

MARCHING TO THE BEAT

Sermon—6 September 2020

Some of you know that I play string bass. But you may not know that in high school I was actually good at it, because I practiced. So, my senior year of high school I had an opportunity to play bass in the pit orchestra for a production of Camelot. It was amazing and unlike any other music performance. When you're in the pit orchestra of a musical, you have to constantly be paying attention. No two performances are exactly the same, which means your timing for when to come in changes. You can't get caught up in this beautiful thing that's going on onstage because you might miss your cue to start playing.

For those who are watching, you don't see the pit orchestra, you have no idea how much work is going into it, but they set the tone for everything. They make you FEEL things. Imagine watching Hamilton without music. It just wouldn't be the same. The music directs us, gives us cues on what's going on.

The music for the book of Exodus begins in discord, with the pharaoh making harsh labor demands on Hebrew people. And in the midst of Pharaoh's law that every boy child born be killed there is Moses. Moses, tucked away in a basket by his mother, floating to the pharaoh's daughter, watched by the loving eyes of his sister. And, as you may know, after many displays of God's power and might, this same little baby, now an adult man, Moses, leads the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Leads them through the Red Sea and onto the other side while Pharaoh's army is crushed by the waves.

So Moses, the mighty hero of the Exodus story, sings a song and the Israelites sing along with him. It's a song of victory and of triumph, a song of celebration. And then... for whatever reason... Moses' sister Miriam, the same one who watched Pharaoh's daughter pick her baby brother up out of the basket, grabs her tambourine and sings the refrain and all the women grab their tambourines and sing along. "Sing to the Lord for an overflowing victory! Horse and rider he threw into the sea!"

It's cute... Miriam's song. Essentially the refrain from Moses' song. And the tambourine jingling along.

Tambourine is what we have read as the translation, but some scholars argue that it's actually a drum, that there was a mistake in translation. So what Miriam was playing was not a jingling tambourine, but a drum that led the freedom songs. Miriam the prophet—she is the first woman to be acknowledged in the Bible as a prophet. She heard from God and she moved her people on both sides of the Red Sea. Some argue that the song of Moses was composed by Miriam, that she gave him the words that led the people. This prophet of a woman who was never given the spotlight, yet she beat her drum—reminding the women that freedom was theirs as well.

For so long, the men spoke of freedom, but they spoke of it from their perspective, for them and about them. But the vision God gave Miriam was a larger vision, one that drew her out in the beginnings of the Exodus story to tell Pharaoh's daughter, "I'll get you someone who can feed your baby." A drive to take care for, to push, to nourish the ideas of Moses, the one that people would listen to. Her hope was for the liberation of her people. Not only for the men, but for the whole house of Israel. And God gave her the steady drum beat to march to—on and on and on, one step at a time. This woman, barely visible, carries the left, right, left, right drum beat for the people's victory march.

It's always the invisible people who lead the movement. They may not get credit, may not be hailed as the champions that they are, but make no mistake, it is their work that drives the freedom movement forward. In Exodus we have Miriam, beating the drum, being a prophet, leading the march.

Claudette Colvin was a good student, earning mostly A's in her classes. She hoped to become president someday. It was after school on March 2, 1955 and Claudette Colvin was 15 years old. As she got on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama to head home she was told to give up her seat to a white passenger. But she wouldn't do it. "It's my constitutional right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare, it's my constitutional right." she told the bus driver. Later in her life while being interviewed by Newsweek she said, "I felt like Sojourner Truth was pushing down on one shoulder and Harriet Tubman was pushing down on the other, saying, 'Sit down girl!' I was glued to my seat."

She was arrested that day and nine-months later a woman you've probably heard of, Rosa Parks, was arrested for doing the same thing. Claudette Colvin was young, and she became pregnant. She also had darker skin than Rosa Parks, so civil rights leaders didn't think she was the best icon for the movement. Which is why everyone knows what Rosa Parks did, and far fewer people know the name of Claudette Colvin. But there she was, beating her drum, leading her people toward freedom. Giving courage to those who would follow her.

In 1969 in New York City bars that served gay people didn't receive licenses, which made them easier for the police department to get a warrant to raid. On June 28, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn. The thing that was special about Stonewall was that drag queens that were turned away elsewhere were welcome there. As trans and gay people began to be arrested, the crowd became agitated. As police began escorting those who were being arrested outside a bystander shouted, "Gay power!" and someone began singing, "*We Shall Overcome*." It's said that after this pennies and beer bottles began to be thrown. And thus began the Stonewall Riots.

Now, Marsha P. Johnson has said that she was not there at the beginning of the raid and all reports confirm this, so I'm going to lean into legend more than fact, but it's said that Marsha P. Johnson was the first to throw something, which was probably not true, but what *is* true is that black trans women were the leaders of this movement. People who were shunned everywhere, people who were misunderstood, misgendered, and pushed to the side—it is their work that

paved the way for the gay rights movement. And though Marsha P. Johnson may not have physically started the riots, her spirit and boldness were part of that great drumbeat pushing the movement forward, leading her people toward freedom.

On February 14, 2018, an expelled student entered Parkland, Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and opened fire, killing 17 people and wounding 17 others, in what became the deadliest shooting at a high school in United States history. It was horrific. But in the aftermath of the horror emerged these high school students saying never again, saying that they would not allow another high school to have to go through this.

Among these student activists are Alex Wind, Cameron Kasky, Jaclyn Corin, David Hogg, and Emma Gonzalez. They organized marches, led pushes for gun control legislation, and founded organizations to work toward a world where school shootings no longer happen. And people looked down at them and said they were young and didn't know what they were doing. But they just kept on pushing, kept on working, kept on making strides for change. Leading young people toward freedom and inviting those of us older than them to march alongside.

Just like Miriam, there are invisible people all around us beating the drum and leading the way to freedom. God's work in this world always leads to liberation. Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name. Your job may not be to beat the drum. In fact, it's probably not. Your job is to find the invisible person playing the drum. Listen for them, look for them, and, when you find them, follow them. March beside them. Hold their bullhorn. They are the prophets declaring that God's will is the liberation of all people.

"Freedom," they'll say, "freedom is this way."

Amen.