

The St. John's Pulpit

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ANSWER BOLDLY

Acts 9:1-9, 1 Kings 19:9b-13; Psalm 46

Sunday, May 28, 2017

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No one ever told me that Joan of Arc, Jeanne d'Arc or Jeanne La Pucelle to you francophiles, was such a rebel. In every movie I've ever seen about her, she is portrayed as distant, flighty, wide-eyed, and slightly crazed. Her story was never one that I found compelling—she fought some battles and got a spoiled, French prince onto a throne. Whoop-de-do. In my recent visit to France, however, I found that I had never really heard about the real woman or her actual story. Obviously, she is more elevated by the French—there are statues of her in multiple places around Paris—but it was when I went through the museum in her honor in Rouen, the city where she was burned at the stake, that I truly began to fall in love with Joan. The museum is dedicated to the nullification trials that took place posthumously at the request of her bereaved mother, and the story of her life is told through those lenses. This experience caused me to look up and read the transcripts of the original trials of Joan, and there I found one of the sharpest, most defiant, most faithful, and most deliciously rebellious women I have ever known.

Like the authorities who accused Jesus of Nazareth, the authorities who have arrested her have very little on which to base their accusations. They are obsessed with the fact that she is wearing men's clothing, and take her refusal to wear dresses as a sign of her heresy and her recalcitrant nature. By that measure, I guess I should have been condemned at age 13, when I discovered the joy of boy's Levi's and vowed I would wear them every day that I possibly could for the rest of my life. Like Jesus, her words of truth are read as defiance and disobedience, and she bends not an inch to their misogyny and obsession with controlling her. These learned men gather for her trial, and begin by asking her to swear to tell the truth. She says, "Of my father and mother and of what I did after taking the road to France, willingly will I swear; but of the revelations which have come to me from God, **to no one** will I speak or reveal them." They command that she say her Pater—**she refuses** unless they will hear her confession. They tell her she cannot leave the castle, that she is a prisoner—she tells them that she **will escape** if she can. When they ask her a question she has no intention of answering, she says, "Passez outre," "Pass on," and **will not answer**.

At her third interrogation, the authorities are asking her about the Voices she claims to have heard, the Voices she claims come from God. When they ask whether she heard Voices the day before, she replies that she did. She says, "The Voice said to me: 'Answer boldly.'" The Voice repeats the phrase "Answer boldly" twice more, Joan reports, and then she addresses her judges: "You say you are my judge. Take care what you are doing; for in truth I am sent by God, and you place yourself in great danger!" After seven public trials, and even more private interrogations, in which she is increasingly pressured and threatened, especially on the issue of wearing men's clothing, Joan finally gives in—she recants as admits that she is just a simple girl, and she should have gotten the help of the learned men

in deciding the importance, and the meaning, of the Voices. She agrees to put on a dress, in return for the right to go to Mass. This is on Wednesday, May the 23rd. The all-male court sentences her to “perpetual imprisonment,” and does not, in fact, allow her to go to Mass, or to have female companionship, but locks her up again, in a tower, surrounded by her male enemies.

By Monday, May 28th, exactly 586 years ago today, she is back in men’s clothing and renounces her confession. She says, “God sent me word by St. Catherine and St. Margaret of the great pity it is, this treason to which I have consented, to abjure and recant in order to save my life! I have damned myself to save my life!” When they again command that she tell the truth, she says, “What I said was from fear of the fire: I revoked nothing that was not against the truth...I have done nothing against God or the Faith, in spite of all they have made me revoke...If I said that God had not sent me, I should damn myself, for it is true that God has sent me...if the judges wish, I will resume a woman’s dress; for the rest, I can do no more.” Joan was burned at the stake in the middle of Rouen on May 30th, 1431. Her supposed crimes were nullified twenty-four years later in a new set of trials, and some 470 years later, she was canonized by the Catholic church as a saint.

What is compelling to me about the story of Joan of Arc is not that she died. Like Jesus, she did not set out to die, although, again like Jesus, she knew it might be part of her story. Everybody dies, and while Joan’s death was horrific, the horror, for her, only lasted minutes, while many people suffer egregiously for years before they die. Death is not compelling. What is compelling is the fierce and faithful manner in which she listened to what she believed to be the sacred Voice of God. Once she ascertained for herself that it was God to whom she was listening, she did not waver, she did not question. She answered, boldly. She said “yes” to her mission, and off she went. Like the apostle Paul, who was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” when he headed out for Damascus, Joan was stopped cold by the voice of God, and turned to a new path and a new identity. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, like Elijah in his cave, like Moses and that impossible bush, Joan was accosted by the Voice of God, claiming her and providing for her a mission and purpose in her world. It should not escape our notice that she succeeded where many others had failed. Nor should it escape our notice that Her King, having ridden on her successes to claim the crown, abandoned her to her enemies and to death.

