

January 22, 2023  
Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 9:1-4  
Psalm 27:1, 5-13  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23

Last Sunday night, Jakki and I watched the film *The Woman King*. Before watching it, I knew nothing about it, nothing at all, except that the ads for it featured the actor Viola Davis brandishing a large sword. A formidable 57-year-old Black woman vanquishing her foes in hand-to-hand combat? Yes, please. By the end of the film, I concurred with the “Critics Consensus” on Rotten Tomatoes: “All hail Viola Davis!”<sup>1</sup>

Because I knew nothing about it, the plot was a complete surprise. As it turned out, *The Woman King* is set in 1823, in a small kingdom on the west coast of Africa. Viola Davis is the commander of that kingdom’s unique all-female military unit. There’s more going on, but the key plot point is this: she’s trying to stop *some* Africans from selling *other* Africans into Euro-American slavery. Among those she’s trying to stop is her own man king. I later learned that the film was “inspired by true events.” I don’t exactly know what that means in this case. I did do enough research to learn that the kingdom in the film actually existed, that it had an all-female military unit, and that it participated in the slave trade.

Be warned: *The Woman King* contains a lot of violence. For me, more difficult to watch than the film’s fight scenes were its depictions of human beings in chains and cages, awaiting sale and transport. I appreciated seeing those women warriors fight back. But I found it slightly bothersome that the bad guys in the film were primarily colluding Africans. After all, the evil of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was conceived by European colonial powers and “legitimized” by layer upon layer of institutional systematization. In this, Christianity played its part, with the participation of an awful lot of regular Christians. It’s sometimes hard to imagine that they were reading the same Bible that we are.

Last Monday was The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day. The date of our nation’s secular MLK commemoration is based on the anniversary of his birthday, January 15. Note that the Episcopal Church also commemorates Dr. King, but on April 4, the anniversary of his death, which is to say, the day of his birth into eternal life. That’s how we do it in the Episcopal Church. One of the stories that passed through my inbox last week mentioned MLK’s last sermon. I realized when I saw that headline I’d never thought about the fact that he would have preached a last sermon. That struck me, so I checked it out. It turns out that King preached his last sermon at the most prominent of Episcopal churches, the Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Washington, D.C., also known as Washington National Cathedral. The date was March 31, 1968.

The full text of that sermon is online, along with the audio of it. There’s nothing like hearing it in King’s own voice, so I suggest you give it a listen. I’m going to read the beginning of that sermon, in which he references “Rip Van Winkle,” the short story by Washington Irving first published in 1819. Here goes:

The one thing that we usually remember about the story is that Rip Van Winkle slept 20 years.

But there is another point in that little story that is almost always completely overlooked. It was a sign in the inn from which Rip went up in the mountain for his long sleep. When Rip Van Winkle went up in the mountain, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down 20 years later, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first President of the United States.

Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington but in looking at the picture he was amazed. He was completely lost. He knew not who he was.

And this reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that Rip slept 20 years but that he slept through a revolution.

While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountain, a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history and Rip knew nothing about it. He was asleep. Yes, he slept through a revolution.

One of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands, and they end up sleeping through a revolution.

There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today. In the sense it is a triple revolution: that is, a technological revolution with the impact of automation and cybernation; then there is a revolution in weaponry with the emergence of atomic and nuclear weapons of warfare; then there is a human rights revolution with the freedom explosion that is taking place all over the world.

Yes, we do live in a period where changes are taking place, and there is still the voice crying through the vista of time saying, "Behold, I make all things new; former things are passed away."<sup>2</sup>

That line, "Behold, I make all things new; former things are passed away" is from the Book of Revelation. In this sermon, King went on to speak of the continuing scourge of racism and militarism, and the imperative to act rather than to sleep. It feels just as relevant today as it must have felt back then. More than 50 years later, the revolution that he spoke of is still in progress. And we are still at risk of sleeping through it.

Many years ago, I was a finalist for a rector position, at a church in the Diocese of California, which is the area around San Francisco. By that time I had learned about search processes that the questions asked provide information about the congregation; a question that seems random is likely to reflect an area of conflict. During the initial phone interview, the senior warden asked me this question: "Do you consider yourself to be an activist priest?" Her tone made it clear that an activist priest would be less than ideal.

