

Liturgy & sermon from ICWJ's visit to Dale Heights Presbyterian Church, Madison
 Sunday, June 28th, 2015
 by Sarah Smoot, ICWJ organizer

Call to Worship:

Liturgist: The Lord takes note when God's people are oppressed.

People: God looks upon the laborer and the taskmaster.

Liturgist: When prisoners cry out, when the poor are abused,

People: Does the Lord not hear; does Christ not liberate?

Liturgist: The Spirit of the Lord proclaims release.

People: Thanks be to God. Hallelujah!

[Inspired from Exodus 3:7, Lamentations 3:34-36, Luke 4:18-19; written by S. Smoot]

Prayer of Confession:

Liturgist: Almighty God, we confess that we are swept up in the tide of our generation.

People: We have failed in our calling to be your holy people, set aside for your purpose.

L: We live more in apathy born of fatalism than in passion born of hope.

P: We are moved more by private ambition than by social justice.

L: We dream more of privilege and benefits than of service and sacrifice.

P: We fail to receive and share your grace.

L: Forgive us, we pray.

P: Free us to love you and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

May our lives be renewed and reformed by your Holy Fire. *[pause for silent reflection]*

Assurance:

L: Hear the good news: Jesus Christ eats with tax collectors and sinners, and he walks with the lowly and humble. Through God's grace we are healed.

P: Glory to God! Amen.

[Confession adapted from UMC Book of Worship #479. Assurance written by S. Smoot]

First Reading: Luke 4:16-21 (NRSV) <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=302851839>

Song for Reflection: *Blackbird*, LENNON/McCARTNEY, – Tyler Smoot: vocals, guitar

Second Reading: Exodus 3:1-15 (NRSV) <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=302851901>

Seeing Fire

Fire can take a variety of forms and inspire a variety of reactions... Controlled, it can provide welcome light and warmth; unexpected it causes terror and death. A fire in the shrubbery of the mountainside, while one is tasked with the difficult work of keeping sheep alive and healthy, seems like a scary event. If I were a sheep-herder I think I would be trying to get my livelihood out of there, but not Moses. Moses is traveling as an undocumented immigrant, recently chased out of Egypt as a criminal. He had become an activist for his

Hebrew sisters and brothers, whom Pharaoh had taken captive and was exploiting for their labor. Moses, now a refugee, is a humble, low-wage worker, tending the sheep herds. While Moses is about his work he comes across an unexpected sight. He turns aside from what he is doing to investigate, and he finds much more than some ordinary wildfire. Moses draws close and listens as the Lord describes the cry of Israel under their oppression and the harshness of the Egyptian taskmasters and the liberation that God plans for Israel through Moses own hands. Moses finds that to get close to this warming fire of the Lord is also to get close to his Hebrew sisters and brothers, to get close to their pain and to work with God for their freedom and justice.

As we listen to the Lord's compassion for Israel, we see that Israel is like the burning bush. The bush is in the heart of the fire yet is not eaten up by the flames. The Hebrew people are lashed by the flames of Pharaoh's oppression, yet they are not destroyed. Before Moses turned aside to see the flames in the bush the Lord turned aside to see the flame of Israel moaning under their back-breaking labor. When Moses draws near the fire, he learns that God has drawn near to liberate Israel. And while Moses steps toward the mysterious fire, the Lord confronts him with a command: Stop. Take off your shoes.

[*three claps*] It's December 2001. I'm at the delicate age of 15, when you really don't want to be associated with your family when you go out in public with them, and we're at the movies. The family is all gathered for Christmas, and we join the masses to check out the first Harry Potter movie in theaters. We've been seated for several minutes past the supposed start time for the film, and we're still staring at the blank screen, when all of a sudden to my right there's a disturbance [*three claps*], and to my dismay, it's one of my uncles! Uncle Fred has decided to display his right to view the movie that he has paid for by chanting, "Start the show. Start the show!" While some of my less assertive family members try to silence Uncle Fred, I slump into my seat in hopes that I can disappear behind a giant sized popcorn and Coke. I can't believe this is happening.

