

Sermon Epiphany Year A
 January 20, 2008
 St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church
 The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

In Honor of King and the Great Cloud of Witnesses

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was still in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword...And now the Lord says...I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Isaiah 49:1-6

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?"
 John 1: 38

On March 2, 1955, three white people boarded a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. The bus driver, noting that the white section was full, and both the back Negro section and the middle "no man's land" was full of blacks, turned and instructed the four women sitting in the undesignated middle to give up their seats. Three complied; one refused, a headstrong high school student named Claudette Colvin. She loudly defended her right to the seat in language that evoked disapproval from passengers of both races. She was subsequently handcuffed, arrested and imprisoned.

Several black clergy and lawyers of Montgomery quickly assembled to discuss the possibility of using Colvin's arrest as the basis for a legal challenge of bus segregation laws. They decided against it, because Colvin, for all her courage, was too risky. She was immature, prone to outbursts, and worse, she was pregnant. It was highly unlikely, the clergy concluded, that Montgomery Negroes would rally behind an unwed pregnant teenager.

In October of the same year, a white woman boarded a Montgomery bus and asked a black woman, Mary Louise Smith, to vacate her seat. Smith refused and was arrested. Again, black leaders decided against fighting the case in court. They felt that Smith was no better suited to stand at the rallying point than was Colvin the previous spring. Her father was an alcoholic and they lived in a shack on the outskirts of town.

On Thursday December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a seamstress at a downtown department store and secretary of the local NAACP chapter, boarded a bus after work. Soon the bus filled with white passengers in the front, black in the back. When the bus driver saw a white man standing, he instructed the four women sitting in the row behind the last seated white passengers to vacate their seats. Three complied. Rosa Parks refused. She wasn't in the white section, she said, speaking so softly that had anyone been talking on the bus, the driver would not have heard her. But the bus was silent. The driver responded that the white section was where he said it was. Parks said nothing. He threatened to have her arrested. She replied that he should do what he had to do, but she was not moving. He left to find a police officer, and who subsequently arrested Parks.

On hearing the news, Parks' family panicked. Any black person crossing the racial line of polite society could expect harsh reprisals. Her mother feared her being beaten, or worse. Her husband was desperate. But for the black leaders who had been waiting for the case with which to launch their legal challenge of segregation, Parks' arrest was

answered prayer. She was the ideal standard bearer, a person of great compassion and generosity, quiet demeanor and personal strength. When approached with the request to let her case go to court, with her husband pleading that she say no for fear she would be killed, Parks responded, "If will mean something to Montgomery and do some good, I'll be happy to go along."

Things happened quickly from that point. While the lawyers began refining legal arguments, the Women's Political Council, led by Jo Ann Robinson, a professor at Alabama State and member of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, went to her office late Friday night. Risking State funding for their positions, she and several colleagues mimeographed fliers urging all Negroes to stay off Montgomery buses the following Monday, in protest of Park's arrest. It was meant to be a one-day boycott, a symbol of solidarity. But when word spread through Negro churches on Sunday morning, and the clergy felt the emotional and moral power of the issue before them, they scheduled a mass meeting on Sunday night to organize a larger and bolder protest.

On Sunday afternoon the Montgomery Negro clergy met to plan for the meeting. Their conversation quickly disintegrated into an argument along the fault lines of past grievances and competition between churches, fueled by the egos of the clergy. The newly appointed minister of Dexter Ave. Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, Jr., arrived late--and you know what can happen when you arrive late to a meeting. Already known for his way with words and yet new enough in town not to have made enemies, he was appointed chair of the Montgomery Improvement Association and chief negotiator for the boycott movement. Frankly, the older, more established clergy stepped aside for King because they saw more danger ahead than glory. King accepted and was to address the mass meeting that evening. It was the moment he was waiting for.

