

West Virginia Council of Churches  
Annual Assembly, Opening Worship

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**WHAT TIME IS IT?**

Sermon offered by: The Reverend Dr. Paul H. Sherry

Several years ago, I was privileged to accompany the Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, the then Senior Minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, on a nation-wide tour to address the poverty that afflicts so many of our nation's people. Together, we moved about the country urging public officials, religious and community based leaders, people from all walks of life, to put aside differences and work together to bring an end to poverty.

As we made the rounds, in conjunction with a nation wide program entitled LET JUSTICE ROLL, Dr. Forbes, in city after city, in Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon, Boston, Massachusetts, New York City, Bethlehem, Pa., Minneapolis, Minnesota, Chicago, and many points in between, again and again asked the question, "What time is it?" and with great eloquence and conviction, brought congregations of people to their feet over and over again with his stirring answer. What time is it? It is time, long past time, to let justice roll, to abolish poverty once and for all, to build a society not only for some but for all, so that all people, all God's children, can share the rich fruits of God's good creation. As you can well imagine, it was a great trip of transformation and renewal, for me and for so many others.

I mention that trip in this context this evening, as we reflect over the next two days on how together we can build a more just society, because it was during that trip that I thought a great deal about this very issue; that is; what are the resources resident in our common faith that provide the strength, the vision, and the staying power that we surely will need if we are to respond to Dr. Forbes' challenge in faithfulness. So, this evening, I want to tell you what I came up with. I want to talk with you about those resources, four in number, that provide, for me at least, all that we need if we are to be the people this time requires and if justice is to roll. Here they are: We need a liberating trust in an utterly trustworthy God. We need a transforming and courageous love. We need a venturesome daring. And, finally, we need a shimmering hope that sees beyond what is to the beloved community God desires for us all. Yes, if together, we are to participate as religious people in social transformation, if we are to let justice roll, if we are to help shape responsible public policy for a struggling nation, we will trust, we will love, we will dare, and we will hope. Without these resources, our efforts will surely fail, but with them, we shall yet overcome.

When Harriet Tubman was asked by her biographer, Sarah Bradford, how she was able to accomplish so much in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, she replied: "T'want me, t'was the Lord. I always told him, 'I trust to you. I don't know where to go or what to do but I expect you to lead me. And he always did.'" That is the testimony of so many of the convicted down through the years. I don't know where to go but I expect you, Lord, to lead me. And the good news is this: the Lord God always will.

You will remember the words of scripture: "...the Lord went before (the Israelites) by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people." If we are to see a nation and a world transformed, if justice is to roll across this land and around the globe, you and I, together, trusting in God, will, like Harriet Tubman before us, follow that pillar of cloud by day and that pillar of fire by night. That is the way to the land of promise.

Some years ago, not long before the ugliness of apartheid was finally banished in South Africa, I was in South Africa and while there was invited to attend a small gathering in one of the poor townships that surround the city of Johannesburg. While there, I was invited to speak and in doing so quoted the passage of scripture, quote above, as it related to the struggle of the South African people to be free. Immediately following the reciting of the last words of the passage, an older woman sitting near the rear of that rather small room rose from her seat and began to walk with steady step down the narrow aisle toward the podium.

When she arrived at the podium it was clear that she wanted to testify so I stepped aside, she positioned herself at the podium and, with tears streaming down her face, she began to speak. This is what she said. "We have come this far only because God has led us through the wilderness. We can now see the Promised Land and I know that God will not abandon us. I know that God will take us there." It was a powerful moment for us all. The source of that courageous woman's strength was clear for all to see. She had placed her trust in the God who saves, the God who leads, and she knew that God would not abandon her nor would God abandon her beloved country of South Africa. And as this was the case for her in her struggle for justice, so it was for us in our struggle for justice in our beloved country and around the globe. The justice we seek will roll across this land and around the globe as, together, we follow that pillar of cloud by day and that pillar of fire by night. That pillar will take us home.

But let us not be deceived. If justice is to roll, we dare not harbor any illusions. Rather, we need to be well aware that the journey to the land of promise will be far from easy. We have a long way to go. Take, for example, the state of our children. We are all aware of the struggle going on at this very moment to provide health care for our nation's vulnerable children. We are aware that 1 in 6 children in our country live in poverty. We are aware that child poverty has

actually increased since the year 2000. We are aware that seven out of ten poor children are in working families where despite the fact that someone works full or part-time for at least part of the year the children of that family continue to suffer. These are very sobering figures, are they not, and world-wide, the figures are more sobering still. The journey to the land of promise will be far from easy.

Therefore, in the face of such a daunting trek, if justice is to roll, if, together, we are to build a more just society, in this country and around the globe, we, today, like Harriet Tubman and my friend from South Africa and so many others down through the years, will remember, "T'want me, t'want us, t'was the Lord." We will place our trust in the God who saves; we will follow that Lord God, so that justice will roll down like living waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. What time is it? what time is it? It is time to trust in the one who saves, it is long past time.

Yes, we trust and as we trust we are freed to love, courageously love. I remember the wisdom of Leo Tolstoy - one who lived by faith - who said often that the reason for life itself is for each of us simply to grow in love, to expand our loving horizons. The fact is love is far too often restricted to a tight circle of family and dear friends. Love of family and dear friends is a love we cherish, and rightly so, but love dare not end there. Love needs an expanded horizon; love needs to include all of God's children lest we deny, lest we exclude, those whom our God surely includes.

