

John Sampson

“Crying Out”

Text: Exodus 1:1 – 14; 2:23 - 25

Preached at KVCC

August 12, 2018

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 redeemer.

Amen.

This weekend is the first anniversary of riots in Charlottesville, VA.

In some ways they seem much longer ago than only a year to me.

I think that’s because what was exposed in Charlottesville is still with us; it’s still a part of our political world, and it’s still part of our social fabric.

A year ago last night a group of white supremacists marched by torchlight through the campus of the University of VA in Charlottesville chanting racist, anti-semitic and homophobic slogans such as:

“One people, one nation, end immigration.”

“Jews will not replace us.”

“White lives matter.”

“Blood and soil.”

The marchers felt no need to conceal their identities and marched with out masks. They felt comfortable enough not only to espouse hate, but to own it, openly, publically, without fear.

Throughout this summer we've been exploring the ways God's presence moves through our lives, and the world, in a sermon series I'm calling Extraordinary Time. And sometimes I wonder if I've really made the case for how our ordinary lives are actually really extraordinary, if we slow down and take the time to reflect on them.

When I think about what happened in Charlottesville last year, what's happened in our country since then, I have no problem seeing how extraordinary these days are, how this moment in history is not like others moments I've ever experienced.

And as you know the events at Charlottesville didn't end with the torch lit march through the University of VA. The next day there was a large white supremacist rally in town, and a forceful counter rally that led to violent engagements throughout the day,

culminating in a murder of a woman named Heather Heyer by a white supremacist who drove his car into a peaceful counterprotest.

We live in extraordinary times, times unlike other times.

And in this moment of national tragedy we looked to our leaders for comfort, direction, for a calling out of the hate and racism powering the events of Charlottesville and what we got instead was equivocation, forced statements that were overturned days later, in some cases silence, and a failure to hold accountable. What we got was an environment where those who hate now feel ever more emboldened to share their racist views without fear of reprisal. The dog whistles are gone. Now we have the blow horns. Now we have anti-immigrant perspectives enshrined in public policy, and refugee families torn apart. Now we have racism undergirding our discussions of protest during the national anthem, and how the perspectives of black and brown people are received and dismissed

within political discourse. Now we see just how enslaved our nation is to the powers of brokenness, and alienation, that we had hoped we might finally be free of.

These are no ordinary times we live in. We live in extraordinary times.

And we've been calling out, haven't we, we've been crying out as a nation for liberation. To be delivered from all of this hate that saturates our commonly held heart. We've been praying for hundreds of years, just like those enslaved people from this morning's reading, that all Americans are able to live in humanity and dignity, and that the strong powers of hate and division will be overthrown. That what we saw in Charlottesville will loosen its grip over us as a people, and that it will be overthrown.

But it can be discouraging can't it?

It can be discouraging that since Charlottesville things do not look better.

That since Charlottesville there is a more pronounced racism in our nation.

That there is still a lack of moral leadership at the highest levels of our government.

That our prayers for deliverance have been met with seeming silence.

It's exactly at these moments that I think our tradition can be such a support to us today. Because our spiritual ancestors have recorded their experience of being in relationship with God, and what it feels like, what the rules of engagements are, where God shows up, and

where she seems to be missing, where there is great blessing, and where there is a need for patience.

The authors of Exodus tell us a story of a different kind of slavery than the one we are experiencing in our country today. In their story the people were literally enslaved in their physical bodies. They called out to God, the God of Life, who had made a covenant with their forefathers and mothers, that they would be given their own land.

And these prayers were met with God's silence, and their masters' whips.

I bet they recognized that they too were living in extraordinary times. But I also think they asked themselves where God was. Where was the Divine Presence in all of their forced labor? Where

was God in the capricious violence and inhumanity of their Egyptian masters? Where was God in their slavery?

Where is God in our nation's enslavement to racism and white supremacy?

And our spiritual ancestors tell us that at first there was no response from God. That they waited hundreds of years, for generation after generation, without any kind of answer from the most powerful, from the all knowing, and from the promise maker.

In the midst of the Israelite people's suffering, in the midst of our national suffering, God's silence is the greatest challenge to our ability to make sense of the world, to feel there is a moral center to our lives, to just get out of bed and do the things we need to do with the belief that it is all worth it.



