



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Swimming Upstream” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

February 3, 2019; Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Luke 4:22-30; “Here's to Kids Who Are Different” by Digby Wolfe

A while back I saw a Bacardi ad. It opens with the New York marathon, the street full of runners. Then two people dressed as salmon appear running in the other direction. Onlookers are confused. Eventually the two runners get to a bar where people have been watching the race on TV. As two glasses are poured the line appears – swim upstream. It suggests having Bacardi isn't following the crowd. This is ironic given how popular this rum is. But it stuck with me, all these years later. Good as it was it was criticised for not crediting the concept, and I don't mean actual salmon. The idea of running in the opposite direction of a race dressed as salmon comes from the Cacophony Society, a group based in San Francisco who have been part of the Bay to Breakers run since 1994, entering midpoint and running back to the bay.

Today's gospel reminds me of both the ad and the Breakers to Bay runners that inspired it. At first it was the end of the gospel that made me think of it - Jesus slipping through the crowd. The detail combined with the attempt on his life is an allusion to his death and resurrection, but what struck me was his moving in the opposite direction. Also like the faux salmon entering the race midway, we're at a midpoint in the story. We heard the first part two weeks ago. Jesus returns to his hometown where he not only visits the synagogue but preaches from Isaiah: “The Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to captives, to announce G-d's jubilee.” At first all's well. But then, like in the ad, confusion sets in. People mutter, “Isn't this Joseph's son?”

As Jesus continues you realize he's marching to his own drum and not just because of the presumption not to keep his station as a carpenter. The first hint is his omitting from Isaiah the line about G-d's vengeance. His hearers may have considered it a mistake but he went on to recount how Elijah and Elisha performed miracles for Gentiles rather than their people. To add insult to injury one of the foreigners, Naaman the Syrian, was a general of Aram, a historic enemy. In that moment they realized his omission was intentional. He was saying their hope of a divine turning of tables wasn't coming as they had expected. The collective good will shifted and his neighbours tried to kill him.

To a certain extent you can't blame them. After all they were struggling under a Gentile Empire and expecting a messiah like Judas Maccabee who started a revolt against the last foreign occupiers, the Greeks, in part by emphasizing their need to hold to their traditions, to stand apart from Gentiles. And here was one of their own trying to take that away? They failed to see that they weren't really standing apart. They simply wanted to take back control and stick it to the Romans while they were at it. They were flowing with the current of the violence around them, separate religiously, but really just the same as everyone else. Jesus, on the other hand, was calling them to go the other way, to see how the liberation they sought would only come if it included everyone, even enemies.

If I'm honest Jesus' approach at times seems impossible. After all swimming upstream is tough going. When real salmon do it they barely have enough life left to spawn. We get a hint of this sacrifice when the crowd turns on Jesus. As I said earlier, this foreshadows Jesus' death. We claim it is redemptive but forget that it's not exclusively so. He calls us to pick up our cross and join him in non-violent struggle, no matter the cost.

Fortunately some respond. Like Rosa Parks. When she got on the bus after a long day in 1955 she didn't know it was a moment of civil dis-obedience she'd trained for. Her refusal to give her seat to a white passenger and her arrest would be more than a catalyst for the bus boycott but a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement. And in the end she paid the price, losing her job as a seamstress and having to relocate to Detroit.

More recently I think of Colin Kaepernick, the football player formerly with the 49ers who began taking a knee during the national anthem in protest against racial injustice and police brutality. His action sparked a movement of other players doing the same, first in the NFL and then other sports. The issue gained new impetus in the lead up to this weekend's Super Bowl after several high profile performing artists declined the offer to perform at the halftime show. Like the bus boycott, the refusals have economic impact. Big names at halftime are part of the incentive behind huge price tags for TV ads during the game. The protest won't cost these artists. But Colin Kaepernick has been blacklisted and a mural of him in Atlanta recently vandalized.

We need to swim upstream here at home too. I think of Elijah Harper, the Manitoba MLA who helped scuttle the Meech Lake Accord because Indigenous peoples had not been consulted. Each time the vote was called he sat stoically holding an eagle feather and said no. And the issues we need to struggle through go beyond racial ones. The liberation Jesus was speaking about includes bridging wealth divides, gender gaps, our sense of human superiority. As details of Bill 66 were released this year, especially the section enabling municipalities to be exempt from environment protection laws, groups mobilized. Fortunately the protests and petitions had the desired effect.

When it comes to our world, be it corporate ethics, government legislation, long standing prejudices, it may be easier to go with the flow but that will neither protect equalities we have gained nor bring changes we still need. Instead we need to pick our moment and swim upstream.. It isn't easy to do this, especially if we benefit from the way things are. But we need to. Like for salmon it's the only way new life will be born. May we find the courage to follow Jesus and swim upstream. Amen.