

Jan. 18, 2009

We Shall Overcome

I Samuel 3:1-20 & John 1:43-51

Jesus is baptized and hears the voice of God calling and blessing him—You are my beloved Son—with you I am well pleased. Don't we yearn to just stay in that moment—not only for Jesus sake but for ours? Wouldn't we just love to hear God say to us through Jesus everyday you are my beloved child.

A friend of mine collects quirky buttons with various sayings on them. One says—does the noise in my head bother you? Indeed, we all live with such noise in our heads that we can barely hear this voice—do you not believe that God speaks to us still whispering through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus this ancient and glorious truth—you are my beloved child.

Jesus wasn't allowed to bask in that moment of love and joy and blessing. The spirit sent him, drove him out into the wilderness to be tried and tested, to struggle with his identity, to sear the meaning of God's call deep into his soul.

Then, Jesus comes out of the wilderness, back to Galilee and begins calling disciples. And he has now called you and called me. We rejoice in that call. We live out our lives as disciples, as followers of Jesus in this context of this community and of the dramatic events happening in the US. Barack Obama's election is indeed ceiling breaking, earth shattering, drama creating. A mixed race American will be inaugurated as the President for the first time. I love Obama's phrase from his powerful speech on race where he said, "Look, I have relatives who look like Bernie Mac and some who look like Margaret Thatcher." Some people voted on the basis of race alone. But we can only hope that the vast majority of us are committed to and have come to a place where indeed we judge one another by the content of a person's character and not by the color of their skin.

So we certainly are entitled in Jesus name and spirit to celebrate the election and inauguration as a dramatic and glorious step in our national and personal struggles with racism. But a dramatic victory certainly doesn't mean that the war is won. In fact, we will face the danger of complacency. Heah, we have an African American president, so maybe we don't have to deal with issues of prejudice in our communities or churches or in our hearts.

But we have decided to follow Jesus no turning back, no turning back. So we know that we are called to be able to pass the peace rejoicing to everyone. We want our children to grow up respecting themselves and respecting all they meet.

I would like to share part of my own journey. When I was a kid visiting my grandfather I remember a trip to the grocery store. It was always hot in Missouri and I reached for some of the ice under the vegetables. Don't touch that said my kindly grandfather—the darkies might have touched it.

In high school, I loved playing basketball and one of the few black kids in our school was on the team. Willie was a good shooter but his special gift was jumping center. He had this incredible vertical leap.

In college, my freshman year in 1963, only months after the 4 little girls were bombed into the arms of God in Birmingham, I heard Martin Luther King speak. Eloquent, forceful, inspiring. But my heart was converted by the speech of a 22 year old senior who had taken a year's leave from school to work with the nonviolent resistance movement in Memphis, Tennessee. He ended his speech with this challenge. "Test your belief in the fires of the hells of this world." So in the summer of 1964, I volunteered for the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. About 500 volunteers, mostly students, mostly white agreed to serve under the direction of veteran civil rights organizers to promote voter registration and create freedom schools. We were trained in Oxford, Ohio at the only college in the country that would agree to have us use their facilities. We were told to expect violence and to be prepared to respond non violently. The video Eyes on the Prize shows part of that training session.

So you see me as the person who looks really worried. We would sit around the dorms at night confronting our fears. Jesus calls us surely to confront our fears. Perfect love he says casts out fear.

In the story of Samuel's call, we can certainly imagine that Eli is afraid—there is no vision or voice or word from God in the land. His son's are a disgrace and beyond his control. He certainly fears God's righteous judgment and yet his love for Samuel helps him push through that fear. Too, Samuel loves and trusts Eli—and wants to protect him. Love casts out fear and as disciples we go into battle against our fears in the name of God's love and hearing that voice that calls us 'beloved' in Jesus name.

We are called to cultivate courage, physical and moral courage, in ourselves and our children and our communities. Hope has two lovely daughters—anger and courage, says Augustine. The President elect has called us to be people of hope—even in the midst of all the disastrous political and economic news. So be people of hope—but that means to be angry in focused ways and certainly it calls us to be courageous.

I lived next door to Fannie Lou and Pap Hamer. Fannie Lou Hamer had been a timekeeper on a plantation until she tried to register to vote. For her action of courage, she was thrown off the plantation. She was a glorious singer—gospel songs and civil rights songs. She was one the leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and spoke to the nation at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City in 1964.

Here is what she said. So be angry—be angry in Jesus name. The tables of injustice and evil and prejudice of all sorts must be overturned in the name of love and hope. Those battles continue.

Fannie Lou Hamer would lead our group of civil rights workers and folks from the community of Ruleville in song and we would always end by singing We Shall Overcome. Pete Seeger, the folk singer activist, was asked once 'who is the we?' Well, he said, the we is everybody.

Please stand in honor of the long way we have come, and celebration of the great spiritual victories that America has won with electing an African American president—and let us sing We shall overcome. Yes, we do carry in us some fears about the future, but deeper and stronger, we have faith in each other, we trust in the essential goodness of America and we believe, o, deep in our heart, we believe that the Lord God who called us and calmed us through Jesus the Christ, this Lord will see us through.