

Sermon for the Feast of St. Luke/San Lucas

20 October 2024

Sirach 38:1-4,10,12-14; 2 Timothy 4:5-13; Luke 4:14-21; Psalm 147

For the Word of God in scripture,

For the Word of God among us,

For the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Please be seated.

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Luke/San Lucas. For those of you who were here on Friday for Jazz Vespers, you may recall that St. Luke was not just one of the four gospel writers, he was also a physician who spent much of his life dedicated to healing, of body, mind, and spirit.

Healing. Not just of the individual, but also of society. In our Gospel, Jesus quotes from Isaiah, that good news for the poor includes release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the oppressed go free, and all proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The gospel, the good news, isn't just about spiritual issues. It includes practical, earthly challenges as well. Release to the captives. Sight to the blind. Freedom for the oppressed.

Perhaps these resonate a bit more at this time, as Yasuhiko and I just completed a ten-day civil rights pilgrimage with a group from the diocese. Starting in Atlanta, we traveled through Georgia, Alabama, parts of Mississippi, ending up in Memphis, Tennessee. Along the way, we visited sites of important, and often painful, events in our country's path toward releasing captives, freeing the oppressed.

We touched the walls of the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, where white supremacist bombers destroyed part of the church, collapsing the wall and killing four young women. Girls between the ages of 11 and 15, who had come to church early to practice their

singing. Young women whose lives were cut short because of hatred, hatred and discrimination based on one thing only—the color of their skin.

We walked through Kelly Ingram Park, at the center of the Civil Rights District, bound on one side by the Civil Rights Museum and on the other by the historic 16th Street Baptist Church. The site of one of the children's marches, where teens were met with water from fire hoses, with batons wielded by private and public security forces, with attack dogs. For daring to insist on schooling, on an education that would prepare them to enter the workforce.

We traversed the Edmund Pettis bridge, where peaceful protestors, individuals who had signed the pledge of non-violence, were tear gassed, beaten, arrested. For protesting against unfair, unequal treatment of people based on the color of the skin. For insisting on the right to vote. For wanting to sit on an open seat in the bus, to be served at the lunch counter, to be recognized as human.

And as we journeyed across the land, we also traveled through time—visiting museum and parks and places where memories are stored. Memories of enslavement. Memories of mistreatment. Memories of suffering. But also memories of common action. Memories of courage. Memories of solidarity. The wall of heroes of the civil rights movement contains an entire row of individuals, most with white faces, all pictured in their clerical garb. Baptist preachers, Roman catholic priests, Jewish rabbis, Muslim imams, and yes, even a few Episcopalian clergy.

We visited the past, but we also reflected on the present. Particularly as we are in the midst of a turbulent election season, we are once again seeing the divides in this country. We are experiencing conflict, across society, within communities, within churches, within families. How are we supposed to achieve what our gospel outlines, how are we supposed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, how are we going to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, when we can't even be in the same room together?

As I was considering these and pondering this sermon, what came to mind was one of the women we met in Selma. Hattie was one of the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement—and quite a character. She spoke to us at the National Voting Rights Museum, and shared some of her experiences and insights. Hattie was in her late teens when the civil rights movement came to Alabama.

Meetings were held in the local churches, as that was the only place people of color could gather safely. Hattie told us that she began attending the session, not because of her belief in the cause, but because that's where all her friends were going after school. She noticed that some of the kids got to go on trips to other towns, and even into Birmingham. Since she had never been away from home, she was interested in going so she signed up.

However, before she could board the bus, the organizer asked if she had signed the pledge of non-violence. She was honest—not only hadn't she signed the pledge, she didn't even know what non-violence was. Since she was not allowed on the bus, she went home and looked up non-violence in the dictionary (that was pre-google, as she informed us, holding up her cell phone). However, she discovered that, at least in the dictionaries they had in Selma at the time, non-violence wasn't included. Not in the dictionary at her home. Not in the one at school. Not even in the one at the library. Violence was there, but Hattie already knew what that was. It was non-violence that was the novel concept.

So, Hattie went back to the meetings, and this time, she listened more closely, and she asked questions. She asked what they meant by non-violence. The organizer told her it was like in the Bible, when someone slapped you on the cheek, you were supposed to turn the other cheek. Hattie was amazed. You mean when someone hits you, you don't hit them back? No, the organizer said. Well, said Hattie, I can't do that.

The organizer told her that, if she couldn't do that, if she wasn't able to have enough self-control to not react, then she couldn't go on the bus to the demonstrations. But she was still welcome to attend the local meetings, to listen to the speakers and to learn from them.

Hattie continued to come to the meetings—that's where all her friends were. She listened and, she said, after a while, she began to understand, to understand the power of non-

violence, to understand the importance of self-control, to understand the centrality of not lowering yourself to another's level.

And she changed. Finally, she was able to fully commit to the pledge of non-violence. She was able to begin participating in marches. She got to go on the bus rides, to Birmingham, to Montgomery. And later, as a worker in the effort to register voters, she traveled throughout the South, including into Mississippi. During her travels and her voter registration efforts, she faced opposition. She was arrested. She confronted violence. She saw and experienced some awful things, things that even now, years later, are difficult to recount. But, she noted, she was able to hold to her pledge of non-violence, not because of who she was, but because of who she had become.

Hattie's transformation came slowly. She began as a feisty young woman, ready to stand up for herself, to fight back when confronted. She didn't ascribe to the ideals of the civil rights movement's organizers, their desire for non-violence, but, she said, she was still welcomed into their space. She was invited to listen, to challenge, to question, to participate in their learning. And as she did, as she listened, and learned. As she questioned and heard the experiences of others. As she reflected on her own values, a transformation took place. She embraced not only the goals of voter registration, but also the methods of non-violent presence.

Perhaps we can take a few lessons from Hattie, from previous times of social upheaval, of conflict, of change. We know some of our objectives—freeing the oppressed, sight for the blind, release for the captives, but perhaps we have forgotten or neglected others. We are also to bring good news, good news to the poor, to those in distress, to those with whom we disagree. Not arguments. Not insults. Not violent upheaval, but good news.

And not everyone will be ready to hear the good news. Not everyone will understand. Not everyone can understand. But that doesn't mean we cast them out. Or distance ourselves from them. While a few people may have a bright light and a voice from the sky like Paul, or a burning bush like Moses, for most of us I expect, transformation comes more like it did for Hattie. Slowly. Through listening. Through learning. Through opening oneself up to new

experiences, to new thoughts, to new ways of being. And it happens when one is welcomed into that space.

So, as we continue through this period of anxiety and uncertainty and, yes, at times, of conflict, let us walk in the world with confident peace, let us welcome others into our space. Welcome those who disagree with us on goals, on objectives, on methods. Let us continue to put forward our missions—freedom for the oppressed, sight for the blind, healing for all those in sickness or distress, release for the captives, good news for the poor, for the unhoused, for the hungry. To put forward our missions in loving terms, in non-combative terms, to those who disagree, to those who do not understand, to those who are trying to figure things out, to those who are hurting and confused, angry and alone.

And we are called upon to do this, all of this, with love, confident in the assurance Jesus has given us, that through God, this scripture has been fulfilled. Amen.