

Rev. Alexis Kassim
Westmoreland Congregational UCC
Sermon: "A Heavy Halo"
December 14, 2014

Christmas is almost here. Only 11 days away until the big day. I don't know about you, but it's taking me a long time to get in the holiday spirit this year. And by "holiday spirit" I mean the one society tells us that we are supposed to have this time of year. That warm, fuzzy feeling that goes along with decorating a Christmas tree, singing carols, baking cookies and getting great deals on gifts at the mall. All of these things are rituals we take part in to invoke the warmth and joy of the holiday season. It's all very comforting when you think about it.

Well, I haven't arrived at Christmas comfort yet. I'm still very much in Advent-- the uncomfortable period of waiting. Not the gleeful-anticipation-of-Santa-coming-down-the-chimney type of waiting, but rather the suffocating-with-pain and desperate-for-relief type of waiting.

Yesterday, Jacob and I attended the "Justice for All" march downtown where we joined thousands of protesters, perhaps even some of you, to call attention to the issues of racial profiling and police brutality that are plaguing our nation.

And it was there, somewhere around the intersection of Pennsylvania and Constitution did I truly feel the spirit of this liturgical season. It wasn't merry; it wasn't bright; it wasn't comforting; **it was heavy**. At the conclusion of the march once everyone had reached the Capitol, the mothers of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and other slain unarmed boys and men were invited to speak. I didn't even make it through the first one before I started to cry. As someone who recently attended the funeral of a child who was unjustly shot to death, I felt the weight of these mothers' grief and despair. I watched them take a moment to choke back tears before addressing the crowd. And then I thought of Mary, mother of Jesus.

Our scripture this morning is the annunciation of Jesus, where the angel Gabriel visits Mary to tell her that she is highly favored and has been chosen to fulfill God's promise and birth a savior... And what great timing! The people of Israel had been suffering under foreign occupation for a long time, waiting for a Messiah who would set them free from oppressive rule.

And there in the annunciation lies a story of God's grace and power in the midst of a troubling reality. Grace, in that what is soon to happen in the birth of Christ will express God's favor toward the world; and power in that God can work through anyone. Mary is not yet wed and from Nazareth, a small town of little

regard, so she wouldn't be the obvious choice for this particular task. And in this way, Mary is not unlike the mothers who spoke at the march yesterday. Women who similarly are not of privilege, women who similarly are seen to be of little regard. Nevertheless, *God is able* and Mary has a son, for our sake, because God is gracious.

God bestowed a tremendous blessing on Mary, by calling her to this work. And what God did for Mary anticipates what God will do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world through Jesus. The message of the story is that God will disrupt the status quo by bringing justice and mercy through Jesus.

A common refrain of the mothers who spoke yesterday was that their sons were still with them, and with us the protesters, as spirits guiding the work that still needs to be done. When the mother of Amadou Diallo, a young man killed by NYPD officers in 1999, spoke of her son's spirit living in each and every person gathered there regardless of their background, I felt like she was entrusting a ministry to us. A ministry that calls us to embody the promise of the Christ-child who was born to usher in a new age of justice and mercy in the world. A unified ministry of ordinary people, called by God to disrupt the powers that be and declare that ***we are still here, our lives still matter, and we are not forsaken.*** And

at the end of a protest, when you've marched a mile down Pennsylvania Avenue arm-in-arm with people from various backgrounds, black and white, young and old, male and female, that's a warm fuzzy comforting feeling.

The trouble is, ministry is not all warm and fuzzy. Ministry *is* a bumpy road – *not* a smooth road with occasional bumps. If you're doing it right it's bumpy all the time. Not because our hard times will last forever, but because as ministers we are called to tell the truth. And I purposely use the collective "we" because in my tradition, everyone who faithfully professes Christ is considered a minister of the gospel- a Master of Divinity isn't required. We live in an age of "inconvenient truths." Sometimes it's not pretty to tell the truth, it's risky. And the truth is—a lot of us out here are beaten and broken and scared for the lives of our children, but we also profess that we are not destroyed. It's a bumpy road...but we don't lose heart because we take time to remember who Jesus is. We take the time to see who Jesus is in other people.

A friend of mine is currently serving as an associate pastor at Calvary Baptist Downtown, and he said to me the other day that what a lot of us fail to realize is that Jesus *is* Michael Brown. Jesus *is* Eric Garner. Jesus *is* Trayvon Martin. Like each one of them, Jesus was a poor young man whom the authorities distrusted. They were so suspicious of Jesus that they conjured up a story, quickly

condemned him to death, and called it justice. Jesus is like each of these young men because the powers that be saw him as a threat, and that's all that mattered. Jesus *is* each of these young men because as he teaches his disciples in Matthew 25, "whatever you did to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did unto me." And for those of you who were not at the march yesterday, let me tell you that the mothers of "the least of these" were many in number.

And at this point you may be thinking "Well Alexis, this is all very interesting, but what am I supposed to do about it? I'm white, I'm privileged, I live in the suburbs. I might sympathize with Michael Brown and the others, but I can't *be* them!" And I can understand that, but I challenge you to try. See yourself as Jesus saw the woman at the well, or as he saw Zaccheus, or the adulterer, or (you fill in the blank). Jesus didn't see these folks as a separate people who just needed saving, he saw himself as one of them. Jesus lived in their neighborhood, identified with their people, and experienced their struggles.

That's why Jesus could say and truly mean "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do it to me." Jesus takes our oppression personally because Jesus *is* the oppressed. And as disciples of Jesus we need to take that seriously.

The entire gospel we follow hinges on the theological idea that the Most High God, took on the literal conditions of the 'least of these' by coming into the

world as the child of people we would label “at-risk youth” into an oppressive regime. In a very real sense, in bringing Jesus into the world this way, God emphatically declares Godself on the side of the oppressed. So as we move through this third week of Advent, let’s remember the depths of Mary’s ministry. Let’s remember the ministry of the mothers at the protest yesterday, who like Mary suffered through the unjust killing of their sons, and finally let’s say “yes” to the ways in which God calls each of us to real solidarity.

The body count rises every day; every single day, and the road to justice is bumpy to say the least, but ministry also involves a sort of thankfulness in the fact that God calls amidst all the suffering and the sadness. And being called is a joyous thing.

Amen