

Easter: Foolish Hope?

Sunday, April 1, 2018

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones, preaching

Hymns: #203, All Creatures of the Earth and Sky;
#108, My Life Flows on in Endless Song; #61, Lo,
the Earth Awakes Again. Choral Anthem:
Triumphant Song of Joy (Handel).

Sermon

This coming Wednesday, April 4, is the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Easter Sunday was 10 days later. The poet May Sarton, a white American woman, wrote a poem entitled “Easter, 1968.”¹

Here is part of it:

Easter, 1968

Now we have buried the face we never knew,
Now we have silenced the voice we never heard,
Now he is dead we look on him with awe...
Dead king, dear martyr, and anointed Word.
Where thousands followed, each must go home
Into his secret heart and learn the pain,
Stand there on rock and, utterly alone,
Come to terms with this burning suffering man;
...
Head of an African, vital and young
The full lips fervent as an open rose,
The high-domed forehead full of light and strong—
Look on this man again. The blood still flows.
Listen once more to the impassioned voice
Till we are lifted on his golden throat
And trumpet-call of agony and choice
Out of our hesitating shame and doubt.
Remember how he prayed before the task.

Remember how he walked, eyes bright and still,
Unarmed, his bronze face shining like a mask,
Through stones and curses, hatred hard as hail.
Now we have silenced the voice we never heard,
Break open, heart, and listen to his word.

For centuries the holiday of Easter has been marked as a time of hope, joy, rebirth and renewal. It is marked as a celebration. Yet Easter of 1968 was a time of grief and fear in this country. Remember or imagine the shock, pain and anger. Remember or imagine the sense of lost momentum for the Civil Rights Movement, the loss of direction. How to move forward in hope?

Fifty years later, the time in which we are living now feels also like one of despair, dread, and pain. Our time is marked by a pattern of destruction -- of natural environments and human bodies. Recent weeks have seen the 70th killing of a person of color at the hands of law enforcement in this country during this year. Here in Sacramento, Stephon Clark, black and unarmed, was shot by two police officers in his grandmother’s back yard. One bullet entered the front of his body but seven more went into his back. The bright smile of a 22-year-old is gone. Stephon won’t be learning, working, or watching his children grow up. He won’t be having Easter dinner at his grandmother’s table.

In Parkland, Florida, a violent young white man has added to the nation’s toll of school shootings with a semi-automatic assault weapon he had obtained legally. The bright smiles of 17 teachers and students won’t be seen at any holiday table where any of them would normally celebrate with family and friends—this year or any year.

Of course, while speaking about violence I want to mention the damage now being done to the institutions of democracy and civic life in the nation’s capital. From the top office in this land comes an attitude of arrogance, dishonesty, greed and cruelty that boggles the mind. Furthermore, not only in this country but also around the world there

¹ Complete text of poem at end of document.

is wide rejection of the plight of refugee families fleeing war, human rights abuses, and starvation.

So it feels a bit foolish to offer up a sense of hope, or to claim to have it, on this Easter. Perhaps it's an unfair joke for April Fool's Day and Easter to happen on the same day this year. Hoping for better things? Expecting to find more human kindness and peace among people? April Fool!

Nevertheless, we have a choice of whether to keep going forward, or whether to remain still and quiet in our grief, to remain hesitating in our fear, our discomfort, our confusion. In this moment, it seems clear that we are being called forward. But how to move, where to move? Perhaps we should look at the ways already marked by others. Perhaps we follow companions along the way for support, accountability, and encouragement. Much of the progress human societies have made is a result of solidarity--of not going it alone. Yet even for those who were wise enough to find companions on the way, there was not often a clear way forward. There was no guidebook, no path or map charted by others. On this question, Antonio Machado, a great Spanish poet of the early 20th century, wrote these words, which I quote in Spanish first:

Caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.

