen journey, we are not alone.

Meditation Music

Eli, Eli

*My God, My God, I pray that these things never end,
The sand and the sea,
The rustle of the waters,
Lightning of the Heavens,
The prayer of Man.*

Story Pt. 2

Let's shift our focus a bit . . . move forward in history, biblical history, at least, to the time when Jesus has finished his retreat, his time of discernment. For forty days, according to the story, he goes to the desert to reflect on what he should do. This is the time now celebrated as Lent. By the end, he had not eaten; so at the end of the time he was hungry, and Satan tempted him. I can turn all this stone into bread if you'll only worship me, to which Jesus replies, "one does not live by bread alone . . ." And Satan says, look around - I'll make you the most important guy in the world, to which Jesus replies, away with you, Satan - God is the most important thing in the world. We might imagine that Jesus is acknowledging the limits of our human agency, that there is something beyond us to which we must be reconciled and committed - a spirit of love and of life that offers us the chance to respond beyond our own selves, our own needs and wants.

What little we know of Jesus suggests his ministry was brief - he had been at it for three years, give or take. And during his time in the desert he wrestled with his choices - ultimately returning to Jerusalem, on a simple donkey, on a dusty path where his followers lay down palms to pave the way for his return. It was not a triumphant return - there was another celebration across town that was much bigger and finer than his welcome. Who would choose such a return except that it was a chance to offer up a different way of being: one that did not value pomp so much as humility; one that did not value the love of power so much as the power of love.

Homily

Before we circle back to our friends, Moses and Jesus, I want to pause and ask us to hold in light all those who have been victims of Covid 19, and all of those who are working so hard to keep the rest of us safe. But for the news, we are largely removed from the reality of their efforts, are we dare not forget.

Also, this morning, I want to hold up another inspiring leader - the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, who was assassinated 52 years ago yesterday. King's Poor People's Campaign is experiencing a resurgence thanks to the energy of the Rev. Dr. William Barber who is leading a new moral movement for the 21st century. In a note to all those involved in the current campaign, Dr. Barber reminded us of King's words from 1968: that ". . . the whole structure of American life must be changed," after which Barber went on to say, "Today, the structure of American life is indeed changing as we respond to the double pandemic of poverty and COVID-19. There are record numbers joining the ranks of the unemployed; hospitals and morgues are overflowing while the streets are empty; and many of the workers who have been deemed essential and mandated to work are those being paid the lowest wages, with the least worker protections.

We see a health care system on the brink after decades of budget cuts, privatization, and a focus on profits over patients and public health. We see, in stark reality, the truth that **140 million people in America are either already poor or one health care crisis or missed paycheck away from poverty**, nearly half of the U.S. population."

We can't be shocked. Economic disparity and poverty in America is a known statistic. Alison Gotlieb sent a link to an article earlier this week with a title that challenges us: we won't go back to normal because normal was the problem.

The question is . . . will we? Will we go back to normal? Or are we called to something else?

When this pandemic subsides, even though it has made even more obvious the inequities in our systems, will anything be different? Will we be changed?

Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, Paul Rasor, wrote an essay for a book called *Soul Work* that was published in 2003. His essay is called, *Reclaiming Our Prophetic Voice: Liberal theology and the Challenge of Racism*. In it, he says "Liberals want to create a strong and inclusive community but we often want to do it without giving up anything . . . We waded into

the waters of community up to our knees, but we're afraid to let go of the dock and plunge in with our whole bodies." (p. 109)

Moses and Jesus, as we heard earlier, plunged in . . . despite their hesitations. "Oh, I don't speak well in public," and yet Moses picked up his staff, and went. And forty days - Jesus spent all that time in the desert discerning - that's a lot of time to wander and think about one's commitment. It may be that we have at least that long to consider our choices, yes?

And yet I wonder: how prepared are we to do things differently at the end of this time?

Yesterday, I watched Audre Lorde quoted on a FB site called Learn as Protest. OK so stop right there - Learn as Protest. Yes. We can all do that, at the very least.

But beyond that, Lorde - self-described "Black woman warrior poet" - asks us to think about how we might find OUR voices.

"What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?"

Do you ever hear that spirit beyond yourself encouraging you to speak or act differently on behalf of the bigger picture?

Razor offers another thought in his Soul Work essay: "Liberals deeply want things to be right in the world, but they also want them to be tidy." That speaks to my heart, friends. I am a tidy girl.

And, yet the truth is that the kind of change we need to be a part of is messy - and, of course, not easy. If it were easy, it would have been done already.

We hold a tension, always - between accepting the present as it comes to us, detaching from desire, and working for what we want to be a better and more just future. A colleague shared a note she has on her computer: Right now, it's like this. Yes, but we also know it doesn't always have to be. As Rev. Barber reminded us the other night, it is especially obvious during this time of epidemic that "we are only as safe as society's most marginalized. Everybody has the right to live . . . and if *they* don't, (ultimately) we don't."

Let this be our prayer, then, that these trying times might incline us to step into the mess a little more boldly, a little more willingly; that we might watch and learn how we can find our voices and change our patterns on behalf of a larger equity, and a larger peace.

Let's USE this time rather than bemoan it. Let's step into it way above our knees and put up with the mess. Amen?

Among the people taken by the Covid19 virus this week was singer/songwriter Bill Withers. Let's honor his gift to all of us by singing the closing hymn, Lean on Me.

Closing Hymn Lean on Me