



Ashfield First Congregational Church/United Church of Christ
429 Main Street – PO Box 519 – Ashfield MA 01330

Sermon January 24, 2021 “For God Alone My Soul..” Rev. David Jones

“I take it for granted that if I could love you unconditionally, I could iron out the edges of the darkest sky. But for some of us that isn’t enough. And so I take off driving past places that have been tainted; I put on a good show for you. And when I turn back around, will you let me believe that I broke through? Tomorrow could feel like a hundred years later. I’m wiser and slow and attuned, and I am down on my knees. I’m like a bird in the trees, I can learn to see with a partial view, I can learn to be easy as I move in close to you. And that’s what I wanted.

“I take it for granted that if I could love you unconditionally, I could iron out the edges of the darkest sky. But for some of us that isn’t enough.”

These are lyrics from the song called “Fire” by a singer-songwriter named Katie Crutchfield (she performs this song with the band Waxahatchee). I found myself turning to this song as I sat with our scripture readings and the events and the tragedies of this week.

This week we have seen a particularly dramatic and distressing episode in Washington come to some kind of resolution. And this week, closer to home, our congregation and our community have suffered many terrible losses. Covid is impacting our community more and more. Congregants and their families have themselves had Covid; congregants have been afraid to go into workplaces that are becoming less safe; and we have had too many congregants and friends of our church who have not been able to grieve and mourn and comfort loved ones as they should have been able to.

I was speaking with one of our congregants just yesterday, after the passing of a sister-in-law. I really felt this congregant’s grief. I couldn’t help but think of my own sister. I told this congregant how my sister had just had her second child on Tuesday. I started to worry I was sharing too much. But the congregant saw that we were experiencing something similar. This congregant was denied the opportunity to say goodbye to one life, and I was being denied the opportunity to say hello to another. These denials will impact us differently. I will still get an opportunity to say hello. But I was grateful and moved by this congregant’s wisdom and generosity in seeing how different things can be united--in this case united by a sense of a deep lack in our lives, of a painful missing out, of losing time together that we can’t get back.

I am someone who, throughout my life, has clung to what Katie describes, that if I--if we, as a people--can just come to love one another unconditionally, we could iron out the edges of even the darkest sky. But they are not just edges up in the sky, they are the

paths we must travel on right now. We can not take unconditional love for granted, anymore than we should ever take democracy for granted. Yet we have, haven't we? We have taken both of these things for granted for far too long. Once sure and even, the ground beneath us now shifts day by day.

In our reading from the Gospel according to Mark this morning, we learn that Jesus' ministry begins in earnest after King Herod arrested John the Baptist. This detail can be easily overlooked in light of the beauty of the verses that follow, when we learn that Jesus intends to make these first disciples to "fish for people." But the ministry that brings so many of us here today--that is in accordance with the broad body of faith and hope that brings us *all* here today--is jolted to life by the violence of Rome and its clients against another prophet. The new life that Jesus gives to Simon and Andrew -- subsistence fishermen not so unlike the subsistence farmers that planted and tended the towns of these hills -- is a summons or a call into still greater possibilities. Of course hard work will always be a part of any new possibilities together. But work now joined to the responsibility of new relationships and bonds of kinship--joined with the enactment of the forgiveness of debts and therefore forgiveness also of an anxiety of the soul--life's hard work will become like miracles. The hard life of fishing to net a precarious, subservient survival will be transformed through siblinghood into the abundant life of the Table of common prosperity. All of this *begins* when time is of the essence, begins after John has been arrested; we can't afford to mess around and be distracted, or be soothed by idle words. Now our faith must become both an urgent and steady practice, where God, meeting us at our work, calls us away to work for God instead; then we must physically drop whatever preoccupies us and *follow*.

The decision of Simon and his brother Andrew to go this way--to leave their nets in the sea and follow Jesus--is not really different from the decisions of Martin Luther King we have been dwelling on this month. Simon and Andrew have heard the good news that God doesn't work the way this world does. By now they have heard the good news that God has come to find and to call them so that the world can be re-created in God's image alone. And like Simon and Andrew, Martin Luther King risked his life because God's calling is that persuasive; it is that overflowing with the promise and possibility of divine love.

I found myself reflecting on the inauguration this week, on my own and with congregants. I kept asking myself, was it really what it told us it was? Was it really the great democratic triumph that we long to see, the overflowing promise of love? Because I do not recall that the election in 2020 was especially democratic, that it was free of voter suppression or the influence of money. I do not recall that in 2020, when tens of millions of people were put out of work and never got any meaningful help, that the mere peaceful transfer of power would guarantee healthcare for those who lost it with their jobs this year. I don't remember this democracy relieving the tired hands of our Food Pantry volunteers, or guaranteeing an income for all people like Martin Luther King demanded. Democracy is a funny word in a country where houses sit vacant even as people sleep homeless on the cold concrete of our city streets. Whatever may change or may be improved has not happened yet. And so what I do remember is that even this democracy we do have is far from enough.

For a few weeks now there has been this dissonance piling up in my ears; cable news and op-eds telling me one thing, my faith crying out another. These are tough, awful times, no matter how lofty or sunny our words may be. I *wish* one day could change that. I know that many of us breathed a deep and worthy sigh of relief this past Wednesday, for one reason or another. It is good to hold onto that relief. But if we cling too tightly to *our* relief, we will find ourselves taking love and freedom for granted just the same as always.

So let us turn to the prospect of *God's* relief. We will have to be wiser and attuned; we will have to be like a bird in the trees and learn to see with a partial view. We will have to learn to move easy, with the resolve and purpose of God's call. Because make no mistake, whether at work, or in our communities--whether in this sanctuary or in our hospitals--we *are* being called. God promises a house of worship and siblinghood in every place that we go, because that promise is already there inside us. Simon and Andrew were not better or stronger or more moral than you or I. They were just open to the call of God where they worked; they were just brave enough to see the light, and "brave enough to be it." They were open and prepared to accept that God sees greatness in us all and they let that vision transform their lives.

I have to say I have lost count how many times the direction of Washington has changed in just my lifetime; sometimes it changes in two years, sometimes four or eight, but back and forth it always seems to go. In my experience this makes Washington an unreliable beacon. Washington is too powerful to ignore or fail to study; it is too important to neglect and to not try to use in the struggle for justice. But its government buildings should not become our temples. Its words should not become more sacred than our own. It was after all the words and institutions of Rome that arrested John, and that forced Jesus to go into our workplaces to spread a different word. And we know what our government and newspapers made of Martin Luther King, a prophet the powerful had long since grown tired of when he was murdered.

So instead of by Washington we need to be moved by God. Because unlike Washington, God sees that you and I and all of us deserve nothing less than total and steadfast love. And God sees, in each of us, all that is needed to catch the kin-dom of justice and peace here on earth. So we will not sell our souls in the marketplaces of this world. Instead we will give our souls for God alone. And we will be brave enough to follow when we are called, wherever we are, that we may one day realize an abundant and equal society that will let God breathe God's own worthy sigh of relief.

Alleluia and amen.