
Looking for an Epiphany?

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The Third Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

"Don't do it," she says. "You are risking your political capital. You are risking your future as our leader."

"I must," he replies. "The day I am afraid to do that is the day I am no longer fit to lead."

Nelson Mandela has just been elected President of South Africa. The legislated system of oppression is over, but the racial and economic lines that divide the country remain. His government is fragile.

In the opening scene of the movie *Invictus*, Mandela's motorcade is moving down the highway. On one side of the road, white rugby players look on in fear that their country is being destroyed. On the other side, black soccer players cheer wildly in anticipation that their country is coming into being.

Mandela is on his way to confront a black sports council that has just voted to get rid of the name and colors of the national rugby team. The Springbok name and the green and gold colors have long been symbols of the systemic and brutal racism that was Apartheid in South Africa.

"What's past is past," Mandela says. "We look to the future now."

He isn't looking for a transition of power. He is looking for a transformation of society.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus offers us a similar message. He goes back to his home synagogue, stands up and reads a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

"Today," he says, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This must have sounded familiar to the people listening. They had heard it many times before. The times were out of joint. They had long expected a messiah who would make everything right. All the better for them that the messiah be one of their own.

But, Jesus leaves something out. The passage goes on to say that the anointed one will proclaim "the day of vengeance of our God." (See Isaiah 61:2b)

Jesus starts the verse. He reads the part about bringing in the "year of the Lord's favor." But, he chooses not to finish it. He leaves out the part about delivering "the day of vengeance."

You remember the vengeance part. It's the part that always sounds like it will taste the sweetest. The punishment deserved. The righting of past wrongs. The closure that justice demands.

But, it never does. It always turns bitter, and lingers well past its time.

The problem with vengeance is that, like violence, it can't create. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"violence can repress, restrain, coerce and destroy. But, it can't create or organize anything permanent."

Vengeance can't cure poverty; it can only change the skin color of the poor. It can't end captivity; it can only change the sound of the jailer's name. It can't restore sight to the blind; it can only change what it is that they can't see.

"We cannot satisfy our thirst for freedom," Dr. King says, "by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred."

Jesus, in other words, isn't looking for a transition of power. He is looking for the transformation of a society.

It turns out that "Invictus" is the title of a poem that inspired Mandela during his time in prison. It means "unconquered."

The movie follows an underdog South African rugby team and its unlikely run to the 1995 World Cup Championship Game. But, as you might imagine, it's not just the story of a rugby game.

It's a story of an epiphany.

You can see it in the face of Mandela when he sits down to tea with the captain of the rugby team and asks him how they can inspire themselves to greatness when nothing less will do.

You can see it in the face of the captain as he reaches out with both hands and touches the walls of the prison cell where Mandela lived for 27 years?

You can see it in the faces of black spectators when Mandela, dressed in the hated green and gold colors, steps out onto the rugby field and wishes good luck to each of the white players.

You can see it in the faces of the white players as they drive into the homelands to stage rugby demonstrations for the black South Africans who live there.

You can see it in the faces of the fans as they begin to cheer for their national team when the game is on the line.

You can see it in the faces of the players as they listen to the cheers and realize that they are no longer playing just for themselves.

God is revealed in these faces.

As we look at them, we feel connected to them. In a mysterious way, they show us how fragile we all are. We sense all of the ways that we can be hurt, insulted, objectified, assessed or violated. These faces make us feel compassion for each other. They make us feel an obligation to each other.

The movie ends in the same place that it started.

We see the fields along the highway that Mandela's motorcade had used. But, the scene has been transformed. The young black boys are no longer standing along the fence. They are running up and down the field - passing a rugby ball to each other.

They left out the vengeance part.

They looked into each other's faces and discovered that the best way to defeat their enemies was to make them brothers and sisters.

The old symbols of hatred were transformed into symbols of national unity.

Are you looking for an epiphany?

Go back to where they know you the best. Let them see your face. Tell them you have good news to share.

Ask them to join you in securing release for the captives, sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed. And, tell them that you are going to leave out the vengeance part. Tell them that you are not looking for a transition of power. You are looking for the transformation of society.

Then wait. Their eyes will fix on you. Look into their faces. Something mysterious will happen. You will realize that you, who are many, are really just one body, because you are one in Jesus Christ.

And, at that moment, you will realize that the promises of scripture have been fulfilled in your presence.

Amen.

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