

Rev. Jennifer A. Gleichauf
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Racine, Wisconsin
Scripture: Luke 4:14-21
Sermon: The Time Is Always Right
January 23, 2022

This last Monday on Martin Luther King Jr. day, Brian, Evie and I sat down to watch Dr. King's last Sunday sermon at the Washington National Cathedral. I commend it to you, not only as an example of truly gifted preaching, but because it continues to be remarkably relevant today. And there is part of it that I'd like to share with you this morning. Dr. King begins by telling the story of Rip Van Winkle, which I am sure you remember is about a man who goes to sleep for 20 years, but King lifts out this part of the story you may not remember. He says:

“When Rip Van Winkle went up into the mountain, the sign had a picture of King George the Third of England. When he came down twenty years later the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington—and looking at the picture he was amazed—he was completely lost. He knew not who he was.

And this reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that Rip slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountain a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history—and Rip knew nothing about it. He was asleep. Yes, he slept through a revolution. And one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.”

Now, of course, Dr. King was lifting up the great period of social change in his time, but when we look at human history we can observe that really every generation has its own revolution. Every age struggles with its own unique struggles for change. And it is worth noting, that most often, these revolutions have something to do with a push for greater human dignity, more rights for more people, more freedom for more people. And those who oppose these greater rights, this greater freedom, often do not fare well in the stories history tells about them.

Now, Dr. King was a man who knew his Bible. He was steeped in scripture. And I doubt it would have been lost on him, that his speech about sleeping through a revolution connects well to Jesus' reading in the synagogue from this morning's scripture.

The synagogue reading for the day was from the words of the prophet Isaiah and were words of revolution. And of course, Jesus, who was also steeped in scripture (the word made flesh after all) knew his place in the long line of prophets who had come before him, and added his voice to call for revolution, proclaiming that Isaiah's words were fulfilled through him.

Isaiah's revolution was one which would bring good news to the poor, and release to the captive and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor which is a reference to the jubilee year – a practice of the Jewish faith where every 50 years, enslaved people were to be set free, debts were to be cleared – in other words, a massive resetting of the economic system.

And Jesus stood up in the synagogue, read this prophetic scripture and told everyone that the scripture was being fulfilled right then. Throwing in with Isaiah, Jesus makes clear that he intended his mission and ministry to be rooted in the fulfillment of these very things – the release of captives, the resetting of economic systems which enslaved and burdened people, and bringing the poor good news. "The poor," by the way, refers not just to those who are financially poor but to all those who are marginalized – women, widows, children, people of low social status or considered to be outsiders. Jesus said this was what his ministry was about - not somewhere along down the road. Not someday. But right then. Right now.

Of course, there were plenty of people who did not want to hear that message. There were many who were actively against Jesus' message and mission. His message, over the course of the gospel, "generated resistance and controversy especially from Israel's religious leaders. His outreach to questionable people was a threat to their religious traditions and their sense of social stability." and we know where it led. Religious leaders accused him of blasphemy, tried to discredit him by calling him a drunk, and cast aspersions on him for the company he kept, eventually all escalating to his assassination.

But, just as there were many who spoke out against Jesus, there were certainly plenty of others who preferred to just "sleep" through Jesus' revolution – those who just turned away from his message, dismissed him as too radical or ignored him altogether. Surely there were people along Jesus' journey, even his own disciples, who suggested that perhaps he should stop pushing so hard; maybe he shouldn't draw so much attention to himself; if he could set his sights for freedom and justice a little lower he might be more

successful; if he could just be more patient. And we know there were people like this in Jesus' life, just like we know there have been people like this during every revolution.

Dr King referred to this problem as people who subscribe to a "myth of time." "The myth of time," he said, "is the notion that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice. And there are those who often sincerely say to the Negro and his allies in the white community, "Why don't you slow up? Stop pushing things so fast. Only time can solve the problem. And if you will just be nice and patient and continue to pray, in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out."

There is an answer to that myth. It is that time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And I am sorry to say this morning that I am absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation, the extreme rightists of our nation—the people on the wrong side—have used time much more effectively than the forces of goodwill. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, "Wait on time."

Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right."

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It is obvious to say that our Christian faith is centered on a relationship with Jesus – the teachings of Jesus, the miracles of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus. We believe that, in Jesus, we see the best possible example of what God intends for this world. And the way Jesus introduces his mission and message to those who will follow him is with this focus on a powerful justice, which by its very nature, turns the systems of the world on their head. This can be a hard message to hear, especially if you happen to, like many of us, benefit from those systems. But Jesus does not mince words or say that eventually these things will be fulfilled or that they will be fulfilled easily or comfortably or when we are ready.

Our call as Christians is not to wait around for a right time, but rather, we must reject the myth that time will heal all ills, and take seriously that time is what we make of it. We are not meant to wait for a charismatic leader to come along, or to wait until we are inspired or to wait until we have some more time or to wait until someone else leads

the way. The time to release the captives and preach good news to the poor and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor is now.

So, how do we start?

Well, we see at the beginning of the scripture that when Jesus comes into the synagogue he is filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, in fact, all over this part of Luke – the Spirit appeared at Jesus' baptism. The Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness for a time of temptation and prayer and devotion. And now the Spirit filled him as he began to preach and teach to the people.

Our first step is to remember that we are not alone and that we need not just flail about, because while we do not need to wait for another person to lead us, we are always invited to seek the Spirit's leading; to seek out ways to be filled by the Spirit; to get quiet enough to hear the Spirit's prompting; to pray for eyes to see and courage to follow when the Spirit is in our midst; to pay attention to the way the Spirit connects us to those who will join us in the revolution.

And then, there are no fewer opportunities today to work for justice than there were when Jesus preached or when Dr. King did. There may well be plenty more. But instead of feeling overwhelmed by it, we can trust that our lives become richer, more meaningful and connected to a deeper joy when we work for justice, and that the invitation to this work is sacred. God invites us to bring our unique gifts and talents to places where we can make a difference; where we can effect change in the systems which cause harm, even and especially, when we are the ones benefiting from them. We have the opportunity and privilege to speak up about the wrongs we see and to work together to eradicate poverty and dismantle racism and take a hard look at how we can change the ways in which people are burdened by all kinds of different debts or are literally or figuratively enslaved. We have the opportunity to serve in ways which do good for others while filling up our own spirits when we reach out to individuals and groups who are suffering. We can literally bring good news to the poor in the form of food and clothes and financial support and affordable housing and more accessibility to equal rights and greater dignity.

To be followers of Jesus is to agree with Jesus' insistence that there is no time to wait. That the time to do right is right now and to do it with joy and courage. To remember that we are not waiting for another, because Jesus has already shown us the way.

So, I invite you to take into your prayers this week and in the weeks ahead the question: "how am I bringing good news to the poor, releasing the captives, proclaiming the year

of the Lord's favor, the jubilee, in my own life? " And whether you have no answer to that yet or many answers, to then ask the Spirit for guidance in deepening your commitment and filling you up to the brim with the strength and courage and compassion to step into the revolution. May history not tell stories of us sleeping through the revolutions of our day, but instead that we brought good news to those who needed it most. Amen.