

“A Voice of One Calling in the Wilderness”: Hope Comes from the Margins

A Sermon Preached for Highland Baptist Church

Mark 1:1-8

December 6, 2020

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This week marks the 65th anniversary of the day in December 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Parks was on her way home from work that evening, and when the bus filled up, the bus driver demanded that she get up so that a white male passenger could have her seat. But she refused to budge, and the police arrested her. Her act of resistance triggered a 381-day boycott of the bus system that was organized by the 26-year-old Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

But what you may not know is that nine months before Rosa Parks, there was Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old girl who refused to give up her seat on the bus, too. At her segregated school, her class had been studying Black leaders like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Claudette says, “My head was just too full of black history and the oppression that we went through. It felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side pushing me down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other. I couldn't get up.” And 15-year-old Claudette Colvin was arrested and taken to jail.

Before Claudette, there was also Sarah Keys, who in 1952 boarded a bus from Trenton, N.J. to her home in North Carolina, her first trip home since joining the military. Around midnight, the bus picked up some new passengers, and the driver told Keys to give up her seat to a white man. She refused. Sarah spent the entire night in a jail cell, with a mattress so dirty she says she was afraid to sit down, so she stood all night in her full uniform, including her one-and-a-half-inch heels.

You see, there were others who prepared the way for Rosa Parks. There was Aurelia Browder. Viola White. Geneva Johnson. Katie Wingfield. Susie McDonald. Epsie Worthy. Mary Louise Smith Ware. And so many more names and faces and stories we will likely never even know about.¹

As Professor Courtney Boggs writes, “Forerunners are often unseen figures and unsung heroes. Their back stories are unknown. The details of their lives are underimagined or undervalued. They garner minimal attention, because they are forerunners—those who plow the ground, destabilize the terrain, and make ready for change that is to come...Every movement needs those who function as the advance team, that is, those who prepare the way for something beyond the present state of affairs.”²

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2009/03/15/101719889/before-rosa-parks-there-was-claudette-colvin>, <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-43171799>, <https://time.com/5786220/claurette-colvin-mary-louise-smith/>

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-11-8-5>

But forerunners don't come from the center of society. They're not the star of the show, and society never treats them that way. Because more often than not, forerunners come from the margins.

For instance, the summer after 15-year-old Claudette Colvin's arrest, she found herself shunned by parts of her community. She experienced various difficulties and soon became pregnant. And when Claudette started getting involved in the NAACP, civil rights leaders didn't want someone like her, a pregnant teenage girl, to become the face of the movement. They didn't think anyone would take her seriously. And, her family didn't even have a running toilet in their house.

To this day, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, Claudette says, "They didn't want me because I didn't represent the middle class. . . . They didn't want me involved because of where I lived and what my parents' background was."

Historian David Garrow says "the reality of the movement was often young people and often more than 50 percent women." But, the images we most often see and the stories we most often hear are of men in suits."

However, Colvin still remembers something her pastor said to her when he came with Claudette's mother to pay her bail and take her home from jail that day. "Claudette," he said, "I'm so proud of you. Everyone prays for freedom. We've all been praying and praying. But you're different—you want your answer the next morning. And I think you've just brought the revolution to Montgomery."

In today's Gospel reading in Mark, there is also someone who is preparing the way for the revolution that is about to take place: A man named John the Baptist. He's not the kind of person we expect to be at the beginning of a Gospel – he wears camels hair clothing, tied around his waist with a belt, and he eats locusts and wild honey from the fields. And he comes to us comes crying out, not from the city, but from the margins of society - from the wilderness.

As Karoline Lewis remarks, "The opening of Mark's Gospel reminds us of the decentering of God's good news that is found on the edge...of everything. God [always] goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be. We find ourselves not in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem but outside of her city walls, in the margins, on the sidelines. The good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves in the peripheries of our world, but it also belongs there."³

So much so that if we read further in Mark verse 5, we find that "all the people of Jerusalem" are going out to the wilderness to discover what the fuss is all about. And something about

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-11-8>

what John is saying and doing out there in the wilderness is compelling and captivating to them, because there by the river Jordan, the people are going to be baptized.

It makes me wonder – what are the voices that you and I listening to these days? Are we paying attention to what God is saying and doing outside of where we are - on the margins, in the wilderness? Because maybe that's exactly where we need to be looking and listening this Advent season to find hope for our weary world.

Back in October, a handful of us from Highland marched with about 500 more from our community in a peaceful protest from Tyler Park downtown to Breonna Square. And one of the people leading our chants along the protest was a young man named Travis Nagdy. He had big curly hair and a large megaphone, and I remember being inspired by the energy and passion he brought all along our route.

