

Prophetic Encounters

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The readings shared during this worship service can be found at the end of this sermon transcript.

Where does courage come from? What gave Abraham the courage to leave Ur? What gives anyone the courage to turn away from hearth and home in service to a nameless dream? We're told in Genesis that God told Abraham to go. We're told that Abraham left Ur simply because faith called him forward. The mythic image of the father of three faiths stands as sign and symbol for countless untold others who left not for a nameless dream but for a dream whose name is now and always has been, freedom.

I've just finished reading The Warmth of Other Suns, Isabel Wilkerson's magnificent narrative history of America's Great Migration. Her title is taken from Richard Wright's Black Boy.

*I was leaving the South
To fling myself into the unknown...
I was taking a part of the South
To transplant in alien soil,
To see if it could grow differently,
If it could drink of new and cool rains,
Bend in strange winds,
Respond to the warmth of other suns
And perhaps, to bloom.*

The Great Migration refers to the relocation of millions of black Americans who left the South in hope of living better lives up North. It is generally thought to span the years 1915-1970. In a little more than half a century between 5 and 6 million people made their way North. Economic factors are often cited as the primary motivation of those who made the move. It's said that the mechanical harvesters came in and took away the jobs of those who picked cotton by hand. Truth is the Great Migration was underway for forty years before the loss of cheap labor finally forced the owners to invest in mechanical harvesters. It was Jim Crow that sparked the Great Migration. It was all those broken promises. It was separate and unequal. It was first one war and then another when black men

were asked to fight for their country only to return wounded and victorious to find themselves abused and scorned again. They left because God told them that they had to go. They had to go because they dreamed of freedom.

They didn't know what they would find up North. Turned out there was no land of milk and honey. Prejudice and deprivation do damage everywhere they rein. My purpose here is neither to condemn the South nor is it to glorify the North. My purpose is to ask where does the courage come from. Who shows the way? Who are the prophets, the teachers, the dreamers who are the ones with courage to lend, the ones who in the end make progress possible? Unitarian preacher and poet Samuel Longfellow tells us, *"from hand to hand the greeting flows, from eye to eye the signal runs, from heart to heart the bright hope glows, the seekers of the light are one."* For every downtrodden tortured soul who finds the courage and summons the strength to stand up and move on there is someone far off or close by cheering them on and showing the way.

Dan McKanan, the Emerson Professor at Harvard Divinity School, writes in his newly published Beacon Press book, Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition: *When human beings encounter one another deeply, in the midst of their struggles for freedom and equality and community, prophetic power is unleashed. This is the power to denounce, to condemn those who would "grind the faces of the poor into the dust," in the words of Isaiah. It is also the power to announce—to proclaim God's Kingdom that will be realized here on earth, the beloved community of black and white and brown together, the new society within the shell of the old. Prophetic power enables people to speak boldly in the face of brickbats and bludgeons and fire hoses. It empowers them to tell new stories and build new communities. Because interpersonal encounters are the source of this power, their place within radicalism is analogous to the role of divine revelation within traditional Christianity, Judaism or Islam. For this reason I describe them as prophetic encounters.*

McKanan goes on to provide a brilliant survey of both interpersonal and inter-organizational encounters which have been the driving force of the expansion of personal and political freedom here at home and all around the world. He charts a lineage of liberation, from Frederick Douglas to William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown to Henry David Thoreau, from Sarah Grimke to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, from Bayard Rustin to Martin Luther King Jr. Just as these world

shapers depended on those gone on before to inspire and sustain them each of us depends on those who have summoned the courage to speak out loud and to embody the love which endows and animates our lives.

In 1928 E.D. Nixon, a Pullman porter, heard the President of his young union speak. Years later, reflecting on that moment, Nixon said, *When Randolph stood there and talked that day, it made a different man out of me. From that day on, I was determined that I was gonna fight for freedom until I was able to get some of it myself. I was just stumblin' here and there. But I been very successful in stumblin' ever since that day.* It was a prophetic encounter. Thirty years later as President of the Montgomery Chapter of the NAACP, Nixon saw a certain spark in a young preacher recently arrived to serve the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He and Rosa Parks, who served as secretary of that same chapter then recruited Martin Luther King Jr. to be president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association. It was a prophetic encounter. Person to person, heart to heart, we call it the civil rights movement, looking back it was all about love.

If you think this is about them, about those poor people who fought the good fight, think again. Right next to you, or at most down a few places in the pew, is someone who somehow found the courage to leave hearth and home behind in hope of finding this free faith. I tell you friends, it isn't always easy. Your ministers hear stories all the time from those who have to hide the truth of who they are religiously or run the risk of being shunned. And worse yet friends there are still those, even in these supposedly enlightened times, who have to lie about their lives simply to survive. We call it gay rights, we call it marriage equality, but when we look more deeply, when we hear the whispered promise freedom murmur in our ears we know we're talking about love.

The law does make a difference. It makes a difference who we say we are. If the voters of the South had been allowed their say who can doubt the majority would have voted to keep Jim Crow in place.