*Traveler, there is no path,
you make the path by going on it.*

Typically, I am a person who wants to know where my path is headed before I set out on it, before I make a choice. I'm a dithering decision maker. Rarely have I made big changes without some fallback position in mind. Coming out of the closet as a gay person was perhaps the single biggest step for me with no fallback position. As a young adult in the early 1980s, I would be making the path by going on it. I did worry about what I could not see. Yet I was fortunate; once I began the path, I found the support of others who already had been making a path forward, in their own lives as LGBT people or as allies wanting to learn and wanting to walk the path alongside of me. Only by connecting with others did I realize how isolation

and silence had oppressed me. Even though I had started without a feeling of hope, it turned out there was just enough hope in me to begin making the path as I went.

Most of the progress in human rights in this nation and the world has been made by people making the path as they go. In the Civil Rights Movement people of color put their lives on the line because, under the systems of this nation, their lives already were on the line. They trained one another how to wage economic boycotts. They practiced how to conduct actions of non-violent resistance. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the most notable of the leaders of that progress. He wasn't the only one, and his words alone would have meant little if there were not people on the path with him, shaping their hope in the form of courage and persistence, making a path as they traveled it.

Dr. King's assassination was a brutal setback for the movement. Three years earlier, Malcolm X had been killed. Two months after Dr. King's death, Robert Kennedy was killed. For so many people, the pain and confusion were nearly unbearable. Yet even in those early days of trauma, there was the imprint of Dr. King's presence on the movement and his vision of a better future to call us forward. Even without him, there was the path which people had been making. They made the path by going on it with courage and with faith, and with encouragement from one another's presence. You can read hints of this in May Sarton's poem about his death:

Look on this man again. The blood still flows.
Listen once more to the impassioned voice
Till we are lifted on his golden throat
And trumpet-call of agony and choice
Out of our hesitating shame and doubt.

Lifted out of our hesitating shame and doubt. To the broken hearted the poet said, keep vivid the memory of his presence and power. If we still hear that impassioned voice, it will be as if he had never left us. The poet was urging us not to lose the meaning of the work he had led and the progress the nation had accomplished. The choice

is ours whether to go forward. The choice always has been whether to suffer our broken hearts all alone or join hands and make the path by going on the path.

Let's consider the first Easter in history, which took place in the Roman Empire's province of Palestine. Jesus of Nazareth was the son of a Jewish carpenter, yet he formed his own path. He became a traveling holy man, making disciples for a strange ministry. He and his followers went around healing the sick, curing spiritual afflictions, and raising those who were dead or seemed to be. His disciples didn't know what they were getting into! The New Testament quotes more than a few moments of doubt expressed by his followers. "Teacher, we didn't know..." "Lord, we were afraid..." "Oh," he scolded them, "ye of little faith!"

Yet the New Testament gospels give evidence of Jesus having his own moments of doubt and worry. Early in his ministry, he went into the wilderness, a long time alone, facing spiritual struggles about the way to go forward. Yet once he set out on the path, he did not hesitate. Jesus broke social barriers between people, such as barriers between unrelated men and women, between Jews and Samaritans, and between poor peasants and their antagonists, like tax collectors and Roman military police officers. By parables and questions, he taught about God's purpose for all people to regard one another as family. He preached for us to put down our grudges and let down our guard.

However, some of his preaching brought him to the attention of imperial authorities. To preach that God was above all human authority was to deny the Roman emperor's claim to divine status. To challenge the socially constructed barriers of his time, like the barriers between ethnicities, religions, genders or social classes was to challenge the basis by which an empire controlled its people.

The message of Jesus was a radical one over 2,000 years ago. Of course, it remains a radical message, as we still have all those barriers to separate us. We still have all those justifications for

the lack of equity, fairness and justice in human relations; all the same good excuses to be unwelcoming to those we don't know and to be unkind to one another.

By the way he embodied his radical views, Jesus inspired more people to join his team of justice, love and healing, more people to make the path as they went on the path, together. That movement grew and its message grew till it seemed a threat to the powers that be. The Romans executed Jesus in a public way, intentionally designed to keep the people terrified and terrorized. Not only was his crucifixion a cruel and unbelievable experience. It was a setback for the movement which he had led. To many of his followers, it now must have seemed foolish ever to have been hopeful in the first place, ever to have been inspired to set out on the path with him.

