

For Nothing Will be Impossible with God

The Rev. Nancy Hildebrand | Sunday, December 12, 2021

Today's lections seem quirky and more than a little troubling. John seems to be greeting his followers by yelling. How is it that any minister or prophet could win over hearts and minds by calling his followers a brood of vipers? Yet, the passage proceeds in a way, that allows our pre-judgment of John to evaporate. We live at a time when we disparage those who judge, yet we quickly judge them for judging. Need I say more? The group gathering around John are probably a well-mixed bag of believers, saints, heretics, slimeballs, thieves, and ordinary, God-fearing Israelites who know they could be better. They all are there to either prepare for judgment or to consider preparing for judgment. The worst of them were there because of their betrayal of their own people by gouging them from their privileged positions and by their complicity with the Romans and their proxy local rulers. It's safe to assume that there was a strong cohort of vipers there. It's also safe to assume that a people raised and trained in the importance of living in the consciousness of God knew when they have sinned or not. Some, following John, have even suggested that John might be the Messiah giving John even more importance. The ruling powers would, of course, be on high alert for anyone around John, because John was fearless in speaking truth to power. If we assume that these sinners, wherever they are in crowd are incapable of repenting and reforming, we are being very cynical. We learned through Jesus, that God has a special place in God's heart for sinners. More than likely, God will send a firebrand like John after them. Even the most resistant to repentance might succumb to the charisma of John. Even Herod the tetrarch, seemed to have a softness for John, before he beheaded him. If there was anything that would bind the people of Israel together, innocent or corrupt, was the memory of their story of God's loving compassion, God's ear for their suffering and God's power for their redemption. John as prophet reminded them of their story which was told in the Tenach throughout their lives. They knew the story of liberation, personal and social and knew that God's spirit had a way of firing people up to change themselves and their unjust surroundings. I hope that if I had been there, I would have come to stand before God at John's invitation. However, I also know that God is issuing his summons to us day in and day out.

This story of Israel is the story of God's willingness to right the wrongs of the world and to make demands on the people to not only critique and grieve over their situation, but to be energized by God to challenge the prevailing paradigm that harms people. We are steeped in the Bible than we know. We inherently accept the story of Israel as our story and we read the bible as our story, just as the African Americans on their journey to freedom read the Exodus story as their liberation story. They sang songs of liberation that were hymns praising God for leading them to the Jordan. Israel's story is the story of God's concern for the entire human race and because we read and re-read these encounters of the Israelites with God, we have incorporated the love of a universal God of freedom, peace and justice for the entire human race. We have the opportunity in our studies, songs, prayers, teaching and serving to be formed by God through our church life and practice. When we read of the of the trials and tribulations of Israel, we know of our own trials and tribulations. Walter Brueggemann, in his riveting book, **The**

Prophetic Imagination, asserted that It was the radically free Yahweh, a God who was not beholden to any earthly ruler who responded not to the slavers needs but to the enslaved. From the time of the Exodus to the freedom movements of the last two centuries, God's freedom begat human freedom and a politics of human justice. We as a whole are like the people who gathered around John and we have also been raised to see the importance of living in God consciousness just as the Israelites were.

The entire context of the Israelites' lives was built on this foundation as are our's. So, when they responded to John's call in the wilderness, they sensed that God was coming near through John's fiery presence, speech and commands to be fair and just. They were ready to listen, to be baptized and ready in earnest for the miracle of the Messiah who turned out to be Jesus. They were primed to believe that not only would they be saved individually, but that their dysfunctional world would be made whole.

When Jesus appeared near the time of John's arrest, the people followed, because Jesus heard the poor and sick and the oppressed cry out and he healed them. He would teach that God was not beholden to the oppressing powers of the earth and that he cared only for the welfare of the people as a whole. The oppressed and suffering, however, got special attention. With this in mind, it is absolutely essential that as we enter this Christmas season reminded that we as a people of God, we are called to God's covenant with us and to do our part by effectuating the justice and healing God so desires. Our joy is known in our confession of the Collect for Purity. *"Almighty God to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your Holy Name; through Christ our Lord."* When we come before the Lord with this prayer, we are offering ourselves to God and praying that God will respond to our willingness to improve our lives for our own benefit and for all whom we love. From this intimacy, comes the possibility for us to be more like Jesus, more able to hear and respond to the sorrows of others. This step then leads us to respond in a more global sense to the sorrows of the world.

We have been challenged and asked to step up for all those who have suffered when most of us here have been advantaged. We are on a journey now to finish cleaning up the mess of the enslavement of our African sisters and brothers who with few allies aligned themselves with God in their own Exodus story of freedom. It took 245 years for slavery to end, another 150 years to tackle Jim Crow, segregation, and the lingering and toxic racism that still infects our society. We need our church to help us through this last rugged terrain of expunging racism from our national character. We can model ourselves on The Black Church which was crucial in forming African American resistance to the hundreds of years of oppression. Faith and biblical history provided a model for their freedom action plan. God is radically free and human beings are made in God's image, so the proper conclusion to them was that God made us free. Our African sisters and brothers were confident that God heard their cry and that their cause was just, and, more they believed that they would be led to the promised land, no matter how long it took, how many lives were lost or how strong the resistance. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, in a piece he wrote for the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival, "God has wrought many things out of

oppression. He has endowed his creatures with the capacity to create, and from this capacity has flowed the sweet songs of sorrow and joy that fortified the people in their freedom quest. Rev. Dr. King loved the Impressions' song "People Get Ready" and made it the unofficial anthem of the civil rights movement. These representative verses say it all, *"People get ready There's a train-coming.... You don't need no baggage ...You just get on board... All you need is faith to hear the diesels humming..You don't need no ticket..You just thank the Lord...So People get ready...For the train to Jordan.... Picking up Passengers Coast to coast. ...All you need is faith to hear the diesels humming.... You don't need no ticket.... You just thank the Lord."* There were so many more...go check them out on the internet...or, better yet, YouTube and sing along with them. Since I came of age at the time of the civil rights movement, the power of this music is still very much with me. There's nothing like success, even that bought with blood, sweat and tears. The faith and courage of our African American sisters and brothers astounds me to this day and I thank them that their quest brought me to a deep faith in God and a deep faith that with God on the side of justice and freedom, means that the despots cannot win. I also learned how important community was, particularly communities of faith to bind people together to learn, to pray and to sing freedom songs, found everywhere in the bible.

I hope that these readings will invite everyone here to re-examine where they are in their faith and where they are as God's partner in their personal healing, the healing of their communities and the healing of the world. I ask you to examine where you can in your daily life respond to those near and far who are in need. John tells us that we do not have to give the shirt off our backs, just an extra one or just to share the food we have and to be honest and just with others. That's a great starting point. When we see our lives enriched because our close relationships in family, neighborhood and beyond, we know that there are ripple effects. We can then ask what more we can do. I also remember today all our faithful Christian ancestors in this country who built our churches, our colleges and universities, our hospitals and who introduced the idea of a free public education. Join our African American family as exemplars of the freedom quest and see how we can continue the great tasks still before us. I ask you to join all these forebearers in their tradition of giving that leads to becoming builders and change makers. Begin this week as we approach the fourth Sunday of Advent, by reading Luke 1:30-55 daily and reflect on why John the Baptist, still in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy at Mary's entrance into their abode. Then, prepare to sing along with Mary, her glorious, joyful, heartrending Magnificat. Let's make it our anthem of joy as we complete the Advent season. Let us rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Know that the Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.