



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Then the Lord said, I have observed the misery of my people. I have heard their cry. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Recently, Bill Danaher, who I like to call the other Father Bill, told some of us that he has been listening to Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young at the gym. A few years ago, Tracy and I went to hear Neil Young perform solo. It was a sold out crowd. One of the highlights of that evening was hearing Neil sing Ohio. That song tells the story of the four American students killed at Kent State University on May 4th, 1970. Nine others were wounded when the Ohio National Guard opened fire on the crowd. As a former chaplain to Ohio University (not Ohio State, the other one), I can tell you that the date of the massacre is still remembered on campus there.

But the song I really want to start with tonight was really the B side on the Ohio Single. The songs were recorded together in a hasty session right after Kent State, and the latter song is called Find the Cost of Freedom. Maybe some of you know it. The chorus goes like this:

"Find the cost of freedom buried in the ground
Mother Earth will swallow you, lay your body down."

Stephen Stills originally wrote these words after witnessing a Civil War battlefield. All too often the cost of freedom is blood. The song is a lament and the haunting harmonies make it all the more powerful. Like Ohio, Find the Cost of Freedom has a specific historical context. This becomes clear enough from the following verses, which allude to tonight's lesson from Ezekiel:

"I think I see a valley
Covered with bones in blue
All the brave soldiers that cannot get older
Been asking after you

Hear the past a' calling
From Armageddon's side
When everyone's talking and no one is listening
How can we decide?"

When stills wrote these words, the larger context was the war in Vietnam. Now our country is involved again in another painful undeclared war. It's been more than a month now, and there are already more than a dozen American soldiers who cannot get older because they're dead. And that's to say nothing of the soldiers and civilians, some of them children, in Iran and Lebanon, and other war torn zones around the world. These human beings still challenge us with their questions.

The song is so profoundly moving because it does not simply condemn, rather, it gives voice to the dead. Often this is the function of the church's witness, to give voice to dead and suffering people, including anonymous forgotten millions who can no longer speak for themselves, and find the cost of freedom still does not discount the nobility of sacrifice for a cause or even dispute that it's sometimes necessary. But he urges us. He urges us to stop talking so much so that we may listen to the fallen dead. He thereby invites us to consider the real costs of war.

Tonight, beloved, we sing another kind of freedom song. First of all, we sing The Exsultet, the hymn that Father Bill sang at the start of the service. That song is all about Jesus, our mighty King. It is about the God of grace, who to redeem a slave gave a son. It is all about Jesus Christ, who broke the power of death and rose victorious from the grave. That's what this night is all about. Tonight we hear other ancient songs of freedom. You heard Go Down Moses, you heard several others, and we hear several lessons from scripture. Among these is always the story of the exodus. That story is all about a God who keeps faith with us when we suffer. It is all about the liberator God of Israel who acts with a mighty hand to deliver us from bondage.

And that brings us to a third kind of freedom song: the great songs of the Civil Rights Movement. Today is the 58th anniversary of the murder of Dr. King. Many of these songs come from the African American spirituals as well as the songs of labor on the picket line. Martin knew them well. He sang them in church and out on the streets. Often these freedom songs hearken back to the Exodus, which the black church tradition has always understood in terms of their own struggle for freedom. These are the kinds of songs that someone sings as they prepare to be arrested or beaten or killed, and they are filled with the boldness and the freedom of beloved children of God.

One of my favorites goes like this:

"Ain't nobody gonna turn me around
Ain't nobody gonna turn me around
I'm gonna keep on walking, keep on talking
Walking into Freedom Land."

On Easter morning, the women arrive at the tomb. They are numb with grief. They have been traumatized and they are nearly past the point of weeping. Their hopes have been crushed. Their hearts have been broken, for they have seen Jesus tortured, mocked, and crucified. For three days now, His body has been swallowed by Mother Earth and with Him, their hope has been sealed in the tomb. For all they know, this is how the story ends. They have come to do what they can for His body, which others have dismembered and desecrated, but then to their amazement, they find the stone rolled away.

Then they see the Angel of God blazing like the sun. He is sitting on the stone. Do not be afraid, he tells them. You are looking for Jesus. He is not here. Come and see where He lay. Then they meet Jesus. They meet the Lord Himself and that changes everything. He turns their terror and grief into great joy. And so they grab His feet and they worship Him. Do not be afraid, He tells them. And then He sends them off, hearts pounding, to tell the others the good news.

It's not that the suffering and death of Jesus have been undone. He still bears the scars of His passion, but His wounds, even His wounds have been transformed. They have been given new meaning in light of what God has done. For by the power of the living God, the crucified Savior has become the living one. He is the author of life. He is risen from the dead and He will never die again. He has shattered the bonds of death and the grave. In Him, we have been born anew to a living hope.

Tonight is the great vigil of Easter. And in many places, in lieu of a sermon, they simply read the great Easter Homily of St. John Chrysostom. In it, one of our greatest preachers, nicknamed the Golden Mouth, connects the resurrection of Jesus with two of His parables, the laborers and the vineyard, and the prodigal son. For Chrysostom, Easter is all about the victory of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. In that kingdom, workers who get there at the end of the day get paid exactly the same as those who are there at the beginning. In that kingdom, God comes running out to meet us when we are lost and hurting and afraid.

Easter is all about a God who is scandalously good to us, a God who brings life out of death. And so speaking on behalf of the Lord, Chrysostom issues the following invitation: “Therefore, let all of you enter into the joy of your Lord. Receive your reward, both the first, and likewise the second. You rich and poor together, hold high festival. You sober and you heedless, honor the day. Rejoice today, both you who have fasted and you who have disregarded the fast. The table is full laden. Let all of you feast sumptuously. The calf is fatted. Let no one go away hungry.”

Tonight, beloved, we claim these promises for our sister, Janie. We do this as we initiate her into Christ's own body and receive her as God's own child. We do that

as people who know that God's love extends to absolutely everyone, including those who have not been baptized. And so we baptize Janie as a sign of God's great love for every last one of us, and tonight, especially for her. Tonight, we are sealing Janie with the Holy Spirit and marking her as Christ's very own. Jesus Christ, the living Lord, is giving her a hope and a gift and a promise that no one can ever take away from her.

We don't earn God's gifts. God gives them freely with no strings attached because God is the one friend who never lets us down. God's gifts can't be bought or bartered or sold. God gives us gifts because God loves us and wants to make us happy. God gives us gifts because God has heard our cry. God wants to set us free. Our freedom costs God everything, but for us, it is absolutely free.

And so we stick out our empty hands and we receive the bread of life. We come to the tomb numb with grief, only to find Jesus alive. And tonight we hear God's invitation to all of us written in the book of Isaiah. "Come to the waters. Come, you who have no money. Come and buy bread without money or price. Come as you are. Come one. Come all. Come and take and eat."

Amen.