

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

Sacred Resistance*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
The Church of the Transfiguration
August 28, 2017

Many people don't know this, but Martin Luther King, Jr., preached his last Sunday sermon to an Episcopal congregation. Just four days before he was assassinated in April of 1968, King preached to the congregation of the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. In that sermon, he reminded the congregation of the story of Rip Van Winkle. (By the way, there's a stained glass window at the back of our church that contains images of Rip Van Winkle. It's the Joseph Jefferson window. I'd be happy to show you the window after mass.)

As the story goes, Rip Van Winkle went up a mountain in the Catskills, drank some Dutch gin, and ended up sleeping there for twenty years. At the time when he went up the mountain, there was a sign in front of the village inn with a portrait of King George the Third painted on it. But when he came down the mountain twenty years later, the portrait had changed to that of George Washington. So not only did Rip Van Winkle sleep for twenty years, but he literally slept through a revolution!

For Dr. King, the story of Rip Van Winkle was a cautionary tale for those of us who might end up sleeping through a revolution in our own time. Some well-meaning people think that human progress automatically happens, and that it simply "rolls in on the wheels of inevitability." King rejected this view. Change for the better never just happens. Rather, it takes the "tireless efforts" and "persistent work" of those who are "co-workers with God."

According to King, it is often the people of good will who "sit around" and face evils like racism with "silence and indifference" who actually cause the most harm. As William Blake, the 18th century English poet, put it so powerfully: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing." We must, in other words, stay awake in the face of evil and resist the tendency towards "social stagnation." We are called to engage in sacred resistance.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Bible is about several brave women who engaged in sacred resistance. These women included two midwives to the Hebrew people, Shiphrah and Puah, who feared God and refused to follow the cruel orders of a new Egyptian king to kill all of the male children born to the Hebrew people. By engaging in sacred resistance, Shiphrah and Puah saved the life of the baby Moses and changed the course of religious history.

* Copyright (c) 2017 by Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

Over the last few weeks, we have heard from this pulpit about the Joseph story from the Book of Genesis. As you may recall, Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery out of jealousy. Despite the hardships he faced, Joseph ultimately rose to become the second most powerful official in Egypt. This ultimately led the Hebrew people to leave Canaan and migrate to Egypt.

Today, we move from Genesis to the Book of Exodus, and from the story of Joseph to the story of Moses. Fast forward many years, and there was now a pharaoh – a new king of Egypt – who did not know Joseph. The king felt threatened by the Hebrew people. To him, they were more numerous and powerful than the native Egyptian people. The king was afraid that these immigrants would collude with the enemy in the event of a war. And so he oppressed them ruthlessly through forced labor. But the Hebrew people still prospered and grew, despite being scapegoated by Pharaoh.

Finally, the king of Egypt decided to take action against these outsiders. He ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill off all baby boys who were born to the Hebrew people. But two of these midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, refused to follow Pharaoh's orders.

Even when they were summoned by Pharaoh, the midwives showed great courage in standing up to the king. They had no problem delivering him “fake news.” Shiphrah and Puah said that, unlike the Egyptians, the Hebrew women were “vigorous,” and they gave birth before the midwives could come to them. This, of course, was not true. Enraged, and still threatened by these immigrants, Pharaoh issued another tweet. I mean order. This time, he ordered all of the Hebrew baby boys to be thrown into the Nile.

There was one mother who refused to kill her son. At first, she tried to hide him for three months. When that no longer worked, she followed Pharaoh's order quite literally – she did throw her baby boy into the Nile – but only after putting him into a papyrus basket that she waterproofed. She too, like Shiphrah and Puah, engaged in an act of sacred resistance.

Eventually the basket found its way down the Nile to the daughter of the Pharaoh. The daughter took pity upon the crying baby and found a nurse among the Hebrew people, which – lo and behold – happened to be the baby's actual mother. Eventually the daughter took the baby as her own son and called him Moses, which means to “pull out” or “draw out” of the water. The rest was history.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” That is the central question for any follower of the Jesus movement, including you and me. Walter Wink, the late biblical scholar from Auburn Seminary here in New York City, summed up Jesus' ministry as “militant *nonviolence*.” Let me say that again: militant *nonviolence*. That is, like Shiphrah, Puah, and Moses' mother, Jesus refused to fight violence with more violence. Rather, he practiced sacred resistance against the political and religious powers and principalities of his world. And, as a result, he paid the ultimate price for that – just as Dr. King did.

Two weeks ago, an Episcopal congregation right here in the Diocese of New York engaged in a powerful act of sacred resistance. Holyrood Episcopal Church – Iglesia Santa Cruz – on 179th Street in Washington Heights gave sanctuary to Amanda Morales, a 33-year old undocumented immigrant and mother of three young children. Morales, who has no criminal record, fled Guatemala some 14 years ago because of violence and death threats that she received from a drug trafficking gang.

Morales sought sanctuary at Holyrood church because she had been ordered by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency – ICE – to purchase a one-way ticket back to Guatemala. If she were forced to leave the country, she would be separated from her three children (ages nine, seven, and two) who are all United States citizens. Holyrood church – with the full support of Bishop Dietsche – is committed to housing and feeding Morales and her children for as long as it takes for her to be granted the right to stay in the United States with her family.

Holyrood is only one in a long line of congregations that have served as sanctuaries for the most vulnerable in our society. This includes our own beloved parish. A major incident of domestic unrest in the United States was the Draft Riots of 1863 right here in New York City. In July of that year, hundreds of rioters lynched or otherwise killed at least 120 African Americans in the streets. A nearby orphanage for African American children was burned to the ground. Two things had set off the rioters. First, they were afraid that recently-emancipated slaves would take away their jobs. And second, they were angry at a recently-passed law that imposed a mandatory Civil War draft on men between 20 and 45, but had a loophole for the rich. (Anyone who could pay a fee of \$300 was exempted from the draft.)

Transfiguration served as a sanctuary to African Americans who were fleeing this violence. Our schoolroom, library, vestry, and even part of this main sanctuary were filled with people hiding from the rioters. Our founding rector, Dr. George Hendric Houghton, actually came out of the church with a processional cross when a mob threatened to break into the church. He spoke so forcefully that the mob broke up and left.

So what are we called to do today, in this time and place, as followers of the Jesus movement? Might God be calling us in some way to practice the sacred resistance shown by Shiphrah, Puah, and Moses' mother in today's Old Testament reading? How might we break the cycle of violence through "militant nonviolence," as Jesus did in his ministry? And how might we protect the most vulnerable in our society – as our founding rector did over 150 years ago?

Let us heed Dr. King's warning – from nearly half a century ago – never to sleep through a revolution, as Rip Van Winkle did. Progress never just "rolls in on the wheels of inevitability." May we be strengthened by the Word and Sacraments in these difficult and trying times. And may we always stay awake and respond, if necessary, to God's call of sacred resistance.