



MINE EYES HAVE SEEN THE GLORY...

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 20, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; and John 1: 29-42.

The year is 1968. The place: Memphis, Tennessee. Elvis Presley is living at Graceland with his wife Priscilla and newborn daughter Lisa Marie, and is enjoying the Grammy he has just won for his second gospel album, "How Great Thou Art." In the minds of many, he is "The King." But in March of that year, another King comes to town.

This King is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who travels to Memphis to lead a march in support of city sanitation workers. These 1,300 workers, most of whom are black, have been on strike for safer working conditions, higher wages and equal treatment. However, when several militant groups threaten to become violent, King announces over a bullhorn, "I will never lead a violent march..." and with that he calls off the march, and begins plans to return in April for a non-violent demonstration.

On April 3, 1968 King returns to Memphis. He is receiving death threats and tension in the community is running high, but he feels that it is important to press ahead and speak at a rally on behalf of the sanitation workers. On the eve of his assassination, in the last sermon he will ever give, he tells the story of an earlier attempt on his life, one that brought him perilously close to death.

"You know, several years ago, I was in New York City autographing the first book that I had written. And while sitting there autographing books, a demented black woman came up. The only question I heard from her was, "Are you Martin Luther King?" And I was looking down writing, and I said yes. And the next minute I felt something beating on my chest. Before I knew it I had been stabbed by this demented woman. I was rushed to Harlem Hospital. It was a dark Saturday afternoon. And that blade had gone through, and the X-rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. And once that's punctured, you drown in your own blood - that's the end of you.

"It came out in The New York Times the next morning, that if I had sneezed, I would have died. [Some time] after the operation, after my chest had been opened and the blade taken out, they allowed me to move around ... and to read the mail that had come in from all over the states and the world. Kind letters had come in. I read a few, but one I will never forget. I had received telegrams from the President and Vice President. I've forgotten what those telegrams said. I received a visit and a letter from the Governor of New York, but I've forgotten what the letter said.

"But there was another letter that came from a little girl, a young girl who was a student at the White Plains High School. And I looked at that letter, and I will never forget it. It said simply,

“Dear Dr. King: I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School.” She said, “While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I am a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I’m simply writing to you to say that I’m so happy that you didn’t sneeze.”

“And I want to say tonight, I want to say that I am happy that I didn’t sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American Dream. And taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been around in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. And whenever men and women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can’t ride your back unless it is bent. If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill. If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have had a chance later that year, in August, to try to tell America about a dream that I had had. If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been down in Selma, Alabama, to see the great movement there. If I had sneezed, I wouldn’t have been in Memphis [tonight] to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. I am so happy that I didn’t sneeze.”

If King had sneezed, he would never have seen the lunch counter sit-ins, the Civil Rights Bill, the March on Washington or the sanitation workers’ strike to name a few. King gave leadership to one of the greatest movements for justice and equality that our nation has ever known only because he was able to remain calm and still during that attempt on his life.

In his autobiography he later wrote, “If I demonstrated unusual calm during the attempt on my life, it was certainly not due to any extraordinary powers that I possess. Rather, it was due to the power of God working through me. Throughout this struggle for racial justice I have constantly asked God to remove all bitterness from my heart and to give me the strength and courage to face any disaster that came my way. This constant prayer life and feeling of dependence on God have given me the feeling that I have divine companionship in the struggle. I know no other way to explain it. It is the fact that in the midst of external tension, God can give an inner peace.”

The author of today’s psalm writes: “I waited patiently upon the Lord; he stooped to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay; he set my feet upon a high cliff and made my footing sure.” (Psalm 40:1-2)

And that was King’s experience. Even as he walked “through many dangers, toils and snares,” he walked in the presence of the Spirit. The Spirit was his divine companion, giving him the strength and the courage to face any disaster that came his way. He had the very same faith as the ancient psalmist. In a time of civil turmoil and racial tension, he lived in the peace and presence of God.

No matter what danger or turmoil we face, God is with us in all that we do. In the midst of anxiety and tension, God offers us inner peace if we will only accept it. This peace gives us courage and confidence, inspiration and insight, serenity and strength. Most of all, this peace frees us to do God’s will.

This is important, because peace doesn't necessarily protect us from pain and suffering - it doesn't shield us from the hardship that comes from doing what God calls us to do. Samuel, Nathanael and Paul were called to advance the reign of God under very different circumstances, and it was sometimes costly. But it was the gift of inner peace that freed them to respond.

For Martin Luther King, death by an assassin's bullet came just one day after his speech at the rally in Memphis. God's peace didn't give King long life, but it was life long. It never failed him. Without that gift of peace, King would not have been able to organize the Montgomery bus boycott. If it had not been for the inspiration and insight of the Spirit, he would not have been able to give his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington. If it had not been for God's courage and confidence, he would not have been able to launch "Crusade for Citizenship", that massive voter registration drive. It was that peace which passes all understanding that gave King the courage and confidence to face death threats, and to stand with the Memphis sanitation workers.

It is the peace of God that gives us strength and courage, and sets us free, free to respond to the call of God, and free to die for what we believe in. King knew this all too well on the night before his own death. In his last sermon, King said:

"It really doesn't matter what happens now... I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me...?"

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Like King, we are never going to be free from adversity. But if we accept the gift of that peace that passes all understanding, it will set us free, free to respond to the call of God, free to live with integrity, and to do what we know to be right no matter what the cost. In the words of the old hymn:

The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.

Yet let us pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God.

Sources:

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Hymnal 1982, #661