[*three claps*] "Obama, escucha, estamos en la lucha!" Add thirteen years, a bit more self-confidence, and a passion for migrants' rights, and I find myself joining in my first protest, in public! (no crazy Uncles were involved). I'll admit it was not my first choice to be

there. I was with a group of students of Duke Divinity School, traveling around the US/Mexico boarder to learn about the struggles and ministries that surround this tumultuous region. We found ourselves in San Diego at the same time as a major action in the fight for immigration reform, and the leaders of our group called on us to join with the protestors. I was timid. “I’ll go,” I thought, “but I’m not gonna hold a sign.” I agree with this call for reform, but I don’t be one of those people who makes a *[clap]*fuss. Then after meeting an artist who was passing out posters, I thought, “I guess it’s safe to hold this sign; I’ll just stand quietly with it,” and then as I met some of the protestors, and began to hear their stories, of family members deported, of livelihood and education threatened by the powers that say, “This land is my land!” I soon felt moved to join my presence and my voice with their call for reform, and I found myself not slumped into my seat, but standing and shouting with confidence, “¡Obama, escucha, estamos en la lucha!” “Obama, listen! We are in the struggle!”

It was not my own confidence that brought me to that point of solidarity with our migrant sisters and brothers, but God’s guidance through holy fire. Like the burning bush to Moses, the Lord encountered me in the voices and stories of the protestors, who were undaunted and unafraid of letting their light shine toward reform. Through this experience of bonding over protest, God taught me to remove my sandals of preconception about protest. I no longer saw it as a faux pas disturbance. Yes, protest can be uncomfortable, but it is necessary to be discomforted by oppression and injustice. It’s not easy to approach the fire; it’s not easy to take off our shoes. We find ourselves vulnerable, and embarrassed around others who would rather keep the peace by overlooking the problems.

Before arriving at the burning bush, Moses has already been discomforted by seeing the Hebrew people burned. Moses came from a place of privilege. Who knows how long he could have kept his life of comfort in his adoptive family with Pharaoh’s daughter? But he gave up that privilege in his first act of protest when he killed one of the Egyptian taskmasters, in his passion on behalf of the people he was starting to reimagine as his people. Now on the run, Moses is in the middle of an identity crisis when he encounters the Lord at the burning bush. Unable to give God a straight answer when he is tasked with leading Israel

out of Egypt's oppression, Moses stalls by asking God, "Who am I?" Once I lived like an Egyptian, and then I saw more closely the slaves who worked all around me, and then I made a rash decision in my passion for them, and now I feel even closer to them as I've experienced their fear of Pharaoh. But they mocked me when I tried to resolve a dispute among them. I thought killing the Egyptian was the right thing, but it seems the Hebrews fear me now, just as they fear their taskmasters. So, "Who am I" to be their leader?

Getting close to protest raises identity questions in us. Whose side are we on? Are there only two sides? What is the best way forward? Do I feel sufficient passion for this cause to put myself out there, in public? What does God feel for this cause, for these people?

Currently I'm in the middle of a term of missionary service, during which the church has made it my vocation to step into economic injustices and join the voices of protest. At the Workers' Rights Center we help workers to learn and enforce their rights over wages, safety, and equity in the workplace, and the Interfaith Coalition works with congregations and clergy to advocate for workers through our scriptures and our faith communities. I have had to learn a lot. I've noticed through my own experience that workers' rights are complicated and are not well advertised. I didn't even know the minimum wage when I first began my work here. Now I'm trying to stay on the cusp of all the changes in law that are currently being proposed, debated, and enacted, many of which are holding low wage workers in a cycle of oppression that makes up the class we now call, "the working poor." As I join and invite people of faith into protests around Right to Work, the Wisconsin State budget, and the Fight for \$15, I imagine a future in which every working person has a safe and dignified workplace. I see us protesting and working toward that future. At the same time, I hear stories at the Workers' Rights Center that tell me we are far from that vision.

