

John Sampson
"I Sing of Rage"
Text: Luke 4:21 - 30
Preached at KVCC
January 27, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Do you remember how Epiphany began?

It wasn't that long ago, just a couple of weeks.

But for some reason it seems to me like it was forever ago.

So I want to bring us back to that holy moment; I want us to remember what happened in Bethlehem as a way to open up the readings we just heard, so that they can reveal to us some of the possible challenges we may encounter in committing to following Jesus as our teacher.

Epiphany started with magi coming from the East, and recognizing God's image born in the baby Jesus. Magi came from the East and reminded us that we all carry within our spiritual DNA the image of God, born right here, right in our hearts.

And it's within this backdrop of God's image revealed that I speak this morning of rage.

And not just of one kind of rage, but of two.

The first kind of rage is mentioned in both our reading from the Gospel, and from the final words of John Brown. This is a rage we can only avoid by being silent about the truth revealed at the opening of Epiphany, the truth of God's presence in all people.

The other form of rage is left unspoken in the words of both Jesus and John Brown, but it is no less powerful. It is a rage we can avoid only by transforming our own hearts.

Jesus and John Brown.

This morning these two prophets enter into a conversation with one another, and come home to share an inconvenient truth.

Inconvenient to the powerful, the rich, the privileged, and the status quo. Because these two prophets come to share a message that those who society had forgotten, those who we have forgotten, are about to receive the great blessing of liberation.

In our reading last week Jesus tells the crowd that he has come to release the captives, give sight to the blind, and open the doors of those imprisoned. And in today's reading the crowds in Nazareth love what they have just heard, because they imagine themselves to be the captives and the blind and the oppressed. And they are. Living under Roman rule they know only too well the challenges and dehumanization of what it means to live as a colonized people. Living as humans, they understand how a metaphorical blindness makes us look over the needs and challenges of our neighbors as if these things were invisible.

But Jesus pulls a slight of hand, and his message takes an unexpected turn. He tells all of the people who have gathered around him that it is in fact not they who will receive God's blessings, but rather the people they hate and despise, the people they have alienated and built cultural and religious walls to keep out. He reveals to them the inner worth, the image of God, which lives within all of those that they've called dirty and impure.

And this message enrages them to the point where, out of jealousy and a sense of spiritual entitlement, they try to throw Jesus off a cliff.

I don't know if this story is literally true or not, I don't know if Jesus really went to that synagogue, preached an inconvenient truth, and was almost thrown off a cliff by an angry mob. But I do know that this story tells a truth about the dynamics of power, and how the privileged work to defend their privilege, then and now.

And the proof of this can be found in the story of the great abolitionist John Brown. Because John Brown comes home to the people of our nation and he tries to open the eyes of those in power to see slavery as the crime against God's dream for all of her children that it is. He fights for the literal liberation of those who are bound and oppressed. He fights not for the rich, and the powerful, not for the free whites of our nation, but for the enslaved black and brown people working in white homes, and on white farms, the ones who built our White House.

And John Brown's message and actions enrage those whites who cling to slavery as their God-given right. And they do what the people of Nazareth couldn't accomplish with Jesus. These white slave holders and their sympathizers in government and within the police and the military seize John Brown, and they execute him.

They execute him.

We are called by Jesus, we are called by John Brown, to live lives founded on love for each other, founded on the revelation of the image of God living within each one of us.

And these stories of Jesus and John show us what may happen when we commit ourselves to working for the humanity of one another. Rage is the possible reaction of the privileged to our voicing our belief that God showers blessings on the least of these, and that history is theirs. Rage is the possible response from those committed to male supremacy when we march to call for the equality of women and girls in every aspect of our society. Rage is the possible response from those who embrace a belief in European superiority when our Native American brothers and sisters wish to resist embracing all of Euro-American culture in order to preserve and celebrate their own ways of life and belief. Rage is the almost instinctual response to the situation where those who have everything are asked to share with those who have little or nothing.

Look at these stories of Jesus and John Brown. Look at the stories of MLK and Harriett Tubman. These are not stories of a cozy nostalgia, nor the feel-good Hollywood fantasy of Driving Ms. Daisy. These are stories that tell us the hard truth of what it means to commit to loving the image of God born in all of us. These stories tell us that this love costs something, that maybe it even costs everything.

Maybe it even costs us the rage that we may find living within our own hearts.

The other morning I woke up and I turned on my laptop, went to Facebook, and started scrolling through the posts. That's how I first learned that our Supreme Court had upheld a temporary injunction barring new transgender recruits from serving in our Armed Forces. And as I scrolled down my feed I saw many of my friends posting angry and hurt messages about what this news meant to them. And the more I read, the more I became...enraged.

Enraged against the Supreme Court, enraged against our President, enraged against our Cis-gender majority that continues to discriminate against our trans minority.

And I felt like I needed to do something. I needed to post some message of support for transgender people who wish to serve. I needed to post a message of resistance to all of the hatred that this Supreme Court decision represented to me.

I needed to do something out of my rage.

Do you hear echoes of my confession in your life?

Have you also experienced moments when the direction of our world, or of our politicians, has caused your heart to be filled with rage, a rage that drives you to take action, to take a stand against something, or a stand for something?

It's exactly in a moment like this, when we are frothing at the mouth with rage, that we need to remember.

We need to remember how Epiphany started. How it started with magi coming from the East, and recognizing God's image born in a baby called Jesus. We need to remember how it all began with God's image born within each one of us.

Because when we see the living icon of God in the other, when we see the image of God in the one we think of as our enemy, we're not asked to stop working for justice and for hope. We're not asked to stop resisting real oppression. What this revelation does ask of us is that we engage with each other, even those we cannot see eye-to-eye with, out of love and respect.

And this changes everything. As his neighbors try to throw him off the cliff Jesus doesn't get into a fistfight. He slips away. As John Brown gets closer to his execution date he acknowledges the fairness of those who have witnessed against him. Jesus and John give us a standard to try to work towards. They tell us to fight with everything we have against blindness and oppression, but not to the point where we are so enraged that we can no longer see the presence of God living within our opponent, that we can no longer respect the inherent divinity of those who we rightfully resist. They invite us to fight for justice and for peace not out of rage, but out of love.

And we can only do this if we remember how Epiphany started. How it started with magi coming from the East, and recognizing God's image born in a baby called Jesus.

How it started with God's image born in each one of us.

Amen.