He raced home, greeted his wife and new baby, and closed the door to his study to prepare his remarks. He was the kind of preacher who typically spent 15-20 hours on a sermon. How could he possibly draft a speech in 20 minutes? He penciled a few thoughts. He wrote a bit more on the way over, helped by a traffic jam. Over five thousand people came out that night, so that the church was overflowing and loudspeakers needed to be set up outside the church. "This could be the beginning of something big," he remarked to the one driving his car. Soon King stood at the pulpit and addressed the crowd with these words:

"We are here this evening for serious business...One of the finest citizens in Montgomery was taken from a bus, and carried to jail and arrested because she refused to give her seat to a white person. And since it had to happen, I'm happy it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks. For no one can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity, the height of her character, and the depth of her Christian commitment."

King then discussed at length the legal points of the case against Parks and the ambiguity of city ordinances concerning seating priority in the middle section of buses. The crowd listened politely. But then he took a different tack: "You know my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time when they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November. We are here because we are tired now." The people began to respond.

"Now we are not advocating violence," King said. "I want it to be known that we are Christian people. There will be no crosses burned at any bus stops in Montgomery, no white people pulled out of their homes and taken out on some distant road and murdered. I want it to be known that we're going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses of this city. We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, then God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong then Jesus of Nazareth was a mere utopian dreamer. If we are wrong, justice is a lie. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream!" The crowd was really with him now.

"Love" he said, "is the pinnacle of the Christian faith. But it is not enough for us to talk about love. There is another side called justice. Justice is love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which would work against love. Standing beside love is always justice." King concluded with a call for unity and working together. He appealed to history, so that people of the future might look back at the Negroes of Montgomery and say that they were "a people who had the moral courage to stand for their rights. We can do that", he said. "God grant that we will do it before it's too late. As we proceed with our program--let us think on these things."

After swaying and cheering King on all through his speech, the crowd was silenced by his abrupt ending. Then the applause began again and continued as he left the church. The members of King's own church were amazed--they had never heard him like that. He would later work to sharpen his message and improve his timing. But this, his first political address put him on the stage of public life where he would remain until he died. As Taylor Branch, the historian of this tale, notes with excruciating hindsight: King was twenty-six, and had not quite twelve years and four months to live.¹

Fifty three years after the Montgomery bus boycott, it's difficult to remember that when it started the goal of blacks and whites sitting together on public buses in the South was as impossible as anything we might consider impossible today. Before it started, there were many men and women working for justice long before momentum shifted in their favor. The boycott itself lasted over a year, until the United States Supreme Court at last struck down all bus segregation laws. In that year the voices of reason and common sense would speak out against King, accusing of him of inciting racial violence. Other clergy would implore him in the name of Christian tolerance to forgive the intolerance of others. In that year his life would be threatened, his house bombed, and his faith in God shaken to the core. It was never easy, and it was never clear. It was a time when people of conscience needed to speak and to act against the conventional wisdom of their day, and the rightness of their cause was not evident to the nation for a very long time.

Most of the people who acted with such courage are lost to our collective memory. We remember King and Parks, and rightfully we honor them. But they were surrounded by a cloud of witnesses whose sustained acts of courage in the face of violence is often overshadowed by the mythologizing of their leaders.

I'd like to tell you of one such man whose story would be lost to us were it not for the efforts of a priest in this diocese, Andrew Waldo. A few years ago, on his sabbatical Andrew went to Montgomery to interview as many retired workers of the Western

¹ This history is recounted by Taylor Branch in *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988. See Chapter Five, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott," pp.143-205.

Railway of Alabama that he could find. You see, Andrew grew up in Montgomery in the 60s, the son of an Episcopal priest. He played with the children of Civil Rights leaders, black and white. And the railroad connected some of the most important towns associated with those turbulent years. Andrew heard about one retired worker, Henry Caffey, who lived “somewhere between Montgomery and Selma.” There are 55 miles between Montgomery and Selma. That stretch became a pilgrimage in a later chapter of the Civil Rights Era, ten years after the Montgomery Boycott, when black Alabamans and their white supporters fought, and some died, seeking the right to vote.

