

When Hope and History Rhyme

Readings: 'Snow' by Anne Sexton
from *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* by Seamus Heaney

Always, there is a story behind the story. I told our children this morning about one moment in the Children's Marches in Birmingham, the story of May 5, 1963.

And because the patterns of our services and the careful timing and valuable content of our religious education program, I couldn't take the time necessary to tell the full context of that story to our children, but I can tell it to you.

The spring of 1963 was a low ebb in the struggle for civil rights in this country. We know now that the March on Washington, the "I Have a Dream" speech, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and other milestones were soon to come, but, of course, no one knew that then.

Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders were rather demoralized that spring of 1963. They had started a campaign to end segregation in Birmingham, Alabama and it wasn't going well. The police were jailing every marcher, which, understandably, meant that fewer and fewer people were willing to march, were willing to go to jail. King had recently been imprisoned himself. He had just written his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail.' It was a call to action aimed mostly at white liberals – and white liberals were not responding the that call.

Taylor Branch is a historian who has written a trilogy of books recounting the civil rights movement in tremendous detail. If you want to read 2,000 beautifully written pages about the civil rights movement, these are the books for you. He writes of this time, "The leaders could not predict exactly how an uprising would lead to victory instead of further pain, but they did recognize they were lost without some decisive move."¹ "Having submitted his prestige and his body to jail, and having hurled his innermost passions against the aloof respectability of while American clergymen, all without noticeable effect, King committed his cause to the witness of schoolchildren."²

Allowing children to march was controversial. It was championed by a young clergyman named James Bevel, who thought that children could provide a moral example to the nation. He had been leading nonviolence training workshops for children and youth and thought they could be powerful advocates for justice. Many of the other civil rights leaders were not enthusiastic about this. They worried about children's safety and how an arrest might impact their future. They worried about what it would look like for grown adults to be holding back while children risked arrest and injury. Bevel's winning argument was rooted in the practices of the Christian churches that were vital to the movement. The black Baptist churches that were at the core of the civil rights movement allowed children as young as six to become church members, as long as they "consciously accepted the Christian faith."³ If someone is mature enough to join the church, they can march, it was decided. If they can make decisions about their individual salvation, they can take action to ensure our nation's collective salvation.

The first children's march was on Thursday, May 2, 1963. On that day, 958 children marched. As many of their parents watched from the sidewalks, the children sang and held signs. They overwhelmed the

¹ Branch, Taylor, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988. Page 752

² *Parting the Waters*, 755

³ *Parting the Waters*, 755

police and law enforcement infrastructure— over 600 children, ranging in age from 6 to 18 were arrested. They were transported to jails in paddy wagons and school busses. There are reports that up to 75 children were crammed into holding cells designed to hold eight adults.⁴

The following day, one thousand more children marched. There was no room left in the jail so the police were instructed to get the children to disperse, using every tool available. A group of 60 children were targeted with fire hoses – and while most of them fled, 10 stayed and started singing, “Freedom.” The authorities brought out more powerful hoses and the force of the water pushed the children across the pavement.⁵ Other children who marched in other directions were met with police dogs. Three children were bit badly enough to require hospitalization.⁶ The images of all of this were seen throughout the world. You have probably seen them, maybe you watched this unfold as it happened in newspapers and news broadcasts. Maybe you know these pictures from documentaries and history books.

That is the story before the story I told the children. The 3,000 children who marched on May 5 knew that they might be hurt, knew that they might end up in jail – and they marched anyway. What makes someone march in the face of such danger? In part, faith. Those children were deeply rooted in a black Christian tradition that taught them that God is on their side, God is on the side of the oppressed. They knew in their bones the stories of Moses leading the Exodus, Paul and Silas in jail, Daniel in the lion's den. They believed in a God who takes sides, who was taking their side.

Those children also acted from hope, from the belief in human goodness. Those children hoped, despite ample evidence to the contrary, that those who wielded power would have the moral imagination to see them as human, worthy of equal rights, possessing equal souls. They acted with the hope that those in power would be pressured to protect them from fire hoses and police dogs, to listen to their demands for equality. They had hope that their actions would be seen and would change people's hearts. They believed they could bend the moral arc of the universe.

And, as we know looking back, their hopes were largely realized, their hope that people in power would hear their calls for justice was realized. After more marches, some that were met with violence and some that weren't, an agreement was reached. Birmingham would have integrated restrooms, water fountains, and lunch counters.⁷ The momentum from that victory carried the movement through to the March on Washington that summer, which carried the movement toward the legislation passed in the years to come that ensured equality in law beyond Birmingham.

Near the end of that campaign, when victory seemed on the horizon, Martin Luther King told a mass meeting, “There are those who make history. There are those who experience history. I don't know how many historians we have in Birmingham tonight. I don't know how many of you would be able to write a history book. But you are certainly making history, and you are experiencing history. And you will make it possible for the historians of the future to write a marvelous chapter.”⁸

And here's a piece of one of those marvelous chapters, from historian Branch again, “There was no historical precedent for Birmingham, Alabama in April and May of 1963, when the power balance of a great nation turned not on clashing armies but on the youngest student demonstrators of African descent, down to first and second graders. Only the literature of Passover ascribes such impact to the

⁴ *Parting the Waters*, 757

⁵ *Parting the Waters*, 758-9

⁶ *Parting the Waters*, 760

⁷ *Parting the Waters*, 791

⁸ *Parting the Waters*, 773

fate of minors, and never before was a country transformed, arguably redeemed by the active moral witness of schoolchildren.

