

Calling Out In The Wilderness

I invite you to join me in a spirit of prayer, closing your eyes if it helps you ground you in this moment. Holy, loving Spirit – we come to meet with you in this hour, each wondering what impact our voice can have in the current wilderness landscape of cruelty and bravery. We recognize with gratitude our freedom to gather – by live stream and on this land loved by First Nations and many others across time. Speak to us today through your prophets of long ago and not so long ago. Help us to see more clearly how we can be your voice calling out in the wilderness. Amen.

Siblings in Christ, on this Martin Luther King weekend, let us take stock of where we are along the journey toward realizing the shared dream of a beloved community. During a speech entitled “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” given at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. in March 1968, Rev. Dr. King drew heavily on words from a 19th century Unitarian minister and abolitionist named Theodore Parker in stating this: *"We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."*

Well, in the time in which we are living, it is very challenging to hold on to hope that the arc of the moral universe continues to bend toward justice. It feels as though those with their hands on levers of power in Washington D.C. are attempting to permanently unbend the arc such that human morality instead follows a tangent toward building a reality vastly different than beloved community.

In a clear effort to consolidate power into an authoritarian regime, the federal administration is currently terrorizing Black and Brown Minnesotans (with a professed target on immigrants without proof of legal authorization to be our neighbors). They are using Minnesota as a testing ground, figuring that if Minnesota falls to authoritarian rule, much and eventually all of the rest of the country will as well.

We are in a deep struggle – encouraged, though, by the ways in which many are stepping outside of comforted zones to love their neighbors. So, today, we do what followers of Jesus have been doing for two millennia. We gather to listen for an encouraging word coming through the breath of our still speaking God.

In today's scripture reading in which John the Baptist explains his vocational calling to his followers and in today's contemporary reading from Bishop Mariann Budde in which she describes how King accepted a destiny he did not choose, I hear three invitations for us in today's sociopolitical context: an invitation to greater self-awareness, and invitation to bold courage, and an invitation to welcome raw, holy discomfort.

Let's begin by considering their **invitation toward deeper self-awareness**. I hear both the baptizing prophet and the civil rights leader articulating a sense of grounding in their callings. Clarity of purpose empowered each of them to reject opportunities to play into the hollowness of either flattery or threats, which could have enticed them to puff themselves up with hot air or cower and pretend powerlessness.

“Who are you?” the religious leaders' representatives asked John. *“Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”* He said, *‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.”* John grounded himself in the God of love and justice known through his Jewish faith tradition. He found his calling as a preacher, urging his neighbors to repent of their sin – everything from harming one another within personal relationships to acquiescence to the violent ways of the occupying Roman empire. He longed for the people to clear the way for God's love and justice.

Budde shares a glimpse into King's self-awareness by drawing out his own words about his inner life: *“King also shared what this journey of inner transformation ha[d] been like for him,”* Budde writes, quoting:

“As my sufferings mounted, I soon realized there were two ways I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force.” King offers us a model of deciding how to respond to a situation – not according to expectations others might place on us but according to the Holy Spirit’s dove-like and dragon-like creative work within us.

I invite you to wonder with me this morning: how will each of us respond to that invitation toward deeper self-awareness?

Let’s shift to consider John the Baptist’s and Rev. Dr. King’s **invitation into boldness & courage**. They model for us ways of being faithful, audacious risk takers.

“And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One.’”

John’s claims were outlandish! The people had been praying for centuries for a messiah to arrive and deliver them from the clutches of one human empire of the next. John was suggesting that an everyday person like themselves – a carpenter from a family of very modest means – could be a trailblazer to lead them toward salvation. But John had sensed the Holy Spirit’s power through Jesus. He would risk everything to point the way to Jesus’s teachings and lived example of transformative healing and justice.

Bishop Budde writes of King’s boldness and courage in this way: *“He drew a clear distinction between passive suffering that only perpetuated injustice and suffering freely chosen as destiny that was rich with redemptive possibilities...”* Very much like John, King knew he was risking his wellbeing and likely his life to do the work to which the Holy Spirit called him and for which the Holy Spirit has equipped him.

So I invite us to also wonder this morning: how will each of us respond to this invitation into boldness and courage? Are you aware of an opportunity for you to act with faithful audacity? What are you willing to risk in order to do so?

Finally, let's consider John the Baptist's and Kings' **invitations to welcome experiences of raw and holy discomfort**. I'll preface a look back at our readings with words of wisdom for modern-day straight talker.

Brené Brown is a well-known author, speaker, and research professor of social work. We read her book during a Lenten study two years ago – *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. In it, she shares this life lesson:

“My mom taught us never to look away from people's pain.

The lesson was simple:

Don't look away. Don't look down.

Don't pretend not to see hurt.

Look people in the eye.

Even when their pain is overwhelming.

And when you are in pain, find the people who can look you in the eye.

We need to know we are not alone, especially when we are hurting. This lesson is one of the greatest gifts of my life.” Writes Brené Brown.

John the Baptist has a following – a group of loyal disciples. He could have remained cushioned within his own popularity. Instead, he looked beyond himself and stayed the course with pointing the way toward this Jesus – saying things that startled some, agitated others, and put him further at odds with those who had their hands on the levers of powers in his time. We heard, *“The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.”*

And Bishop Budde drives home her reflection about King in this way:
“Accepting what we did not choose involves a leap of faith that God is present and at work in ways that we cannot comprehend... this kind of acceptance is not passive or fatalistic, but rather a courageous choice at a decisive moment to embrace the places we are broken as an integral part of a courageous life.”

So I invite us to wonder this morning: how will each of us respond to this invitation to welcome experiences of raw and holy discomfort?

May we move into the coming weeks, willing to cry out in the wilderness in new ways – with deepening self-awareness, practicing faithful, audacious courage, and welcoming raw, holy discomfort. We must be courageous – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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John 1:19-39a, "Accepting What You Do Not Choose"