



12/06/2020 Forerunners of Peace
Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

The residents of Roanoke Rapids, NC, have all agreed to face an uncomfortable episode in their recent history and honor the woman the city leaders had wronged 68 years ago, Sarah K. Evans.

Evans, known formerly as Private Evans, is now 91 years old, and reflects on the seemingly unremarkable event that has led to her public recognition.¹

In 1952 Private Evans was on her way home from her first military assignment, when she refused to give up her seat to a white Marine and move to the back of the bus. Upon refusing, she was taken to jail and detained for 13 hours and fined \$25.00. Evans sued the Interstate Commerce Commission for discrimination. Despite a judicial victory three years later in November of 1955, the ruling was not enforced until 1961.

Meanwhile, in March of 1955, a young black teenager, Claudette Colvin, refused to give up her bus seat to a white person. Having been exposed to the actions of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, Colvin was emboldened to resist the injustice she experienced on the city bus. As a result, she was handcuffed and arrested. And like Evans, her story was hidden until recent years.²

Sarah Evans and Claudette Colvin prepared the ground for what was to become the Montgomery Bus Boycott of December 5, 1955, 65 years ago yesterday. Their names are not as famous as that of Rosa Parks, the Civil Rights icon. Yet, their actions precipitated one decisive boycott of the most pivotal events of the Civil Rights Movement. Evans preceded Colvin who preceded Parks.

Forerunners often surprise us and show up on the world stage unexpectedly. Their back stories are unknown. They garner minimal attention, because they are forerunners—those who plow the ground, remove obstacles, and make ready for change that is to come. They are not the major actor; they are those who come before the one affecting the change. They end up becoming unsung heroes. Every movement needs those who function as the advance team, that is, those who prepare the way for something beyond the present state of affairs. In today's reading we find John preparing the way for Jesus. In a way, all the prophets have prepared the people for a new reality. At the proper time, the letter to the Hebrews instructs us, the change maker has come into our midst. Jesus was understood as the fulfiller of God's promises.

Isaiah reminds us that God's word stands forever. The prophet offers these words as a relief to the Hebrew people exiled in Babylon. The exile was a terrific blow to the religious conscience

¹ <http://sarahkevansproject.com/who-is-sarah-keys-evans>; <https://time.com/5871245/sarah-keys-evans>

² <https://www.biography.com/activist/claurette-colvin>



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and national self-understanding of God's people. It wasn't very long, it only lasted approximately 50 to 60 years (from 598 and 586 to 538). Those who were brought into exile hadn't lost just their freedom, they lost their social support of family, friends and neighbors; lost was the economic infrastructure; gone was their connection to the mother-land and social organization; with the destruction of the Temple, they lost the spiritual orientation and inspiration that a religious organization can give. Was God to be found outside of the Jerusalem Temple? Was God going to listen to their cry so far away from home? Could they possibly sing the songs of Zion by the rivers of Babylon?

Those were hard times marked by despair, disillusionment, and resentment toward God. No wonder people raised their fist and their voices to God wondering why God had allowed that horrific turn of events, the destruction and desecration of the holy space of the Temple, and the mass deportation of the people, including the royal family, to a foreign land. There are just so many passages in the Bible indicating how distraught the Hebrew people were.

The fact that the Bible includes the harsh lament and the angry expressions of people who were physically abused and emotionally exhausted, and were left with the bitter experience of spiritual brokenness helps us understand that the Bible is not simply the inspired Word of God to humans but also a honest expression of people's feelings of joy or outrage toward God.

The Bible is not a Book of Instructions Before we Leave Earth; it is the story of God's presence, care, and intervention into the life of humans who have found out they can relate to God and trust God to the point of feeling free to tell God just about anything and express their feelings to God honestly. The Bible, in other words, is a combination of a divine and human journal in which life interactions are described. God can chastise and forgive, and people can bless or curse God, because in their fear of God they know they can trust God will listen and understand their pain and anger.

So, in our first reading today, God has heard the cry of the people and is moved to attend to their affliction. God commands Isaiah to speak words of consolation, reassuring people that God's promises were (and are) real. Those reassuring words stood then and still stand today. Isaiah has a clear message: Even if you are to perish in an unknown place, under perilous circumstances, God's words of hope and comfort are still true and still apply to you.

It is trust in the truthfulness of God that gives us true hope. God comes through; and that faithfulness gives us peace. Here is the love that brings forth life, again and again, in the face of everything that would oppose it. God's trustworthy love grips us and holds us fast, even as everything else spins out of control.



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Another forerunner, John the Baptist, comes in a long line of prophets before Jesus. He is a truth-teller who operates in the wilderness outside of and away from the centers of political and religious power, unincumbered by the business of daily life.

He is purposely unattractive: no doubt some people have come out to see the spectacle of a wild, crazy man. But many have come to hear an unapologetic, unpolished, and undomesticated truth that possesses the potential to reorient their lives. The truth-teller speaks of another One who will be coming at an unspecified time.

All the forerunners and the One they came to introduce were so focused on the people's wellbeing that they did not mind if some in their audience felt offended and alienated: it wasn't personal gain or approval that they came to seek; to them, speaking the truth was not a popularity contest. They meant to serve God and neighbor, unconcerned with their own safety or glory. In fact, the One who is to come is promised to be even fiercer. He will be the One whose truth will expose the hypocrisy and malice of those in higher places and whose grace will heal and lift up the lowly.

When the people Jesus will touch give themselves fully into the divine power, the Holy Spirit, by which he will baptize, their whole lives will change. Mark 1 states that the One who comes in fierceness comes from God who gave life to the planet and words to the prophets and will be accompanied by holy power beyond comprehension.

John may look weird but can be trusted. His witness inspires lots of people from all around the country to come and make a new start, confessing their sins. John's honest and authentic witness, legitimized by his way of life, helps us to trust that the news about Jesus is real and good. John takes all the attention he gets and points to Jesus.

We may be forerunners of Jesus in other people's lives. Think about it, people listen to us differently when they know we are honest, compassionate, and trustworthy. Maybe they trust your recommendations about a book, a movie, or a restaurant; maybe they see the way you conduct yourself and how you treat others; maybe they notice how persistent your hope is in the face of setbacks and discouraging news; maybe they want to be as free as you are to speak your mind to God in adversity and still keep the faith. Your trust, your confidence, and your peace are going to lay the ground and prepare the way this Advent for people to come to Jesus.

God is love, says 1 John. God so loved the world, says John 3. Comfort my people, says Isaiah. I am with you always, says Matthew. So we pray: O God of forgiveness and new starts in life, sometimes we find ourselves walking in a direction that seems further and further from you.



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Call out to us. Send messengers to us so that with their help we can find our way back to you. Help us to find ways to also be an authentic guide for others who have lost their way. We ask this in the name of the One who is truly good news, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.