The miracle of Birmingham might have stood alone as the culmination of a freedom movement grown slowly out of Southern black churches. Yet it was merely the strongest of many tides that crested in the movement's peak years, 1963-65. They challenged, inspired, and confounded America over the meaning of simple words: dignity, equal votes, equal souls."⁹

That is one story of hope that I hope we hold as a seed in our soul, that we tend and watch so it might bloom within us, among us, and beyond us.

Here is another, an ancient Greek story about an archer named Philoctetes. Philoctetes was among those who set out for the Trojan War with Odysseus. He possessed a magical bow, that had been given to him by Hercules just before that hero died. On the way to Troy, Philoctetes was bitten by a snake. The wound never healed. Philoctetes was in constant pain and the wound smelled terrible. Odysseus abandoned Philoctetes on a deserted island and sailed off to war.

Ten years later, the war ranging on, there is a prophecy that only that bow from Hercules now owned by Philoctetes, can end the war. Odysseus returns to the island in search of that bow, bringing with him a younger soldier, that he convinces to try to steal Hercules' bow. The play takes place wholly on the island with the three men discussing war, morality, trauma, and forgiveness before Philoctetes ultimately is convinced by an appearance from Hercules, now a God, that he must go to Troy, end the war, and be healed.

This story is a common one for ancient Greek playwrights. At least four different plays telling this story were written; the only one that survived is by Sophocles, which made its debut 400 years before the common era. Seamus Heaney, an Irish poet, playwright, and Nobel Laureate made his own version of Sophocles work, called *The Cure at Troy*. A line from it, 'When hope and history rhyme' is the title of the sermon today... Heaney's version brings in echoes of the modern to the ancient story. He has said that he wrote it in part to explore the challenges of reconciliation in South Africa and his native Northern Ireland. Heaney died several years ago, the words 'walk on air against your better judgement' are carved on his headstone. What a powerful call to hope that is.

The character of Philoctetes is a fascinating one. He is hurt, abandoned by people he thought he could trust. His physical and emotional wounds have been festering for ten years. He wails in pain throughout the play. He has spent ten years alone, living in a cave, ruminating on what has been done to him. Then these men appear. The young soldier tries to trick him into leaving the island, saying he'll take him home. Odysseus tries to explain how abandoning him was the right choice, his wailing and stinking hurt the morale of the other soldiers. And they tell Philoctetes that there is a healer at Troy who can heal his wound, that there is a prophecy that only he can lead the Greeks to victory. What does one do at that point? How could he trust these words from the man who abandoned him? Should he hope? What could hope even look like after ten years of pain and isolation?

When Philoctetes is certain he won't go to Troy, when he has convinced the young soldier to take him straight home, the chorus chimes in, with a mature hope – a hope that is fully aware of all of the suffering in the world. The chorus says, as Tim read earlier,

⁹ Branch, Taylor. *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013. Page 186

"Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard,
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

The innocent in jails
Beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, *Don't hope
On this side of the grave.*
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells."¹⁰

As Philoctetes considers this, Hercules, once a hero, now a God, appears to say,

"Go, Philoctetes, with this boy,
Go and be cured and capture Troy.
Asclepius will make you whole,
Relieve your body and your soul.

Go with your bow. Conclude the sore
And cruel stalemate of our war....

Then take just spoils and sail at last
Out of the bad dream of your past."¹¹

¹⁰ Heaney, Seamus. *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1991. Page 77

¹¹ Heaney, 79

And so, with a little divine intervention, Philoctetes, gives in to hope and trusts Odysseus despite his past untrustworthy behavior. He is willing to seek out the further shore on the far side of revenge. He is able to return to right relationship with a man who has hurt him. The Gods and the chorus tell him healing can only be found through returning to relationship. He moves beyond his pain to act as though things can get better.

Now it is dangerous to tell people to turn the other cheek and bless those who persecute you. Words like those have kept people in cycles of abuse and oppression. Forgiveness isn't always the best course of action... but we also know that ability to hope when there appears to be no good reason to hope is a power with the potential to change the world. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" is a refrain often repeated by Martin Luther King Jr. He borrowed it from Theodore Parker, a 19th century Unitarian minister and abolitionist. This echoes the statement that

"once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme."

And this belief, that things can get better is a central message of the holiday we mark tomorrow. It is an act of hope. We, as the church, are called to be the custodians of hope. This isn't false hope, this isn't a refusal to see things as they are. We know things are far perfect, but we know that we, like those Birmingham children, have the power to bend the arc of justice. We can be a drop in the longed for tidal wave of justice.

And we know that hope is an action. It is not idle. It is taking risks to see our values made real. Some of my ministerial colleagues write, "Optimists believe something will go the way they would like; they generally expect that things are going to turn out okay, with the desired outcome. Hope, however, is knowing something is moral and right, and working for it in spite of what others say. When we are hopeful we are willing to be involved. Optimism is passive; hope is active."¹²

Hope is active. Hope is six year olds marching in the face of fire hoses and police dogs and wounded soldiers trusting those who might not be worthy of trust and knowing that is the source of healing. Hope is prophets turning their words into action. Hope is all the other stories of people bending the arc and being the tidal wave that we hold in our hearts.

This day and this week, may we continue to join with others to be the benders of the moral arc of the universe and drops in the tidal wave of justice.

May we be the people of love.

The people of hope.

And the people of change.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

¹²Muir, Frederic, John T. Crestwell Jr., and Christina Leone Tracy. 'Turning Toward Wholeness' in *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*, Frederic Muir, ed. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2016. page 196