**Sharing the Song of Faith**

**Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11**

 **Wakened by the phone in the middle of the night, famed Gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, immediately knows who it is making this simple request, “I need to hear the Lord’s voice.” The person on the other end of the phone is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who like Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, knows that it is a very uncertain future that awaits him in Selma, Alabama. “I need to hear the Lord’s voice.” Mahalia rolls over in bed, clears her throat and softly she begins to sing, “Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand; I am tired. I am weak. I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on to the light; Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.**

**….When my way grows drear, Precious Lord, linger near; When my life is almost gone, Hear my cry, hear my call, Hold my hand lest I fall; Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home”.**

 **The Apostle Paul would understand why Martin Luther King, Jr., facing the threat and uncertainty of violence in Selma, would ask Mahalia Jackson to share a song of faith. In the book of Acts, Luke tells us that on Paul’s first visit to the city of Philippi, he and his partner Silas have been arrested, severely flogged, thrown into jail, with instructions for the jailer to keep them secure. The jailer in turn, puts them in the inner most cell and fastens their feet in the stocks. Luke goes on to tell us that there in the darkness of the cell, Paul and Silas begin praying and singing hymns to God, as the other prisoners listen.**

 **In our Scripture lesson this morning, Paul is back in prison. Biblical scholars differ on the location of his imprisonment. It may have been Ephesus, Caesarea, or even Rome, all places where Paul found himself confined by Roman authorities. Although, Paul never directly challenges the military or political power of Rome he is constantly encouraging the formation of congregations shaped by the justice values of God’s Realm, as Paul would say, having “the mind of Christ” rather than the mind and exploitation values of Rome.**

 **From the confines of a prison cell, Paul composes a letter to the congregation in Philippi. This church is particularly dear to his heart, not only because it is the first European church that Paul establishes, but also because the people of Philippi are so supportive of Paul’s ministry, both in prayer and with financial assistance. Paul knows that any congregation living in faithfulness to Christ is under the same constant threat he is under. It takes courage to live out values that are in conflict with the exploitation values of those with military and political power. Paul also knows that this new community of Christians struggles with all the same challenges with which people of every age struggle; conflict and tensions between members, loss, uncertainty, fear and the prospects of death itself.**

 **Paul is under no illusion that following the way of Christ’s love and Christ’s compassion offers any immunity from the hardships and heartaches of life. On the contrary Paul knows that there will be times when the people of Philippi feel like crying out to God like the Psalmist, “**for I am in distress; my eyes waste away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away”. Long before the false prophets of today’s Prosperity Gospel promised financial well being, recovery from every affliction and families in perfect harmony for those who follow Christ, Paul says to the people of Philippi, “have about you the mind of Christ, who was obedient to God’s love to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

 Our Sunday morning adult forum recently completed a study of the German Theologian, Dietrich Bonheoffer, who as many of you know was executed in a Nazi prison concentration camp for his courageous voice standing in faithfulness to Christ and against Hitler. It is also while in prison, with the constant threat of death, that Bonheoffer writes, “The idea that we could have avoided life’s difficulties if we had taken things more cautiously is too foolish to be entertained for a moment…To renounce a full life and its real joys in order to avoid pain is neither Christian nor human.” In his book the Cost of Discipleship, Bonheoffer writes, “When Christ calls a man (or woman), Christ bids him come and die.” He doesn’t bid him come and clean up his act and try harder.”

 Mahalia Jackson picks up the phone and hears Dr. King say “I need to hear the voice of the Lord.” Mahalia begins to sing “Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on help me stand.” Paul is deeply concerned about the young congregation in Philippi. He knows full well that this is no easy road he has encouraged them to walk. With pen in hand Paul starts to write and as he does so he begins singing the words that most Biblical scholars believe are among the earliest of the Christian hymns, quite likely a hymn known to the people of Philippi. The words of the hymn find themselves onto the page with the hope and the expectation that by sharing this song of faith the recipients of Paul’s letter will be reminded there is nothing that can ever separate them from the love of God. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross”.

 Mahalia sings “Precious Lord, take my hand”. Paul sings, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”. How can something as simple as sharing a song possibly make a difference in the face of the violence and threat of death faced by Martin Luther King, Jr? How can something as simple as sharing a song by the Apostle Paul, himself in prison and facing the prospects of death, possibly be a source of encouragement for the Christians in Philippi or any age for that matter?

 There are two challenges we often encounter when facing struggles, loss, uncertainty, including the fear of death. One challenge is our desire to avoid looking week or vulnerable. This past Thursday, John Bolton, one of the architects for our invasion of Iraq wrote an editorial published in the New York Times whose headline captures the essence of Bolton’s article “To Stop Iran’s Bomb, bomb Iran”. Bolton would have us go to war now on the premise that continued negotiation with Iran is only a sign of our weakness. This is empire theology at its core and it infects all of us on some level. Never expose your vulnerability. Never expose your weakness. Never let people know about your fears, uncertainties, anxieties and worries. On the contrary do your best to exploit your dominance.