Henry Caffey lived in the small town of Trickem. He had begun his work for the railroad as a gandy dancer back in 1941. Gandy dancers were the men who worked in teams to repair or straighten sections of track. By the time of the Montgomery-Selma march, Henry had risen to the position of section master, one of the highest positions a black man could aspire to. He was a respected employee in the company, and for the most part, he liked the white men that he worked for. He also had a teenage daughter who wanted to join the march from Montgomery as it passed near Trickem on its way to Selma.

It would be risky for Henry to let her do it. As Andrew says, “In a small Alabama town, everybody knows everybody. If she took part in the march, everybody would know, and somebody would pay.” It was a moment reckoning for Henry, with a lot at stake. He decided to drive his daughter to join the march. A state trooper recognized Henry’s car and pulled him over. He wrote up a ticket, walked to Henry’s car and said, “Henry, take your daughter back home, and I’ll tear up this ticket.” Henry replied, “You can write up as many tickets as you want. My daughter’s gonna be in that march.”²

Fifty years after the Montgomery Boycott and forty years after the Montgomery-Selma march, it is difficult to grasp how impossible it seemed to secure the most basic civil rights for black Americans, how fiercely and violently some white Americans resisted the change, while the rest of the country stood by and watched. “America’s Founders centered political responsibility in the citizens themselves,” writes Taylor Branch, “but nearly two centuries later no one expected a largely invisible and dependent racial minority to ignite protests of steadfast courage dramatized by stunning forbearance into the jaws of hatred.”³

The change was beyond one person’s ability to bring about, but each one did their part. Rosa Parks decided, against the pleas of her family, to be the one around which a boycott could organize. King decided to at critical junctures in his brief, brilliant ministry to relinquish his stature as prince of the black church and sought after orator across the country to assuage the conscience of white Americans to cast his lot with those who risked their lives on the front lines nonviolent confrontation to expose the violent underpinnings of segregation. Thousands of people whose names are lost to us acted in thousands of ways, large and small, and they risked everything with no assurance that they would live to see the changes they longed for. People like Jo Ann Robinson and Henry Caffey, and Henry’s daughter.

² The story of Henry Caffey comes from a sermon Andrew Waldo preaches in his work on the faculty of CREDO. The text quoted here comes from CREDO Conference 56, April 23, 2004.

³ Taylor Branch, *On Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) p.xii.

I came to consciousness of the Civil Rights struggle in my 20s, long after the events that changed our country had take place, and like many of my generation, I was envious of those who actively participated in such a dramatic movement of social change. But I have to realize two things: First, that for most people consciously living through the King years, it was, in many ways, as ambiguous a time as ours is now. Second, it matters less *when* we live in relationship to movements of social change than *how* we live at what ever time we're in. For there will be times when we, too, need to speak and to act for what is right when it's hard, when we're tired, when it may cost us something important. When we do, chances are good that we will not be rewarded for our efforts. We may never see the fruition of the dream that inspires us. Like our forebears working for change in their time, we must come to terms with failure. Sometimes it's more important to fail in the things that matter than to succeed in mediocrity. We live in a culture that would like nothing more than for all us to collectively agree to succeed in trivial things and avoid the risk of failing at things that matter most.

The gospel with which we have been entrusted is one of love and of all good that love inspires. It is also one of justice, which, as King would say, is love in action. It is both our responsibility and our privilege to live lives of love and justice, doing what is right even when it's hard, even when we fail. And we are not alone in this work. Our deeds, large or small, are part of something bigger, the fulfillment of God's dream. King used to say that the arc of God's dream is long, but it always bends toward justice. We don't have to carry the world on our shoulders. We need only be faithful, as those we remember today were faithful, to whatever God puts on our hearts to say and to do.