

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

PSALM 130

JUNE 26, 2009 – TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHICAGO

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Psalm 130 is the eleventh among fifteen psalms (Pss. 120-134) that are introduced by the title “A Song of Ascents.” They are understood to be pilgrimage psalms, that is, psalms travelers may have sung while en route to a festival in Jerusalem. Psalm 130 is also stationed as the sixth of seven texts identified by Christian tradition as Penitential Psalms (Ps. 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). This classical psalm of penitence and lament groans out of the chaos of human existence, addressing God in hope.

The psalm speaks personally and comprehensively of the steadfast love of God mediating forgiveness and redemption. It declares that God’s hand of forgiveness reaches over the apparently impenetrable barriers erected by human evil. Moreover, it promises that the great power of God will salvage God’s project with Israel despite the floodgates of oppression its sin has opened.

In order to help us understand this psalm, let me introduce you to three of my heroes in the faith.

Do you hear that African American woman singing on the boardwalk in Atlantic City in the summer of 1964. I guarantee you that if you had been a delegate or a spectator at the national Democratic Party Convention that year, you would have heard Fannie Lou Hamer out there singing her heart out. One of her favorite songs was made famous by Billie Holiday, the greatest female blues singer of all time:

“I ain’t good lookin’ and my hair ain’t curls/ I ain’t good lookin’ and my hair ain’t curls/
But my mother she give me something./ It’s gon’ carry me through this world.”

But what made her famous was not the singing. What made Fannie Lou Hamer a force in American life was her courage, her faith in God and her perseverance in the face of what others would call defeat. Her story is the story of a major social protest movement and of a remarkably dedicated black woman from the Mississippi Delta.

The last of twenty children born into a sharecropping family in Sunflower County, Mississippi, Fannie Lou drew strength from poverty and racism and became one of the most respected leaders of her day. That Billie Holiday song that says, “My mother she give me something,” could have been written for Fannie Lou Hamer. Through her mother’s words and actions, she came to appreciate the individual power that flowed from clever, self-affirming responses to racism and injustice. Black girls and women in the Jim Crow South were vulnerable and their lives were shaped by sexualized racial violence.

Fannie Lou’s grandmother had been raped, and Fannie Lou experienced molestation and involuntary sterilization as an adult. Beginning at the age of six, she led a hard, uncertain existence as an exploited sharecropper. For much of her life, poverty and deprivation defined her material existence.

The summer of 1962 marked Fannie Lou's formal entry into the civil rights movement. Arrests, bombings and job dismissals followed, but she persevered and continued working as a field secretary with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) throughout the early sixties. She conducted door-to-door canvassing and taught citizenship classes throughout the rural South. Her singing and her dynamic speeches brought in thousands of dollars for the cause.

When the Democrats assembled in Atlantic City in 1964, the credentials committee wanted to seat an all-white delegation from Mississippi. Lyndon Johnson wanted peace in the ranks of the party, and he wanted the votes of the South. Fannie Lou Hamer stood up and with that big beautiful, sternly resolute voice, declared "If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated today, I question America." Senator Hubert Humphrey was sent to assuage her. Would she settle for two black members of the Mississippi delegation?

She would not hear of such a thing. Had all the work, the danger, the suffering been for so meager a crumb? Exasperated, Humpty Hubert, his egg-like dome glowing pale, asked the big black woman from Rulevill, "What is it you want, Mrs. Hamer?" "Why, Mr. Humphrey," she said, looking sweetly back at Humpty, "don't you know? The Kingdom of Jesus; that's what I want."

When the Democrats refused to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation, the highlight of the convention came when Fannie Lou delivered a passionate account of the 1963 police beating she had suffered in Winona, Mississippi that left her partially blind.

Black women played pivotal roles in every significant stage of the civil rights movement. It was Daisy Bates who led the 1957 challenge to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock. Septima Clark, a longtime educator, engineered the first black citizenship schools, which encouraged and trained black leaders throughout the South. And had it not been for Ella Baker, the movement would have lost momentum time and again.

These "mamas" were the militant women—outspoken, understanding and willing to catch hell, having already caught more than their share.

The tall, gaunt man sitting in the middle chair died last week at the age of eighty-four of congestive heart failure. Note the mane of white hair, the sparkling blue eyes, the firm jaw. A man of great humor and insight and intelligence, Frederick Sontag was slated to retire after fifty-seven years of teaching at Pomona College in Claremont, California.

Fred Sontag was an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ who wrote thirty books on topics like the problem of evil, trends in American religious culture (including the rise of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church) and, most importantly for me, books about the philosopher/poet/polemicist—my best friend—Soren Kierkegaard. An authority on existentialism, Sontag was superb at bringing together secular and religious thought.

Although Fred felt God calling him to ministry and he was ordained, he never held a pastorate. But he offered himself as confidant, counselor and mentor to thousands of students and officiated for them at more than one hundred weddings. He got to his office at 7 AM six days a week and stayed until 10 PM. He ate his lunch not in the faculty dining room but in the cafeteria with students. "I found that what I had been seeking when I thought I wanted to become a pastor is what I now see as teaching," Fred declared in an interview several years ago.

He often defended students on academic probation or at risk of expulsion. Sometimes he bailed them out of jail.

But the incident that sealed his ministry occurred on October 30, 2000, when he sought the release of Jared Essig, a twenty-two year old Pomona College senior with a history of mental illness who had been arrested on a shoplifting charge. Fred was driving Essig from the jail to his dorm when the student became delusional and pulled out a pocket knife. He stabbed Fred twice in the neck.