Looking at white supremacists marching in our streets, seeing that young woman intentionally run down and killed by a man filled with racial hatred, having all of these events met with shrugs and dissembling by our leaders can lead us to wonder where is God in our story.

Our spiritual ancestors wrestled with God's absence in the face of our inhumanity to one another just like we do. And they came up with such a creative response. They came up with an ear. They gave God an ear to understand why God took so long to show up when they were enslaved. They gave God an ear, which is to say they gave God a limitation. God finally acts because she finally hears the cries of her people. God's inaction is the product not of a lack of love or justice on God's part for those who wrote the stories of Exodus, but it's because she simply couldn't hear the crying out of those enslaved. God is given a human form, not because she has one, but

because it answers the question of how God could be absent while her children are enslaved.

And then our spiritual ancestors go further. They say that once God hears the cries of her people she will remember her covenants, and she will act.

Our tradition promises us that slavery will never have the final say. Racism and anti-Semitism do not have ultimate power, even if they are gaining strength and respectability in some sections of our nation. Torch lit rallies, and murder will be overthrown. Our tradition tells us that this has happened before, and it promises us that it will happen again. God remembers her covenants not only with the ancient Israelites, but also with us, here today, in these extraordinary times.

And this deliverance looked to those who wrote Exodus like a great miracle. It looked like the parting of a sea that gave God's people a path to freedom, a road to liberation, even as it drowned their former masters. Freedom from the power of slavery is so unexpected, and the product of so many lifetimes of work, that it can seem as a miracle, as something that goes against the inertia of our lives.

What does our nation's salvation from ugliness of what happened in Charlottesville look like to you? What is today's parting of the Red Sea? Where can we find the possibility of God's deliverance in our lives, in these extraordinary times we live in?

I think it looks like the work many of us here this morning are engaged with, but I want to share with you a piece of the answer I saw the other night on TV.

I saw a man named Christian Picciolini tell his story. He told of how he became a Neo Nazi as a young man through the music he was listening to at the time. And through that music he met white supremacists who taught him a racist ideology that he came to fully embrace. He came to believe that as a white man he was better than people of any other race, and of people of many religions.

One day, as he was beating up a black man, he looked into the eyes of his victim and he saw his victim's humanity. And this moment of empathy with his victim unraveled all of the indoctrination into white power he had undergone. It was that moment of grace that allowed Picciolini to disengage his life from that of white supremacy, and to found an organization called Life After Hate.

Life After Hate connects white supremacists with people of color to create face-to-face encounters that allow racists to get to know the objects of their hatred as people. The conversations don't happen

on an ideological level. They happen on the human level. And it's through these encounters that white supremacists have the same empathetic experience that Picciolini had, and which allows them to begin their own journey of disengagement with the hate groups they belong to. To date hundreds of people have gone through the program and have disavowed their racist beliefs and moved on to new lives committed to overcoming the hatred that has lived in their hearts for so long.

The thing I find so hopeful and so true about a group like Life After Hate is that it doesn't meet hate with hate. It doesn't meet ideology with ideology. It meets hate with empathy and humanity. It meets hate with the power of love, which binds us to each other, and connects the disconnected.

I've been speaking about the events of Charlottesville as if they defined the past year as being extraordinary, and in a way they are.

But, to use Hannah Arendt's words, there is also a banality of evil. In another way racism and violence, apathy and division, are so ordinary in their persistence and commonality.

What is truly extraordinary, what allows us to see God's presence even in our nation's current enslavement to the worst of our human natures, is a moment where two people can look beyond their difference, and in a moment of empathy, they can experience their shared story. This moment might seem small, and almost insignificant, but I believe in the depth of my heart that it is everything. It is like a parting of the sea, which leads to liberation and freedom, and which drowns the powers of oppression and inhumanity. It is like a miracle that defies the inertia of Charlottesville, and the events of the previous year.

Do you know that band The Wailers?

They backed Bob Marley, the godfather of reggae.

Well, they did a cover of an old civil rights era song, which was a riff on Go Tell It on the Mountain. I never heard the original; I only ever knew the Wailers version.

But I want to end my reflection today the chorus of that song, which will start out familiar enough, but then ends in a new way.

May this chorus be our prayer for our nation today on this anniversary of Charlottesville, may it be our prayer for our own hearts.

Go tell it on the mountain

Over the hills and everywhere

Go tell it on the mountain

To set my people free.

Amen.