We are a people who don’t believe in voices. We are postmodernists, who believe in stuff we see and whatever Neil deGrasse Tyson tells us is true. Even if God did speak aloud to us, we probably wouldn’t hear it over our iPhone, Netflix, HaloCallOfDutyAssassin, next meeting, next workout, on the go lifestyles. But I submit to you today that we are wrong not to believe in the active, audible voice of God. Lock me up if you must, but I tell you that I have heard it. I heard it tell me, “You are a minister,” despite my derisive laughter; I heard it tell me to go to South Sudan and to Ferguson, MO; I heard it whisper the name of my best beloved, and I heard it tell me that I am a mother and a teacher and a preacher and a writer and an activist and a feminist and someone who likes cookies. Right now, we are trying something new in the life of this church—a shift, if you will. Instead of asking that this congregation continue to hold up under the constant barrage of service opportunities that come our way, taking on everything we are asked to do, we are asking you to stop. To breathe in, and then let it out. To listen. To attend to the Voice of God, speaking to you, calling you to something wonderful.

What I love about Joan is not that she was brave, but that she was confident—she listened to the voice which mattered to her, above all others. In the coming months, we are asking you to give each other permission to listen. Like Jesus, like Paul, like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr., Joan said “yes” to that voice, and then “NO!” to a thousand others! She never let the other voices overpower the one voice she knew to be true. Our covenant talks about the “joy of Christian brotherhood,” but, I have to tell you, in the last 10 years, the thing I see the most around here is the **fatigue** of Christian service. Service is not about sacrifice—it is not about self-denial or about being good people or about avoiding damnation (although it is apparently much better to be a sheep than to be a goat). We are called to joy—to connecting with each other here, in healing and sustaining practices, and then stepping out into a true calling that is as beneficial to us as anything we might do for someone else.

In our recent class on the enneagram, which is a personality study that helps to introduce each of us to the blind, haphazard ways in which we all seek to solve our problems in the world, our excellent teacher, Paul Hanneman, left us with this poem, by Rosemary Wahtola Trommer, called "PERHAPS IT WOULD EVENTUALLY ERODE, BUT ... "

That rock that we have been pushing up the hill—that one
that keeps rolling back down and we keep pushing back up—what if
we stopped? We are not Sisyphus. This rock is not a punishment.
It's something we've chosen to push. Who knows why. I look at all the names
we once carved into its sedimentary sides. How important
I thought they were, those names. How I've clung to labels,
who's right, who's wrong, how I've cared about who's pushed harder
and who's been slack. Now all I want is to let the rock
roll back to where it belongs, which is wherever it lands, and you and I could,
imagine!, walk unencumbered, all the way to the top and walk and walk and never stop
except to discover what our hands might do if for once they were no longer
pushing.

Our call is not a punishment. It is not meant to be about what we give up. It is meant to be about the joy of loving each other well. In my experience, nothing that I have done, nothing that I have felt truly called to do, felt like sacrifice to me. Last year, our South Sudanese friends invited me to join them at a wedding celebration they were holding here at St. John's. I came, for several reasons, not the least of which was that I felt responsible to help them navigate the building and to make sure the building was in order for Sunday when they left. At South Sudanese weddings, the women all wear a special garment over their dresses—it is loose, colorful, flowing material that goes over one shoulder and each of them looked regal in their wedding attire. I was the lone kawajah, sitting at a back table, enjoying the tableau of it all, when one of the women who has always been particularly kind to me, came up to talk with me. She had taken off her wedding garment and she offered it to me. She said, “You need to wear this.” And she put it over my head. She adjusted it around me and then said, “Now you are a real South Sudanese woman!” She took me over to join the women for pictures, and they ooo-ed and ah-ed over my new attire. So many times, the South Sudanese people have invited me in—

have offered me true inclusion, true sisterhood. It has occurred to me that I was not the only one who received a call, that God told them, “This woman, and her many friends, have a very limited view of the world. There is much they do not understand. Go and minister to them, bring them in, show them what it means to welcome someone completely. Introduce them to the larger world in ways they cannot imagine.” And they answered, boldly, rejecting other places they might have gone in favor of this place, and these people. This summer, we invite you to stop. To pause. To let go, without fear. To listen. And when you hear that voice which is only for you, answer. Boldly.