They were devastated and grieving, stumbling around in confusion and misery. Yet they couldn't forget the love he'd shown them or the justice he'd preached about. They couldn't let go of the vision he'd cast for them about peace among all people. And they couldn't shake the sense that he was still in their midst, that he was on the path with them... as they made the path by walking.

It is a paradox that we must keep a vision strong and clear, even when we can't see anything yet. The Buddhist writer Mark Nepo says: "When feeling [misery] we must look wider than what hurts."² Look beyond what hurts. We must look beyond, even if we can't see it yet. Even if we have to make the path as we go on the path. Writing about kindness, Nepo says that "the reward of kindness is joy."³ He doesn't mean that happiness is owed to us if we are kind. Joy is not a prize we deserve by our efforts at kindness. He means that the action of kindness produces joy as a sense of well-being. Perhaps the same thing applies to hope.

The reward for acting with courage and love is a sense of hope. The reward for moving forward on the path with courage and persistence is that as you go along the way, you might find and see signs

² Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening* (San Francisco, 2000: Conari Press), 57.

³ *Ibid.*, 310.

of hope. Furthermore, you might reveal signs of hope to others by your presence alongside them.

The journeys taken by the followers of Jesus or the members of the Civil Rights Movement have given me a way to think about the demands of the grieving people in and beyond Sacramento to the killing of Stephon Clark and the demands of grieving people in and beyond Florida to the killings in the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School.

Consider the students who launched the March for Our Lives in Parkland and the ones who marched in solidarity and spoke out all over this land. The massive walkouts, silent vigils, and eloquent protests won't raise the dead. They won't return the future taken from every one of the victims. Yet their actions have made an impact. They have perhaps set in motion a renewal of hope. Hope that we can really reduce the number of school children lost to gun violence in the years to come.

They have shown that even in the middle of grief and pain we can still reach out. We can reach out to others, asking for help and offering help as well. We can claim the right to tell our story, can shine a light on denial and falsehoods. Together, we can face down those who would want us to back down into grieving quietly and giving up.

The children in the March for Our Lives mainly wanted to speak up and speak out. They have called for gun safety and sensible gun laws. Yet by their courage they also have inspired so many of us who are not children. They have made us want to help them, and follow them, made us want to embody hope in our own ways, our own communities and our own struggles. They have embodied and given shape to hope.

The work of shaping hope may not feel like hope—and it won't feel clear or comforting, comfortable or convenient. Shaping hope has rarely ever been convenient or clear, and people doing it won't feel comfortable.

This is the message of Easter. It is not foolish to hope for a better day. It is not foolish to put your values on the line or your love on the line. By putting love on the line, we can find our

courage. And by acting with courage we give shape to hope. We give sings for hope to one another.

It is worth putting one step in front of the other. It is worth making the path as you go, and not going on it alone. Amen.

* * *

Easter, 1968

By May Sarton

Now we have buried the face we never knew,
Now we have silenced the voice we never heard,
Now he is dead we look on him with awe...
Dead king, dear martyr, and anointed Word.
Where thousands followed, each must go home
Into his secret heart and learn the pain,
Stand there on rock and, utterly alone,
Come to terms with this burning suffering man;
Torn by his hunger from our fat and greed,
And bitten by his thirst from careless sloth,
Must wake, inflamed, to answer for his blood
With the slow-moving inexorable truth
That we can earn even a moment's balm
Only with acts of caring, and fierce calm.

Head of an African, vital and young,
The full lips fervent as an open rose,
The high-domed forehead full of light and strong—
Look on this man again. The blood still flows.
Listen once more to the impassioned voice
Till we are lifted on his golden throat
And trumpet-call of agony and choice
Out of our hesitating shame and doubt.
Remember how he prayed before the task.
Remember how he walked, eyes bright and still,
Unarmed his bronze face shining like a mask,
Through stones and curses, hatred hard as hail.
Now we have silenced the voice we never heard,
Break open, heart, and listen to his word.