When I was a boy in high school, now more than a few years ago, I was introduced to the writings of Dostoevsky, the great Russian novelist, and while reading several of Dostoevsky's novels I came across a passage that meant so much to me that I carried it in my wallet for many years until it yellowed and crumpled with age. Here is that passage:

"Love all (people). Seek that rapture and that ecstasy. Water the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears. Don't be ashamed of that ecstasy. Prize it, for it is a gift of God and a great one... (but)...one must know how to acquire (love), for it is hard to acquire, it is dearly bought, it is won slowly by hard labor. For we must love not only occasionally, for a moment, but forever. Everyone can love occasionally, even the wicked can."

Dostoevsky is right, isn't he? In the same way that love needs an expanded horizon, love needs to be worked at, day in and day out. And if we are truly to love, we will love not only in the ecstatic moment, but for the long haul.

Again, however, we dare not be deceived. It is far from easy to expand our loving horizons. It is far from easy to love all people. It is far from easy to love forever. And it is particularly hard to love the poor and the excluded. Why? - because they so often remain invisible to us and distant from us. Out of sight, out of mind! How often do we hear our elected officials speak of poor people, excluded people?

How often do we hear our elected officials speak of their commitment to meet the needs of poor people and excluded people? Yes, sometimes, some do, but, unfortunately, not many and not very often. Rather, they, like the rest, too often have decided to ignore the poor and the excluded; that to expand their loving horizons to include the poor and the excluded is not a particularly popular subject and that, my friends in Christ, is not only a judgment upon them but upon us all. And yet, any public policy that does not include the poor and the excluded within its orbit, that is framed without a commitment to the poor and the excluded, that keeps the poor and the excluded invisible, is a public policy unworthy of its name.

What, then, can you and I do to expand our loving horizons? My mother used to say often, "Paul, you are who you run with." She was right. If we want to expand our loving horizons, we will take her advice. We are who we run with and it is time, long past time, to run with the poor and the excluded. It is time to work alongside the poor and the excluded; it is time to learn from the poor and the excluded; it is time to feel the pain of the poor and the excluded. We are who we run with. Who we run with shapes our understanding of who God would have us be. To run with those whom the world would exclude is to expand our loving horizons so that justice will roll down like living waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. I believe the truth is this: If we are to establish justice in this nation and around the globe we can do no other. Distance deceives. Loving relationships, formed in the crucible of struggle, transform. Again, the question: What time is it? It is time, long past time, to expand our loving horizons. It is time, past time, to love, courageously love.

Trust does free us to love and as we are freed to love, we find the courage to dare. Centuries ago, the children of Israel, after a long and challenging journey, reached the Promised Land. Moses sent out spies to scout out the terrain. The spies returned with what some, including Bill Coffin, have characterized as a majority report and a minority report. The minority report, submitted by Joshua and Caleb, said, "We can go ahead, we can do God's will, if only we do not lose hope." The majority report, on the other hand, was far more cautious. It spoke of "giants" in the land, the sons of Anak, literally "the long-necked ones." And, said those reporting, "...we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers and so we seemed to them." The children of Israel, hearing both reports, frightened of the uncertain and challenging future that lay before them, rejected the minority report, accepted the majority report, and said to one another, "Let us go back to Egypt." Fearful timidity in contention with venturesome daring. The story of that time. The story of our time. Indeed, the story of every time.

We should not be surprised at the majority report nor should we be surprised at its acceptance by so many. To dare is to make oneself vulnerable and that is never easy for any of us. Egypt may be unforgiving but it is at least familiar. Yet, in the face of so much suffering by so many, this is no time for timidity. The future beckons and if we are to greet that future with grace, if we are to help build that

future, we will stand with Joshua and Caleb. We will dare to challenge all that stands in the way of a more just society - we will speak truth to power - we will organize for change - come what may. That was the way of Joshua and Caleb, that was the way of our Lord, and that is God's way for you and for me.

Bill Coffin said that the story of Joshua and Caleb "shows that while love seeks truth, fear seeks safety. And fear distorts the truth not by exaggerating the ills of the world...but by underestimating our ability to deal with them...(but) if we do not lose our passion for the possible, we might indeed create a world (that God desires) a world without famine; ...a world without borders, a world, at last, at one and at peace."

The challenges to creating a more just society are huge. It will require a renewed commitment on all our parts. It will require major changes in public policy. It will require standing over against deeply entrenched vested interests. It will require committed organizing. These are huge challenges, to be sure, but let us never forget that the resources resident in the God who creates and renews and sustains are greater still.

Someone once said that courage is fear that has said its prayers. So, let us fall on our knees, say our prayers, and, despite the presence of giants that roam the land, choose to dare.

What time is it? It is time to confront the giants. It is time to dare. Let justice roll.

Yes, if justice is to roll, we will trust so that we will love. We will love courageously, so that we will dare. And we will dare, despite our fears, because, despite the darkness of the hour, we live in hope. Crippling anxiety, destructive indifference, fearful timidity - these lead inexorably to enervating despair and the world has far too much despair already. On the other hand, liberating trust, transforming love, and venturesome daring, reside inexorably in shimmering hope, God's way for a trusting and venturesome and courageous people.

Now it is true. When one looks at the depth of injustice in this nation and around the globe, hope does not come easily in these days, does it? In fact, the evidence sometimes is rather discouraging. But I like the witness of Jim Wallis when he says, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change."

"God is our refuge and strength," says the Psalmist, "a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea: though the waters thereof roar and foam, though the mountains shake at the swelling thereof." (Psalm 46:2-4)

That liberating trust provides the shimmering hope we need, and as we hope, so shall we be.

What time is it? It is time, long past time, to let justice roll. It is time, long past time, for all people, all God's children, to share the rich fruits of God's good creation. It is time, long past time, to build a world fit for children. That's what time it is and may God make it so. Amen.

Dr. Sherry is the retired General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ and more recently retired a second time as the organizer of Let Justice Roll a new organization that played a key roll in spearheading the 2007 minimum wage legislation through the U.S. Congress.