As a person who's somewhat new to this movement for worker justice, and as a person often caught up in the tide of my generation that says we're always progressing forward and bigger and better and stronger, I have assumed that the demands we voice in protest are new and cutting edge, "living wage" sounds like a recent buzzword, and "\$15 and a union!" that's avant-garde. So when I was preparing liturgy for this service, and I came across a link to the Methodist Social Creed from 1908, I thought, "We have a social creed

that was written in 2008; what could the one from a century earlier have to say about today's issues?" Still, something told me (God told me) I should look at this older one, just for comparison's sake, to see how much we're moving forward. Turns out, that back in 1908 the Methodist Church had a lot of big ideas about God's justice for working people. The social creed we now use has expanded to cover themes of environment, economics, gender, ethnicity, sex and all realms of life, but the first social creed, written in 1908 was all about workers. This document, an adaptation of which we will use as an affirmation today, was brainstormed and penned years before the National Labor Relations Act, and before many of the major catastrophes and uprisings that led to that governmental reform. This document called for a "living wage" in 1908. When we say this creed later, we will share in words from our history, that still speak to our present, and inspire our hopes for the future.

God's answer to Moses' identity crisis draws Moses' attention to his history to give him understanding and guidance for his present and future. Moses asks, "Who am I?" and the Lord responds, "I will be with you." Taking a little while to catch on, Moses poses another question, "OK, so when the Israelites ask me what your name is, what will I tell them?" Then out of the flames, the Lord illuminates some old stories that make a lot of sense to Moses. "I am the God of your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Just as you've always heard I was with them, I am with you. Just as I led them through moments of violence and fear to liberation, so I will lead you and Israel." God points to Moses' history to illuminate the present situation.

We too have torches of the past to light our current path and our path to reform. Torches like an old social creed, torches like the 2011 protests over Act 10, torches like Martin Luther King, who saw the integral connection between workers' rights and racial equality and, as his last act, marched and spoke in solidarity with sanitation workers on strike in Memphis. These fires from our history give rise to the fires of protest that continue to burn today. And just as always, God is waiting for Moses (and Miriam) to turn aside. I wonder how many others encountered the burning bush before Moses. I wonder if some passed by without turning to see. I imagine some ran away in fear or in apathy. Passing by is always easier than turning aside, until we try it just once, and then we might get hooked.

[*three claps*] That's the thing; we know that turning aside will bring discomfort where there was comfort. [*three claps*] Turning aside will change the way we view the ones who are part of the flames of protest; it will change the way we view social issues; it will change the way we view ourselves. [*three claps*] The Lord's voice calls out from within these fires, inviting us to join in God's work of proclaiming good news to the poor, of bringing release to the captives and freedom to the prisoners. [*three claps*] When we take off our shoes, get vulnerable and take a risk, we can be part of the fire that burns to shed light where there is darkness and open eyes that are blind to justice...

Or we could try to disappear.

Affirmation of Faith: Affirmation of the Working God and God's Justice for Workers*

We believe in the God who is imaged in Scripture as a worker:

a Shepherd, a Potter, a Gardener, a Carpenter.

We celebrate humankind as God's handiwork.

In our love for one another as human beings and workers created in the Worker's image, we look for the coming of God's reign, through:

Equal Rights and complete justice for people in all stations of life,

The practice of alternative dispute resolutions, such as mediation, in cases of industrial conflict,

The protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational disease, injury, and death,

The end of child labor,

Regulation of labor, under which all people enjoy a safe and equitable workplace, for the good of the community,

An end to sweatshops and other abusive working conditions,

A limit to the number of work hours, while maintaining work for all, ensuring a degree of leisure to all workers, which is integral to abundant life,

One day of rest in every seven,

A living wage in every industry,

The highest wage that each industry can afford,

The most equitable division of the products of each industry,

Reliance upon the Great Commandment and the mind of Christ as the ultimate law of society and surest way to liberation from all sin, individual and societal. Amen

* Adapted from the 1908 Methodist Social Creed:

The Methodist Episcopal Church stands:

For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.

For the principles of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions.

For the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational diseases, injuries and mortality.

For the abolition of child labor.

For such regulation of the conditions of labor for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community.

For the suppression of the "sweating system."

For the gradual and reasonable reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practical point, with work for all; and for that degree of leisure for all which is the condition of the highest human life.

For a release for [from] employment one day in seven.

For a living wage in every industry.

For the highest wage that each industry can afford, and for the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised.

For the recognition of the Golden Rule and the mind of Christ as the supreme law of society and the sure remedy for all social ills.