

“Finding New Purpose after Following a Lost Cause”

Numbers 20:1-13

Along with the Shields, Sassaks and I don’t know how many others of you, Bonnie and I watched the newly released movie version of *Hamilton* this weekend. I don’t know a play that I’ve enjoyed more. So many memorable lines –

- “just like my country I’m young, scrappy and hungry and I’m not giving away my shot;”
- “in the room where it happens;”
- “it’s not a moment, it’s a movement;”
- “immigrants – we get the job done!”

It’s a play about our American revolution but also how its gain of joyous freedom can also butt heads with the tragedies of sins and prideful mistakes. Lin-Miranda Manuel can find ways of calling us to courage and dedication to our promised American liberties, but without neglecting how such freedom does not protect us from loss and brokenness and the hurt that is often left in the wake of selfish ambition and desire.

One of the *several* parts that always “get me,” comes at the beautiful moment when George Washington asks Hamilton to help him write his famous farewell address. In a way, this is the best part of the American revolution in my eyes. Having presidential power – enough, in fact, for many to have wanted George Washington to have been the King George on this side of the pond – Washington, after two terms, voluntarily lets go the presidency. In the words of the song, he wants to “teach us how to say goodbye.”

If I say goodbye, the nation learns to move on
It outlives me when I’m gone

And then Miranda weaves in the actual words of Washington’s Farewell Address.

Though, in reviewing the incidents of my administration, I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. I shall also carry with me

The hope (that my country will) view them with indulgence (and that)
After forty-five years of my life dedicated to its service with an upright zeal
(The faults of incompetent abilities will be) consigned to oblivion,

As I myself must soon be to the mansions of rest
I anticipate with pleasing expectation that retreat in which I promise myself
to realize the sweet enjoyment of partaking,
In the midst of my fellow-citizens, the benign influence of good laws under
a free government,

The ever-favorite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust
Of our mutual cares, labors, and dangers

Why this section moves me is because I hear America's promise coming alive in Washington's voluntary action. By resigning, retiring, putting himself under a term limit, whatever you'd like to call it, he is saying that freedom means valuing the well-being and the gifts of the other more than keeping for oneself power and control.

That George Washington was "too sensible of [his] defects not to think it that [he] committed many errors," was true enough. NPR reporter, Michelle Norris, named not only his ownership of 300 slaves as one of those, but also the fact that when the U.S. government was in Philadelphia, York Washington would move his slaves to New Jersey every 45 days to avoid them becoming free under a time limit stated by Pennsylvania law. Worse still, was that even though the United States became the first modern democracy, it was only so for white males. All men were seen as created equal, unless they weren't of European descent nor, obviously, were women seen as having an equal status with men. When racism is called America's Original Sin, this is what is meant – in violation of the divisiveness which the Gospel sought to overcome, the exclusion and oppression of African Americans, Native Americans and other non-white peoples, as well as women, was an abomination of the very ideal that America aspired to.

Frederick Douglass said as much in the lead up to the Civil War, finding the 4th of July something to celebrate, but not for people of color since they were not included in the Independence, Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. This short video interview speaks to that – documentary film maker Ken Burns interviewing influential black author, James Baldwin. Take a look ...

[Statue of Liberty documentary interview of James Baldwin by Ken Burns]

Three weeks ago, when I planned this sermon, it was going to be before a clergy-led walk in Leesburg, protesting the Lost Cause monument in the Courthouse yard, our walk leading us to the memorial for Orion Anderson a fourteen-year-old Hamilton kid who was lynched because he dared scared a girl, who was a friend of his, by putting a paper sack over his head and yelling Boo. As Ken Burns tells us, the history of the statue is to be distinguished from the myth. The statue was of a Confederate Soldier, remembered as a patriot to Virginia for whom for fought in the Civil War. But the history is that the statue, put up in 1908 in the Loudoun Courthouse yard was a part of a movement called the Lost Cause.

The Lost Cause was a narrative typically portraying the Confederacy's cause as noble and portraying its leaders and armies as exemplars of old-fashioned chivalry. While defeated by the Union armies because of strength of numbers and factories, the South's superior military skill and courage was lionized. Its theme also became a major contributor to defining gender roles in the white South in terms of preserving family honor and chivalrous traditions. Its ideology was used to perpetuate racism and racist power structures leading to Jim Crow laws. It viewed the Civil War as a struggle that was primarily waged in order to save the Southern way of life or to defend "states' rights," such as the right to secede from the Union, in the face of overwhelming "Northern aggression." At the same time, the Lost Cause minimizes or completely denies the central role of slavery and white supremacy in both the buildup to and outbreak of the war. White supremacy was at the center of the Lost Cause narrative. In

that vein, the erection of a statue of a Confederate Soldier in front of our county's Hall of Justice symbolized that there were two standards of law in our community – reiterating our nation's original sin – had one for white males and different grades of law or threat of punishment for those who fall into the castes of persons deemed below.

Our story from the Book of Numbers is also about freedom, but also about freedom not fully realized. Quite clearly, the complaining Israelites are not grasping with courage to generously exult in the liberty which God has given them. This has happened often in the Book of Numbers, but in this instance, at the very moment of the death of Moses' sister, Miriam, instead of coming alongside him and his brother, Aaron, grieving with them, they show their deficit of faith by saying that they wished they could go back to Egypt because at least there they had food and water. And to illustrate what they are missing, they recite the menu of what they are missing.

Now, as we know from Moses' battle with Pharaoh, Moses' staff was legendary for doing miraculous things. And also, if you've been to that part of the world, you also know that sometimes water is behind rocks of a certain kind, having percolated down to the desert floor from the mountains above. But God's instructions to Moses are different than that he should tap the rock with his staff. Instead, Moses is to command or speak to the rock – from which will come water, the miracle belonging to God, who is the one who not only the author of Israel's freedom, but also its sustainer. Moses will get in trouble in this story and because of the trouble, will lose his ticket to ultimately enter the promised land. His sin? Instead of speaking to the rock, he hits it – twice – and water flows out.

That's interesting isn't it? What was not asked for was a display of power. What was not asked for was a miracle. What was asked for was a word, talk, speech, and the kind that comes from knowing and trusting. Our Brief Statement of Faith in our Presbyterian Church asks us, among other things, to hear the voices of those long silenced as a way of living into the liberty that is the promise of the God of Israel and out of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps there's something similar here, to what was asked from Moses as he seeks that promised land of freedom.

Thank God that our conversation isn't over, in fact, there are still ample opportunity to speak, to listen, to discover a plenty that will satisfy us all. The marches that have been taking place, the facing race supper clubs that we all have been invited to, the opportunity to talk about race and seeking a corner to turn to get past racism are before us. A Declaration of Independence was signed 244 years ago, but the full extent of its promised liberty remains in front of us. As we celebrate let's not let the sin in our past keep us from the promise that still beckons into a free future. Amen.