

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
8th February 2009
Epiphany V
Mark 1:29-39

Like a nervous father-to-be outside the delivery room, James Weldon Johnson "paced back and forth" on his front porch, "repeating the lines" of his song "over and over to myself, going through all the agony and ecstasy of creating."

That's how Johnson's autobiography describes the process of writing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which came to be known as the black national anthem.

The year was 1900 and Johnson was a school principal in his hometown of Jacksonville, Fla. He was asked to speak at an Abraham Lincoln birthday celebration, but instead of speaking he decided to write a poem. With time running short, plans changed again and James asked his brother, music teacher J. Rosamond Johnson, to help him write a song.

(Source: <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/liftvoice/>)

The spirit of that song soon traveled; by the 1920s it could be found pasted into church hymnals throughout America.

In her autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," Maya Angelou tells about graduating from 8th Grade. It's an awful event—because in spite of the fact that she has drawn intricate, multi-colored maps of the world, learned to use and spell decasyllabic words, and memorized, in its entirety, Shakespeare's "The Rape of Lucrece,"—in spite of all that, she and her fellow students are being told how great it is that some of them will be able to go on to the Technical School and some of them may get a chance to play sports someday. Some of you may know what decasyllabic means. I had to look it up.

The children's graduation is wrecked by a white politician giving a commencement address. He tells them, by rote, what he tells everybody on his stump: all the great things he's done. For instance, at the high school there's new microscopes and chemistry equipment. There's an artist coming to work with the students.

Except, these kids aren't going to the whites only high school. They can go to the Mechanical School, and—hey—wasn't there was a great football tackler from Lafayette Technical? Boys only, of course. Sorry, Maya.

After the white guy leaves, there's a thick sadness smeared all over the day and it's ruinous ignorance and vile disregard for the tender and proud brilliance of these children puts Angelou in a state of wishing that ALL people were dead. She says,

"It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead."

At the bottom of this despair, Angelou is rescued. By a hymn. Henry Reed, the class valedictorian—the 8th Grade Valedictorian—finishes his address entitled “To Be or Not to Be” and then, the conservative and very proper, bow-tied, best little boy in the world, straight A student goes off his brief and begins in almost a spoken whisper to sing what everyone there knows to be “The Negro National Anthem.” All join. Everyone is lifted up—and it saves a young girl who had memorized all of “The Rape of Lucrece” when even Shakespeare can’t save her.

Angelou says that although all black children were taught the song along with their ABCs and “Jesus Loves Me This I Know,” she had never heard it before. No, she’d sung it a thousand times, but she’d never *heard* it, never realized the words had anything to do with her. By the end of the hymn though, she feels it has not only spoken to her, but almost healed her of her hatred of herself. I won’t quote it. We’re going to sing it later.

So will the words have anything to do with us? Have we earned the right to sing them? And if we sing them, will we, like the 8th Grade girl, actually hear them? We’re—you know...I mean, we’re not...Of course, we know about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Little Rock Nine. But our ancestors—more than likely—weren’t sold on auction blocks in Charleston, Savannah, New York City. We’re mostly white people who hope we actually did more for Civil Rights than we remember.

In this lovely, wonderful, really, really white church in this sweet, Midwestern, really, really white town that is my home, we don’t know how to sing gospel. I guess most of us would have a hard time trying to move on beats two and four rather than the white one and three. If we sing hymns like this, we’re going to have to confront the limitations of our...Caucasian-ness. There is, however, something clearing in our foggy, quotidian milieu, and this new gallant gleaming may just provide enough of a glint for us to start seeing that our flag might really, actually, still be there. I don’t mean just looking at the American flag—which I find absolutely beautiful even though I am so politically correct I am really not supposed to admit it. I mean—seeing each other and knowing somehow, now, that black just can’t go on being something that I, as a white person, am totally separate from.

One of the great mercies in electing a person of color to the White House, for me, is that I can begin, just a little, to claim as part of my heritage the African ennoblement of our great experiment, America. Just as black people can claim Mozart—thank you, Miss Mary Violet Leontine Price—I’m finding it easier now to walk around not feeling quite so nervous claiming that James Baldwin, Audrey Lorde, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Frederick Douglas, Duke Ellington, my beloved Billy Strayhorn, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Langston Hughes, and Martin and Rosa and X—claiming that they are part of my heritage. Yeah, you know—they sort of are. The Kingdom of Heaven is sort of at hand. That’s what this communion thing we do is sort of about.

I asked our Music Director to include this hymn today for two very distinct yet related reasons: First, February is Black History Month, a period set aside to acknowledge and honor the many contributions – and the many trials – of American citizens of African descent. It is important – critical – that the church join in this commemoration, for the church has too often been complicit in the perpetration of the sin of racism. And we may begin to claim the heritage that belongs to *all* Americans.

Second, I believe that this hymn ties in to today Gospel lesson, where a woman is healed by Jesus of a debilitating fever. That healing – the freedom that came from it – shows us a

snapshot of the power of God's love. And the healing of a nation – and the freedom that comes from it – is a snapshot of the overarching message of God: That God is love, that God loves all God's creation and all God's children.

I usually see the glass half full. It seems to me that the election of a person of color with a funny name– it seems to me that this election is significant, that it is emblematic of a deep desire to finally cleanse ourselves, to really begin to live in a land where there is no black or white or brown, where there are simply *people*. Human beings, each possessing the spark, the essence of a God who loves all God's children.

So what if we take a risk and bring to life in our own church the words we heard at the inauguration, and in Angelou's book, here and now? Heck yes, it's in our own hymnal! Some very, very white people thought it was important to have it in there—we're nothing as Episcopalians if not politically correct.

But I'm glad it's there today. Because I want to open up to the way it helped heal the people at the 8th Grade Graduation. I want to open up to the power of a hymn that millions of black people grew up singing and we knew nothing about. I want to risk it. Even if we sing it really, really badly, it may help heal us too. It may heal some of the shame we—I—feel, the confusion, the regret. The guilt. Some of that little bit of age-old sadness that hangs on us.

Angelou says at the end of her recounting of her 8th grade graduation:

Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or by the empty pots made less tragic by your tales?

So what we're going to sing at the end of church today is "auctioned pain" sent to sustain you and me. It is poetry that has made our brothers and sisters nights less lonely and their hunger, sometimes, less tragic, not only the hunger in their stomachs, but in their minds and in their dreams.

So when we sing it today, do lift your voice till earth and heaven do ring. No matter how white we are or how bad we sound, it will still be okay to let the hymn work on us, change us, become us. The gift of Black known and unknown poets is given to all, a light to enlighten all. It's Good News.

Amen.

I am grateful to Harry Kelley for his thoughtful contributions to this sermon.