Unaware of how badly he was hurt, Fred, who at the time was seventy-six years old, drove himself to the hospital—but only after driving to his office to call the dean of students and leaving her a detailed message about the need to locate Essig before he could harm anyone else.

By the time Fred reached the emergency room, he had lost three pints of blood. He could have died from the stab wounds, which had missed his carotid artery by a few millimeters.

But here's the remarkable thing about Dr. Sontag. After that life-threatening assault, he not only forgave Jared Essig but he also found the young man a defense lawyer and testified on his behalf at the trial. Faced with a charge of attempted murder, Essig was found not guilty by reason of insanity.

"My genes lack something," Fred later said. "I don't seem to hold grudges."

Well, whether or not forgiveness occurs because of having some genetic difficulty, I wish I knew more people with the same problem. Of course, the Bible, the church and, most of all, Jesus of Nazareth have a different perspective on forgiveness.

If ever there was a kind of independent mind who marched to his own drumbeat rather than the drumbeat of others, it was Frederick Sontag.

Look at this woman with the gray hair pushed back and tied loosely. Notice the strength of her jaw, the deep-set eyes, the mouth and chin set in strength and faith. Her name is Dorothy Day, and part of her growing up was in Hyde Park, when her father was sports editor of the Chicago Daily News. She read Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, and it inspired her to take long walks in neighborhoods in Chicago's South Side. It was part of a life-long attraction to areas many people avoid.

Dorothy won a scholarship to the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana in the fall of 1914, but she spent most of her time reading radical literature and working with the few Communists on campus. She

had an abortion, and dropped out of college, went to New York and worked for *The Masses*, a magazine that opposed American involvement in the European war. Federal officers seized the magazine's issues and five editors were charged with sedition.

In November 1917, Ms. Day went to prison for being one of forty women in front of the White House protesting women's exclusion from the electorate. Arriving at a rural workhouse, the women were roughly handled. The women responded with a hunger strike, and finally they were freed by presidential order.

Dorothy Day lived with the conviction all her adult life that the social order was unjust. She began her adult life as a Communist seeking religious truth and ended it as a Catholic influenced by Communist ideals. She anticipated Liberation Theology by some thirty-five years.

Robert Ellsberg said of her, "There was absolutely no distinction between what she believed, what she wrote and the manner in which she lived." She wrote half a dozen books and approximately 1,500 articles, essays and reviews.

Part of what attracted Dorothy to Christianity was its theology of immanence, God's indwelling presence in the world. The injustice suffered by the poor had made her a radical, and as she became a Catholic, she united her faith with her Communist ideals. When she found in the Gospels was an understanding of human liberation, a sense of community and solidarity much larger than politics alone could provide.

She lived with a man named Forster Batterham on Staten Island in 1924, and when she became pregnant, they quarreled. Batterham could not believe in God while Dorothy's faith was deepening every day. It grieved her that Batterham did not sense God's presence within the natural world. "How can there be no God," she asked, "when there are all these beautiful things?" Everything moved to a different plane when she realized she was going to have a baby. "For a long time I had thought I could not bear a child," she confided in her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, "and the longing in my heart for a baby had been growing."

On March 3, 1927, Tamar Theresa Day was born. Dorothy could think of nothing better to do with the gratitude that overwhelmed her than arrange for Tamar's baptism in the Catholic Church. "I did not want my child to flounder as I had often floundered. I wanted to believe, and I wanted my child to believe." On December 28, Dorothy was received into the Catholic Church, and she broke with Batterham.

In the winter of 1932, Day traveled to Washington, D.C., to report for *Commonweal* and *America* magazines on the Hunger March. She watched the protestors parades down the streets of our nation's capital carrying signs calling for jobs, unemployment insurance, old age pensions, relief for mothers and children, health care and housing. What kept her on the sidelines was that she was a Catholic and the march had been organized by Communists, a party at war not only with capitalism but religion.

After witnessing the march, Day offered up a prayer which expressed her torment. "I offered up a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor."

Her prayer was answered the next day when she met Peter Maurin, a French Christian brother who was working as a handyman at a Catholic boys' camp in upstate New York. Maurin was a wanderer, and he had embraced poverty as a vocation. He had developed a vision of a social order instilled with basic values of the Gospel.

As remarkable as the providence of their meeting was Day's willingness to listen to Maurin, a born teacher. Out of their shared vision came *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper they handed out on Union Square in New York City.

That led to what is now the Catholic Worker Movement. When winter came and homeless, hungry people began to clamor for help, Maurin's essays in the paper about the practice of Christian hospitality began to take form. An apartment was rented with space for ten women, then another with places for ten men. Next came a house in Greenwich Village, then a national movement. By 1936 there were thirty-three Catholic Worker houses spread across the country.

Dorothy Day lived long enough to protest the Vietnam War, to meet Mother Theresa of Calcutta, to be honored by her church. She died on November 29, 1980, and before her death people began calling her a saint. Her brusque response was, "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily."

"If I have achieved anything in my life," she once remarked, "it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God."

What does it mean for you and me to wait for the Lord? The psalmist evokes an image of body and spirit on tiptoe, breath held, intense with eagerness to greet God, waiting like a sentry who searches the darkness of night for the first sign of dawn. This is a prophetic word from the psalmist, a word about the eager, patient faith of people like Fannie Lou Hamer, Frederick Sontag and Dorothy Day, individuals like you and you and you whose lives remind God's people of God's amazing "steadfast love" and of God's "great power to redeem." Whose voice speaks that word of hope? Whose ears need to hear it?