

2021 03 07 – One Night in Miami

John 2:13-22 (The Inclusive Bible)

Today is the third Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the third Sunday of this year's "Lenten Movie Series." I want to begin by thanking Ray Friesen for leading worship last week while I was on study leave and for his inspiring sermon connecting the movie *The Trial of the Chicago Seven* with Jesus' command to "take up your cross and follow in my footsteps." I believe that this week's film, *One Night in Miami*, can take us even deeper into the discussion of what it means to be followers of the man from Nazareth, disciples of Jesus.

One Night in Miami is a film about a fictionalized meeting of four black men in the midst of the civil rights movement in the United States. It was February 25, 1964, the day that Muhammad Ali beat Sonny Liston to win, for the first time, boxing's World Heavyweight Championship. In those days, segregation was still strictly enforced and Cassius Clay, as he was known at that time, was not allowed to spend the night in Miami Beach where the fight took place. Instead, he went to the Hampton House Motel in Brownsville, to celebrate with his friend Malcolm X.

According to the movie, they were joined by Jim Brown and Sam Cooke. Jim Brown was a fullback for the Cleveland Browns of the NFL, a sports analyst and a budding actor. Sam Cooke was a famous singer, songwriter and entrepreneur who is now commonly referred to as the "King of Soul." The picture in the Power Point for this service shows these four men as they were portrayed by the actors

in the film. In order, from left to right, they are Jim Brown, Malcolm X, Sam Cooke and Muhammad Ali.

The movie suggests that it was Malcolm X who orchestrated the gathering at the Hampton House Motel. Malcolm X was a Muslim leader and human rights activist and, at that time, he was a vocal spokesperson for the Nation of Islam. He was, and still is, a controversial figure because he advocated for black empowerment, black supremacy, and the separation of black and white Americans. He criticized Martin Luther King Jr and his civil rights movement for its emphasis on nonviolence and racial integration. He had also become Muhammad Ali's personal religious guide and was influential in his decision to become a member of the Nation of Islam.

In the movie, it is Malcolm X who leads the discussion. It is obvious that he has brought these men together in order to encourage his friends to take up the fight for justice and equality. In particular, he accuses Sam Cooke, of ignoring the plight of their people and pandering to his white audiences. He even throws Bob Dylan and his song *Blowing in the Wind* in Sam's face, saying, "This is a white boy from Minnesota who has nothing to gain from writing a song that speaks to the struggles of our people, [that speaks] more to the movement, than anything you have ever penned in your life." Malcolm X says to all three of his famous friends, "You brothers, you could move mountains without lifting a finger." With these words he urges them to use their talents and their fame to do more.

I'm not saying that I agree with everything that Malcolm X stood for at that time. I certainly disagree with his support of violence and his idea that total separation from their oppressors was the only way for his people to find their power. But I do appreciate his courage in acting on what he believed and his willingness to challenge the norms of his society.

In that sense he reminds me of the man from Nazareth. In particular, the Jesus who shows up in this week's scripture reading. This intriguing story is found in each of the four gospels, but the author of the Gospel of John is the only one who suggests that Jesus took the time to make a whip out of cords and then use it to drive all the sellers and their wares out of the temple. Many of us may have been startled and even dismayed by Jesus' use of force. But Steve Garnass-Holmes, a retired Methodist pastor explains it this way:

First, he doesn't use the whip on people.

He uses it to herd the animals out.

Second: He's not mad. This isn't an outburst.

(It takes time and patience to braid a whip.)

It's carefully staged symbolic street theater: a protest.

<https://www.unfoldinglight.net/>

Holmes goes on to explain that in doing this, Jesus was protesting the use of animals as sacrifices to God. Jesus did not believe that his Abba God required or needed such sacrifices.

Jesus was advocating for change. In doing so, he was using the time honoured tradition of protest. In doing so, he was breaking the laws of his land. As Ray Friesen pointed out last week, taking up our cross and following Jesus, “may put us at odds with our society.” Jesus was willing to go there. Malcolm X was willing to go there and he was trying to convince his friends to go there too.

One year after that night in Miami, on March 7th, 1965, six hundred marchers also went there. They left Selma, Alabama on their way to Montgomery, the state capital, to advocate for African-American voting rights. They got all of six blocks before state and local law enforcement blocked them, ordered them to disperse, and then attacked them with tear gas and billy clubs. That day, exactly 56 years ago, is known as “Bloody Sunday.”

Just last weekend, Amanda Gorman, the United State’s first youth poet laureate, described how she was racially profiled. She wrote on Instagram:

A security guard tailed me on my walk home tonight. He demanded if I lived there because 'you look suspicious.' I showed my keys & buzzed myself into my building. He left, no apology. This is the reality of Black girls: One day you're called an icon, the next day, a threat.

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/amanda-gorman-inaugural-poet-tailed-by-security-guard-on-her-walk-home-1.5336603>

Of course, we don't have to go south of our border to find examples of people struggling and protesting against racist practices. In fact, the first reported race riot in North America occurred in 1784 in Nova Scotia.

https://www.cbc.ca/firsthand/m_features/the-first-recorded-race-riot-in-north-american-happened-on-canadian-soil

Even closer to home, over the past month I have included in our Sunday bulletins, links to stories written by four black members of our own United Church of Canada. The first blog was written by Rev. Marie-Claude Manga. Her stories of discrimination within our church are hard to read, but they are very real. All four blogs are written by people who are working in their own way to make a difference in the lives of those living on the margins in this country.

We don't really know what was said on that night in Miami. All we know is that Malcom X, Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown and Sam Cooke all ended up using their gifts as a catalyst for change. They all chose to speak up and name the injustices that they heard about, witnessed and experienced. As Amanda Gorman pointed out in a later tweet:

In a sense he was right. I AM A THREAT: a threat to injustice, to inequality, to ignorance. Anyone who speaks the truth and walks with hope is an obvious and fatal danger to the powers that be. A threat and proud.

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/amanda-gorman-inaugural-poet-tailed-by-security-guard-on-her-walk-home-1.5336603>

We can make that same choice. We all have gifts that we can offer. We all have a voice that we can use. We all have ways that we can make a difference. So I'm inviting all of us to take that risk, to take up the cross and to follow Jesus into the street. I'm not suggesting that we all need to break the law or even join a protest march. But we can offer what we have to give.

Sam Cooke used his amazing talent and wrote a song that became an anthem for the Civil Rights Movement and is still being used today. I'm going to end this reflection with his words:

I go to the movie and I go downtown
Somebody keep tellin' me don't hang around
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will

Then I go to my brother
And I say brother help me please
But he winds up knockin' me
Back down on my knees, oh
There have been times that I thought I couldn't last for long

But now I think I'm able to carry on
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will

May we all be all be a part of that change. Amen.