

Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Music of Freedom

Mark 1:1-11 by Patty Friesen, Jan.10/21

We have entered into the new church year, using Lectionary Year B readings with Mark's gospel and Mark's gospel with its 16 short chapters is spare at the best of times and also spare in describing the baptism of Jesus. Mark eliminates the conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus, but highlights the dove and God's voice as all the gospels do, saying "This is my Beloved Son."

Our new hymnal Voices Together includes art work so I'd like us to look at #445 which is a Lino-graph by Matthew Regier in 2018 which depicts both John the Baptist and Jesus in strong dynamic dark lines that integrate ethnicity. The water swirls around Jesus as the healing waters of Bethsaida. There is water, fish, dove and all creation itself as Jesus is inaugurated as Saviour of all people and all creation. Notice the tall mountain behind John the Baptist - the mountain of God in Isaiah where all nations gather in peace. Jesus' hands are larger than proportion for healing, feeding and raising the dead. I don't have any other information about this Lino-graph and suspect the bottom word is Greek for Jesus Christ, Beloved Son of God. That's the great thing about art - it makes us think and wonder.

The baptism of Jesus was one of Georgia Congressman John Lewis' favourite scriptures. Many African American Baptist churches have a painting of Jesus' baptism at the front of the church with a dark-skinned Jesus coming out of the water with the dove above him. How we visually see Jesus influences what we think about Jesus and seeing Jesus with John's own skin tone shaped how John Lewis saw Jesus.

Growing up in Troy, Alabama in the 1950's in a harsh and segregated world, church was comforting and restorative for the Lewis family. From the beginning of his engagement with scripture as a child, John Lewis was drawn to the sweep and scope of the Christian story - the story of a created order disrupted by sin and redeemed by Jesus. For a youngster of great imagination and quickening faith, there could be no more moving saga than the bible stories of deliverance - themes in scripture and music that shaped and suffused Lewis' life from his earliest days, particularly the stories of the Israelite exodus from slavery in Egypt.

The music of the slaves, the spirituals told the stories of the Exodus and freedom in powerful ways. Frederick Douglass in his 1845 memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* writes, "Singing among the slaves is not evidence of their containment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of the heart. The songs had a double meaning. To whites, the songs were about freedom to heaven but on our lips, they meant deliverance from the evils of slavery."

The double meaning of which Douglass wrote is also called "masking" - the tradition in African American music of apparently singing about one thing while in fact singing about another. To sing of deliverance from sin, for instance, was also a song of deliverance from slavery without provoking a white backlash. The great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson would discuss the masking device. "The city about heaven was a city here on earth. Slave songs were code songs. It is not a question of getting to Heaven, but rather getting to the free state of Canada or a safe city in the North - Heaven on earth. (P. 57 *Songs of America*).

Country singer, Tim McGraw says, "Haunting and compelling, *Go Down Moses* pulls us into the struggle for freedom with the minor chords and the major sentiment of this spiritual tune.

Whatever your colour, whatever your background, you can feel the African rhythm down in your soul. (Songs of America, p. 74). Let us sing When Israel Was in Egypt Land #193 Voices

Together

John Lewis' vocation as a minister began with his chief chore on the farm: the care of the family's poultry. "We had a lot of chickens," Lewis recalled. "I literally started preaching to the chickens," he said. "They became members of my first church...I remember my first act of nonviolent protest was when my parents would kill one of the chickens and I would refuse to eat the chicken." There were pastoral mishaps. "When I was about five or six years old, I wanted to save the soul of a chicken, and I accidentally drowned it during an attempted baptism."

When one of his feathered charges died, Lewis would conduct a full funeral, complete with readings from scripture and a eulogy. It describes John Lewis to a T: an earnest young farm boy presiding over an unruly flock, concerned for their well-being and insistently offering the gospel to an audience disinclined to heed it. Lewis long saw his work in the coop as formative. He learned the art of agape, of self-giving love among those chickens. (Jon Meacham, *His Truth is Marching On*, p. 27)

John Lewis' work in civil rights began as a teenager when his local public library in Troy, Alabama allowed only white patrons. He got a petition and worked to get the library integrated. From there he went to college in Nashville and met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and together with activist Diane Nash worked at getting the lunch counters in Nashville integrated. John Lewis believed that God was on their side for integration and in spite of the pushbacks, the beatings, the bombings, the burnings, that God's truth of love of all people would prevail." (p. 245) "The civil rights movement was born in the churches," Lewis said, "with sermons and

spirituals and our belief that we are all God's children who are called to actualize the fruits of the Spirit in our lives and in our nation." (Meacham, p. 234).

Preaching not to the chickens but to those in power gathered in the Washington National Cathedral in 2018, John Lewis said, "We truly believed that through the discipline and nonviolence, through the power of peace and the power of love, that we could transform America into something Martin Luther King, Jr. called a Beloved Community. This was our conscious goal. We worked, we struggled and we suffered to make that dream a reality. Consider those two words: Beloved Community: Beloved - meaning not hateful, not violent, not uncaring, not unkind and Community - meaning not separated, not polarized, not locked in struggle: The Beloved Community is an all-inclusive world society based on simple justice, the values, the dignity and the worth of every human being that is the Kingdom of God."

"We rode the Freedom Buses because of our faith. If Martin Luther King Jr were here today, he would still be saying we are all in this together. Our ancestors maybe came to this land on different boats, mine came on the slave ships from Africa, yours came on the ships from Europe but now we are all in the same boat. Whether we are black or white or Hispanic or Asian American or First Nations, we have to find a way to live together. We have to find a way to understand each other. We have to find a way to make peace with each other." (P. 235)

We Shall Overcome became the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement with the power of music to move people. The brilliance of We shall Overcome, lies in its capacity for many different voices to join in - a fitting metaphor if there ever was one. As a folk song, it has all the hallmarks of great folk music in it that summon the listeners to become singers, it's music as action." (Songs of America, p. 151). Sing: We Shall Overcome #803 Voices Together.

John Lewis lived to see the first African American president inaugurated and wept through this past horrible summer of George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis. John believed that while he was called the Moses of his day telling Pharaoh to let God's people go - young people today are Joshua called to continue Moses' work to continue the work for racial equality. (P. 239). John Lewis died in July 2020. Let us pray:

Our Liberating God who called Jesus in love and baptism 2000 years ago and who called John Lewis in his time and calls us in our time, help us to respond with courage and vision of your Beloved Community, your Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.