In the few beats I had to formulate an answer, I wondered what they were concerned about, and I remembered this: three years before, their very-recently-elected bishop had been arrested for civil disobedience. Protesting the recently-launched Iraq war, he'd joined dozens of other protestors in blocking entry to the federal building in San Francisco. When the arrests started, he was actually not in the area where they were taking place. So he moved there, so he would be arrested.<sup>3</sup> These actions got a mixed reception in his new diocese and caused some early conflict.

I guessed that the search committee preferred that their priest not do such a thing. In fact, I'd done some protesting of the Iraq invasion, standing with fellow parishioners on a busy street corner outside my home church in Burlington, Vermont. I hadn't gone so far as to get arrested. During that interview, my answer was something very like this: "If the most important social justice issue of our time comes along while I am serving as a priest in a congregation, I hope that history will not judge me as having somehow missed it or as having been on the wrong side."<sup>4</sup>

That church went on to offer me the rector position, but I turned it down. Their "activist priest" question would turn out to be the first of many caution flags. But I still occasionally think about their question—both about the fear beneath it, and about my answer. I wonder sometimes how I'm doing when it comes to that judgment of history.

Let's turn to today's gospel reading from Matthew. It begins immediately after Jesus has been baptized by John and emerged from his sojourn in the wilderness. Apparently he is ready to get busy, and the first step is recruitment. Here we meet his first four disciples: the brothers Peter and Andrew, and the brothers James and John. They are four fishermen, and so Jesus speaks to them in a language they can understand: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

We hear in this passage Jesus' call not only to Peter and Andrew and James and John, but also his call to us. And so we might begin to wonder: In our time and in our place, what does it mean to fish for people?

I think we're wary of passages like these, and rightfully so, because we understand them to be references to evangelism, for which the goal must be conversion. In the church writ large, that was even true for a long time, no matter that the people being converted were subject to colonialism and slavery, or that they already had their own religious and spiritual beliefs and practices.

Today we know there are other ways to understand passages like this, ways perhaps even more compatible with the fullness of the gospel message. Even in today's passage, what they did was went about healing people. I think, when we fish for people, we're simply doing what we can to help bring them into the fully reconciled kingdom of God. That means a life, on this Earth, of abundance and dignity and justice and peace.

The truth is, when it comes to all this, I am sleeping through too much. Or maybe what I'm doing is even less excusable than sleeping. It's more like a willing compliance with systems that I know are unjust and even ungodly, because I am too comfortable occupying them. I think the bottom line is this: I possess too much. And I'm not ready to give it up.

And so it is that Dr. King's words remain all-too-relevant today. Still, there *has* been progress since 1968. Those of us who are my age or older can attest to that first-hand. Here's one small thing: that film *The Woman King* would not have been made in 1968. The voices of Black people, and especially Black women, are finally started to be heard. We need to listen—not so that we have *only* to listen, but so that we can be knowing and strong enough to *act*.

I want to read the end of Dr. King's last sermon. Here it is:

Thank God for John who centuries ago, out on a lonely, obscure island called Patmos caught vision of the new Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God, who heard a voice saying, "Behold, I make all things new; former things are passed away."

God grant that we would be participants in this newness and this magnificent development. If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice and brotherhood and peace. And that day, the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.

God bless you.<sup>5</sup>

I love that his sermon that day ended with a blessing upon that gathered congregation. I imagine that blessing extending to this very day, and to every person who takes a moment to receive it, as both consolation and challenge.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Critics Consensus" for *The Woman King*, Rotten Tomatoes, available at [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_woman\\_king](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_woman_king) (accessed January 22, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., in a sermon preached in Washington National Cathedral on March 31, 1968. My sources was "Transcript: The Last Sunday Sermon of MLK (March 31, 1968)," available online at <https://singjupost.com/transcript-the-last-sunday-sermon-of-mlk-march-31-1968/?singlepage=1> (accessed January 22, 2023). Both the audio and the full transcript are available on that website. I used the transcript, but I also listened to the audio for accuracy and made a handful of corrections.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Steve Rubenstein, "Episcopal bishop arrested in protest over war in Iraq," SFGATE, December 8, 2006 (accessed January 22, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> This was part of a private conversation that took place in the fall of 2009.

<sup>5</sup> King.