But Travis' name is now on one of the crosses outside of Highland that we will hammer into the ground on Sunday afternoon. He was shot and killed just two weeks ago on November 23, becoming one more of the heartbreaking homicides in our city in 2020.

As I've been learning more about his story, it became clear to me this week that Travis Nagdy was a modern day John the Baptist, but instead of camel hair clothing he wore a Black Lives Matter t-shirt, and in place of a staff he carried a megaphone. Travis one of the forerunners in the revolution that is taking place in our city and country these days.

According to a November 23 article in the *Courier Journal*, after the attorney general's announcement about the Breonna Taylor case, "Hope, [for many in our community], felt out of reach. But Nagdy clung to it. And as he looked into a crowd [of protesters] gathered at Frist Unitarian Church downtown [that day], he began to speak."

He told them that two months before the movement began, he was the closest he had ever been to committing suicide. But he came out to observe the protests happening downtown, and he said, "There was just so much beautiful interaction [going on between people] that made me realize that what was going on out here was something different, and it gave me a reason to live."

Soon, Travis became one of the key leaders of the movement. One of his mentors said "[Travis is] irreplaceable. Travis really believed he could help change systemic racism...If you ever needed to see hope in a young man, you could look at Travis and see it...He was a beacon of hope. Him and his megaphone."

"While hope again feels distant," the *Courier Journal* article continues to read, "some are clinging to it now in Nagdy's name." One person notes, "I hope he will be a symbol of this violence and that we'll finally say, 'This stops with Travis. We're going to finally put some

attention on this thing, and we're going to wrap a movement around it, and we are going to be serious about what's going on in our city."⁴

This afternoon at 3 PM, we will hammer over 140 crosses into our lawn in memory of all those we have lost to homicides in our city this year. And perhaps all of these crosses on the lawn are voices crying out to us from the wilderness that is the year 2020. Crying out for us wake up. To repent. Crying out for change. And preparing the way for the revolution that is to come.

But with so much wrong – with so many crosses on the lawn – a devastating record number this year - and when hope feels so very distant, where do we go from here? That is, after all, the question we are asking ourselves this Advent season. Where can we find hope for our weary world?

A few years ago, after the horrific shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December of 2012, Rachel Held Evans asked that same question. And she wrote these powerful words that I return to every Advent, and I find them to be especially significant this year. She says,

“Those little Advent candles sure have a lot of darkness to overcome this year. I see them glowing from church windows and on TV, in homes and at midnight vigils. Their stubborn flames represent the divine promise that even the smallest light can chase away the shadows lurking in this world, and that even in the darkest places, *God can't be kept out*.

“It's a hard promise to believe today, I know...And although my doubt and anger make it hard for me to believe today, I will keep lighting my Advent candles like a fool until they help me in my unbelief. May their flames be a reminder to all of us that we don't have to know why God let this happen to know that God was still there.... and here, and in those swaddling clothes, and on that cross, and in that grave, and on the throne....For no amount of darkness can overcome the light.”⁵

Friends, may we remember - when the world feels so very dark and weary – to look for those stubborn little Advent lights.

You know, something I've never thought of before working on this sermon is that the Advent candles are placed along the outside edges of our wreaths. They're not in the center – they're on the margins. And yet each outer candle is a beacon of hope, lighting our way forward for the hope that is to come.

In the same way, I believe that Claudette Colvin was a light and Sarah Keys was a light. Travis Negdy was a light and Breonna Taylor was a light. Each of them reminding us to be bold and to

⁴ <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2020/11/23/louisville-protests-young-leader-travis-nagdy-21-shot-and-killed/6388181002/>; <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/breonna-taylor/2020/11/28/breonna-taylor-protest-leader-travis-nagdy-memorialized-vigil/6454019002/>

⁵ <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/god-kept-out>

be brave with the lights that are within us, that we might progressively light the way for the hope that is to come.

And so may we cling to that stubborn hope that comes to us from the margins of our Advent wreaths. May we listen for the voices of hope that come to us from the margins of society. And together, may we hold on to the promise that no amount of darkness can overcome the light.

Advent Blessing

Friends,

We continue our Advent journey this week
Because we believe that neither height nor depth,
Nor things present nor things to come,
Neither death nor life,
Nor anything in all creation - not even *a pandemic*

Can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord –
This love that is coming to be with us and with our weary world.

And so may we keep watch, Highland family,
And may we listen for the voices crying out and singing out from the wilderness
for the hope that comes to us unexpectedly this Advent season.
Amen.