But, in another letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says, “When I am weak, than I am strong.” Mahalia Jackson sings, “I am tired, I am weak, I am worn” and listening on the other end of the line, Dr. King finds his strength renewed. The people of Philippi begin singing the song of which Paul has reminded them, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness”. As the people of Philippi sing, they find their strength renewed in the love of God.

 The second challenge we often encounter is the tendency to go it alone. We make faith an individual enterprise, a one way street between us and God, no one else. We hear the admonition to empty ourselves, humble ourselves as a personal admonition of individual piety. This individualized admonition has often been used as a way to encourage submissiveness on the part of women and people of color. Be humble, accept your status in life. Empty yourself, be a blank slate, so those with authority can tell you who you are. Those of us nurtured by Western Christianity are particularly prone to a heightened individualism that insists we are on our own with our struggles, we are on our own with our fears, we are on our own with death.

 In our Story for Children of All Ages this morning two young African children know what we too often forget; the song of true faith draws us into community with one another and with God. Their grandfather taught them well and now the young girl and young boy are prepared to teach their young brother about how they are a part of God’s spirit, how God’s spirit is a part of all of life and that when we die our spirit unites with the spirit of God.

Paul sharing his song of faith and Mahalia sharing her song of faith know that a song of faith is never about individual spiritual improvement. A song of faith is intended to shape a community who in turn through our humility, through our mutual vulnerability become a vehicle of God’s transforming love for us all.

 Biblical commentator Richard Spalding puts it this way, “The act of singing together is a form of conspiracy, a breathing together that gives words of faith and confidence their wings. Paul’s own singing in prison recalls Fanny Lou Hammer and Bill Coffin singing in their Mississippi jail cells during Freedom summer…and Bishop Tutu lapsing into a Xhosa hymn during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings in South Africa, when the agony of the stories overpowered all our words…Even on the cross, words that rode upon Jesus final breaths came from (that Old Testament hymnal) the Psalms”.

 In this shared song of faith we find the power for courageous living. The Apostle Paul, Dietrich Bonheoffer, Fanny Lou Hammer, Dr. King, Oscar Romero and countless other become a threat to empire norms of domination and exploitation precisely because they share a song of faith and with the Psalmist are able to sing “I trust in you, O God; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hand…. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love”.

 We have a song of faith to share with one another. Like most congregations it is our practice to list the names of worship leaders in our bulletin. But, I wonder today if what we should really be doing is listing all the names and phone numbers of our choir. If you are struggling with depression, rather than try and tough it out on your own you can call up Mike Bates and simply say, “I need to hear the Lord’s voice”. If you receive an unwelcome diagnosis and find yourself unable to sleep with worry, you can call up Diane Spicer and say, “I need to hear the last voice.” If a family member or friend is going through difficult times and you feel utterly helpless to do anything but worry, you can call up Karen Hyers and say “I need to hear the Lord’s voice.” If you have grown discouraged because racism seems so unrelenting, there is so much hostility toward immigrants, climate change deniers seem louder than ever, you can call up Andy Barnett or Jen Folkers and say, “I need to hear the Lord’s voice.”

 Whatever your point of struggle, whatever causes you to feel like the Psalmist, “my years are spent in sorrow…” we have been given a song of faith to share with one another. None of us needs to have the voice of Mahalia Jackson. You don’t have to be on our church choir to share the song of faith. I would go so far as to suggest that you can even call my wife Michele. She is definitely, by her own admission, not that good of a singer. But, she has a song of faith to share, as do you.

**Mark 11:1-11**

***In our first lesson this morning we hear the story of Jesus final journey into Jerusalem, a journey that has been repeated many times by those who follow the way of Christ. While the people shout their praise and Hosannas, Jesus knows full well the love and justice of God’s Reign is a direct challenge to the exploitive values of the religious and political authorities he will soon encounter.***

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their

 cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,
    "Hosanna!
    Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
    Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
    Hosanna in the highest heaven!"
Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

**Psalm 31:9-16**

***Our second lesson reminds us why so many people often turn to the Pslams, especially during times of struggle. The Psalmist never hesitates to express the depth of grief, loss, sadness that can be part of our human living. Yet, even as the Psalmist speaks of pain and distress, the Psalmist also continues putting trust in the steadfast love of God.***

Be gracious to me, O God, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many — terror all around! — as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. But I trust in you, O God; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

**Philippians 2:5-11**

***Paul’s letter to the Philippians is written to a congregation for whom Paul has particularly deep affection. He is saddened by their struggles and knows full well that following Christ is no easy path. Even though Paul himself languishes in a Roman prison cell, he nonetheless writes a letter to this young congregation in hopes of encouraging them in their faith. Most Biblical scholars believe that this portion of Paul’s letter is drawn from an early Christian hymn intended to remind the early Christian church what it means to follow Christ.***

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.