

Isaiah 49: 1-7
John 1: 29-42
January 16, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

There is such a thing as holy weariness. Rosa Parks had it. After a long day at work she climbed up on the bus, paid her fare and flopped into the nearest available seat. It happens millions of times every day. No one today thinks twice about it. We all identify with being tired. We often smile at the person who with a sigh sinks down onto the seat on a bus or a commuter train and think, "Yeah, I get that."

But on December 1, 1955 things were very different. It did not matter how tired a person was. If your skin was not white skin and especially if it was brown or black, you had to sit in the back of the bus. You literally had to pass rows of empty seats until you sat in the "colored" section.

Rosa Parks was tired. She was too tired to move down the aisle. She flopped down on the first available seat, sighed and began the ride home.

Now I propose to you that there was more to this being tired than having worked hard that day and there was more to the insult than simply having to go to the back of the bus. There were the segregated bathrooms; the separate water fountains, white only hotels, movie theaters and restaurants, segregated railway cars; segregated schools, churches and colleges. African American people could not compete on professional sports teams. While women may complain of a glass ceiling preventing them from ascending as far as their skill and drive would take them, the ceiling was not glass: it was white and unyielding.

Yet these were simply the outward symptoms of a deep and ugly legacy of three centuries of horror—a horror born of a greed so deep that it would turn a human being created in the image of God and turn that person into a commodity no different from a chair or a beast of burden.

A civil war was fought the right of states to hold slaves. An Emancipation Proclamation was issued liberating people from human bondage. A constitutional amendment was passed to give African American men the right to vote; yet slowly but surely the promise of that new day dissipated as mist in the heat of a summer day. Then came the infamous Supreme Court decision of 1896 known as Plessy vs. Ferguson which validated the concept of “separate but equal” opportunity for White and African Americans. In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas that at least as far as education went such separate but equal laws were unconstitutional and illegal.

One year later the news had not reached Montgomery, Alabama—or any where else in the United States. It had certain not reached the busses. And on December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks was tired—tired of it all. Come what may she would not be moved.

Then of course a white man demanded her seat and she refused to get up. She was arrested and forcibly removed from the bus and fined \$10—a significant sum in those days.

But you have to understand that Rosa Parks was tired. Hers was a deep and holy fatigue born not only of her experience but of generations of her family and friends and their family and friends. And you have to understand that this hers was not the enervation of despair where one ceases to care about life. This an exhaustion born of an inability to

participate in the oppressive and dehumanizing society of racism. I propose to you that on that day, Rosa Parks was not thinking about the plight of people of color; she was not planning some act of civil disobedience to spark the rebellion that brought a relatively unknown Baptist minister named Martin Luther King Jr. to lead the now famous Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Rosa Parks was simply tired of it all and unwilling to participate any more. That the Holy Spirit of the Living God was behind this holy fatigue is evidenced that while the war against racism is far from over it is difficult to imagine such blatantly cruel and inhuman legal and social structures existing today. Tomorrow millions of Americans will honor the memory and legacy of Dr. King and rightly so. But today I lift up a woman, an ordinary human being who was simply tired.

This morning we hear of Isaiah in the midst of the exiles of Israel. When he speaks, he does so not only for himself but as the voice of his people. Isaiah announces to the exiles that before he and they were born they were destined for God's glory. Yet Isaiah and by extension the exiles of Israel are tired.

But I said, "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity."

The New Revised Standard Version misleads us a bit in translating the Hebrew word *tohu* as "vanity". The word indicates utter futility and ruin. It harkens back to the primal darkness and chaos on the eve of creation. The King James Version is closer to the sense by simply rendering the verse, "I have spent my strength for nought."

In short Isaiah, and by extension, Israel is tired. He is tired of trying to make it work. The world may do what it may. Isaiah has given up on cooperating. In this

powerful passage God's hope and Israel's fatigue meet. History for a trembling moment stops. Israel awaits God to make the next move.

God does make the next move and announces liberation from captivity and a restoration of Israel's true place in God's sight. It is now the call on Israel to believe this good news and follow. This is no easy journey. It is the call to walk by faith. And faith as we learn from the Book of Hebrews, "is the assurance of what we hope for; the conviction of what we do not see." It is perhaps the most difficult journey of all.

Walking by faith means moving forward when we cannot see for certain where we are going but trust the One who leads. Walking by faith means that we resist the temptation to focus on ourselves and our experience and keep our eyes on the prize. Walking by faith means moving through times of discouragement and desolation where there is no evidence that we are any nearer to the promise. Sometimes it simply means reaching our hand in the darkness and trusting Jesus to take hold.

Of course the truth is that Jesus has never let go. It is we who must realize that our hand is in his and our lives are in the hands of God. Amen.