In 1945 James Farmer, the founder of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and Bayard Rustin, the brilliant black, gay, Quaker activist with whom he served on the board of the radical pacifist Fellowship for Reconciliation met with old A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to talk about next steps. After the meeting Farmer wrote: *Think what if would mean if, as the war draws to a close, the people of this land were to take their stand squarely on the*

Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, the findings of all reputable modern science, and the teachings of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and were to launch a crusade for racial democracy and practice of complete brotherhood in relations between the races. Having hurled bullets at the master race monster abroad, veterans were primed to fight Jim Crow, and their veritable volcano of revolt might be channeled by a Gandhian discipline as exacting as that of war. Twenty years later, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and then a year later the Voting Rights Act, Jim Crow was dealt a death blow. By appealing to the core values which inform the best that is in us, values that ask us to confront and unravel prejudice and deprivation lest fear and tribalism overshadow love, Martin King and his companions helped to put the Nation back on course.

Now it's our turn. The so-called "Marriage Amendment" which will appear on the ballot in November of 2012, directly contradicts the stated values of the Constitution of the United States. We can offer up a hundred arguments. But in the end aren't we talking about the pursuit of happiness, aren't we talking about love.

There is so much in the way, so much in the way of seeing clearly, so much that puts us back to sleep.

*I think, "I am asleep in America too,
And I don't know how to wake myself either,"
And I remember what Marx said near the end of his life:
"I was listening to the cries of the past,
When I should have been listening to the cries of the future."
But how could he have imagined 100 channels of 24-hour cable
Or what kind of nightmare it might be
When each day you watch rivers of bright merchandise run past you
And you are floating in your pleasure boat upon this river
Even while others are drowning underneath you
And you see their faces twisting in the surface of the waters
And yet it seems to be your own hand
Which turns the volume higher?*

I'm tired of turning up the volume. I sick to death, we are sick to death, of all the ways we insulate ourselves from the awful damage caused by prejudice and deprivation. Where does courage come from? Where will you and I find the will and the ways, in this place and in our day to stay awake and answer freedom's

call? The work is never done. We're always starting over. But you and I can testify that change does come. Yes, we human beings fail and we falter, sometimes horribly along the way. But we can trace a steady expanding of the circle of those who inspired and sustained by prophetic encounters both small and great find their way to freedom's gate and pass on through.

It was Unitarian minister and ardent abolitionist, Theodore Parker who said, in a passage often quoted by and attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. "*the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.*" So hope with me, pray with me, work with me, that it may be so.

May it be so and amen.

America

Then one of the students with blue hair and a tongue stud
Says that America is for him a maximum-security prison

Whose walls are made of RadioShacks and Burger Kings, and MTV episodes
Where you can't tell the show from the commercials,

And as I consider how to express how full of it I think it is,
He says that even when he's driving to the mall in his Isuzu

Trooper with a gang of his friends, letting rap music pour over them
Like a boiling Jacuzzi full of ballpeen hammers, even then he feels

Buried alive, captured and suffocated in the folds
Of the thick satin quilt of America

And I wonder if this is a legitimate category of pain,
Or he is just spin doctoring a better grade,

And then I remember that when I stabbed my father in the dream last night,
It was not blood but money

That gushed out of him, bright green hundred dollar bills
Spilling from his wounds, and —this is the weird part—,

He gasped, "Thank God—those Ben Franklins were
Clogging up my heart—

And so I perish happily,
Freed from that which kept me from my liberty"—

Which is when I knew it was a dream, since my dad
Would never speak in rhymed couplets,

And I look at the student with his acne and cell phone and phony ghetto clothes
And I think, "I am asleep in America too,

And I don't know how to wake myself either,"
And I remember what Marx said near the end of his life:

"I was listening to the cries of the past,
When I should have been listening to the cries of the future."

But how could he have imagined 100 channels of 24-hour cable
Or what kind of nightmare it might be

When each day you watch rivers of bright merchandise run past you
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Tony Hoagland

E. D. Nixon introduced by Studs Terkel:

Studs Terkel:

Pullman cars, the sleeping-cars famous on America trains for over 100 years, were staffed by white conductors and African-American porters. In 1925, A. Philip Randolph became founding president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. E. D. Nixon worked as a porter from 1928 to 1964 and was for twenty-five years president of the Montgomery, Alabama, branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Nixon was also president of the Montgomery NAACP where Rosa Parks was his secretary. After she was arrested, he issued the call to the black preachers of the city. It was Nixon who suggested the young pastor Martin Luther King, Jr., as head of the Montgomery Improvement Association.

E. D. Nixon:

When Pullman fought the Brotherhood, almost all the Negro papers sold out to the Company. They'd have big red headlines lambasting Randolph. They'd point out that the Pullman Company been good to the Negro: decent jobs, opening schools for children, all that kind of stuff. Don't bite the hand that feeds you.

When I heard Randolph speak, it was like a light. Most eloquent man I ever heard. He done more to bring me in the fight for civil rights than anybody. Before that time, I figure that a Negro would be kicked around and accept whatever the white man did. I never knew the Negro had a right to enjoy freedom like everyone else. When Randolph stood there and talked that day, it made a different man out of me. From that day on, I was determined that I was gonna fight for freedom until I was able to get some of it myself. I was just stumblin' here and there. But I been very successful in stumblin' ever since that day. It was in 1928

Shoulders

A man crosses the street in rain,
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.
No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo
but he's not marked.
Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,
HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing.
He hears the hum of a boy's dream
deep inside him.

We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what he's doing
with one another.

The road will only be wide.
The rain will never stop falling.

~ Naomi Shihab Nye ~