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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
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Text: Psalm 130: 1-2, 5-6; Acts 16:16-26; Philippians 1:12-14, 18b-20, 27

Why Does A Caged Bird Sing?: Inspiration from Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou, one of the most influential literary voices of our time, died at the age of 86 in 2014. She was a poet, author, and an ardent civil rights activist that won many awards and accolades for her writing. She has many “firsts” to claim, such as the first African-American woman to have a screenplay produced, the first African-American to offer an inaugural recitation for her reading of “Pulse of the Morning” at Bill Clinton’s inauguration, and she made literary history as the first non-fiction best seller by an African-American Woman for her book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. This book and the poem *Caged Bird* inspired me to write this sermon. Her story and poetry have inspired young and old, male, female, those of every race and ethnic backgrounds – anyone who has struggled to be free of prejudiced treatment by others, anyone who has felt the sting of feeling belittled because of who they were. So today, let us explore why a ‘caged bird’ sings. I will begin with Maya Angelou’s poem, *Caged Bird*.

Caged Bird

*A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the currents ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.*

*But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

*The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.*

*But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

~ Maya Angelou
from The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou

Why does a caged bird sing? For Maya Angelou, the bird sings a brave song for freedom. But from where does the inspiration, courage and hope come that urges the captive to bravely sing of a song of freedom and resistance? We ponder this question this morning as we consider the life of Maya Angelou.

In Angelou's autobiography on the first sixteen years of her life, we learn of her painful childhood. How after her parents' divorce, she and her brother Bailey at ages 2 and 4 were placed alone on a train with addresses pinned to their clothing and sent from St. Louis to Stamps, Arkansas to be raised by their paternal grandmother. Life was very difficult for Maya, born Marguerite Johnson. Her grandmother, who owned a country store, loved them very much, but she was a very religious and strict disciplinarian. Any breaking of the rules meant the switch or the belt and there were many, many rules to be followed, some too difficult to be comprehended at Bailey and Maya's tender ages. Five years after living with their grandmother, Maya and Bailey were sent back to St. Louis to live with their mother. While there Maya was raped at 7 years old by her mother's boyfriend and this horrible incident was intensified by having to testify in court with her rapist looking on. So horrified, frightened and guilt ridden, Maya slipped into quietness where she was unable to speak, and life was seen through a different murky lens. Her mother, feeling tremendous guilt and not knowing what to do, sent both children back to their grandmother.

It was during this time of silence that Mrs. Flowers, a frequent customer at the grandmother's store, felt compassion for her and introduced her to books, many books. This literary love affair saved Maya and became a new life force. She was an avid reader with a robust imagination, and

she excelled in school. Her imagination took her to another place and allowed her to imagine herself free of the ugly prejudices, inequalities and grave injustices of the South in the thirties and forties. Yet every time Maya felt a sense of accomplishment or dared to feel a sense of pride and a reason to hope, someone's words or actions would knock her to the ground and steal from her any inkling of self-esteem nurtured through the months or years. Yet she managed to pull herself up, to stand again and continue, and to do this in her own unique way, with her own unique courageous voice.

One incident I want to share with you was Maya's elementary school graduation. She was graduating at the top of her class. Her grandmother, so proud of her accomplishments, made Maya a beautiful yellow dress. The day was filled with accolades, and Maya was on the top of her world, filled with hope and expectation. The simple, plain school was overflowing with gaiety as the school band played for the entering sixth graders. The program was moving along in a glowing stream, and then two white men entered the school during the celebration. One was the 'key note,' speaker, a town official; he stepped on the stage and spoke of all the improvements to be made at Center School (the all white school in town) how they were purchasing new microscopes in the science class along with chemistry equipment, and he told them about a new arts program with visiting artists, and he went on and on. Not to leave out Lafayette County Training School, Maya's all black school, he told them how the city would refurbish the football field, because of the promise seen for the future black football tacklers. Each member of the graduation class sank in their chairs and looked at their shoelaces, and in this deflated state Maya writes,

"The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises..... We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to be was farcical and presumptuous..... Elouise, the daughter of the Baptist minister, recited "Invictus," and I could have cried at the impertinence of "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." (*I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, pp.176-179).

Maya writes when the speaker left and the whole graduating class was laid low, the classmate Henry Reed, offered his valedictory address. Maya listened with a hopeless and cynical ear. She writes,

"I had been listening and silently rebutting each sentence with my eyes closed; then there was a hush, which in an audience warns that something unplanned is happening. I looked up and saw Henry Reed, the conservative, the proper, the A student, turn his back to the audience and turn to us (the proud graduating class of 1940) and sing nearly speaking,

*"Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty....."*

It was the poem written by James Weldon Johnson. It was the music composed by J. Rosamond Johnson. It was the Negro national anthem. Out of habit we were singing it. Our mothers and fathers stood in the dark hall and joined the hymn of encouragement.

*“Stony the road we trod
Bitter the chastening rod
Felt in the days when hope, unborn, had died.
Yet with a steady beat
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?”*

..... And now I heard, really for the first time:

*“We have come over a way that with tears has been
watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the
slaughtered.”*

.... The tears that slipped down on many faces were not wiped away in shame. We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race.” (pp.180-182).

The caged bird sang and the song transforms the ugliness and despair of prejudice words into a bright sun of hope that spoke to Maya and her classmates’ souls.

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

I am sure there have been times in your lives of feeling low and hopeless that may have lasted for hours, days, months, or years, but then there is this inner burning, this inner warm energy that stakes its claim deep within, and says, “Rise up!; Claim your life again; Be brave and courageous; You are worthy; Follow me; I am on your side; I am with you always. And out of the depths of the dark beleaguered soul comes the voice, the song, the hope... the caged bird sings.

In our scripture lesson, we enter the scene of Paul's imprisonment through the account in the Book of Acts and by Paul's letter to the Philippians, where he and Silas are arrested after casting out a demonic spirit from an exploited slave girl. The girl's owner seeing this as a loss of income, has Paul and Silas arrested for disturbing the city, and because they are Jews, for advocating customs for the Romans to observe that are not lawful. They are stripped in public, brutally flogged, and imprisoned. Yet the book of Acts says that in prison they were praying and singing hymns to God. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out my deliverance." His deliverance comes in the form of an earthquake that opened the doors and unfastened everyone's chains.

Maya's and Paul's stories speak of a caged bird, a person or people who are brought low through violence, prejudice, ugly hatred and cruel injustice. They are as caged birds with clipped wings and feet tied by systems of power that bear down and oppress the soul. Yet through all this the caged bird sings out a song of resistance, a song that speaks of hope unrealized, a song from the soul that says I am here and God is with me -- an Emmanuel song.

We are living through an unprecedented time of political uncertainty, oppression, unjust policies, war, and chaos. We are moving further away from the democracy we hold so dear to our hearts. We witness all around us actions by our government that go against everything we stand for that is the core of our Christian faith. We are taught to love our neighbors as ourselves, and yet our tax dollars fund inhumane treatment of immigrants, separation from family members, imprisonment, placing them in detention centers with wretched conditions, and deporting them to a foreign country, as if to wash their hands of this crime. 40% of the 393,000 ICE arrests have been made in error. Many arrested are here legally with no past criminal charges or convictions. They are judged by the color of their skin and their accents. We must continue to speak out against these practices, against the actions that go against the rule of law in our country and our own moral guide. I have felt discouraged lately, especially with our president and his families' immunity from IRS audits, and the Department of Justice's newly created 1.8-billion-dollar slush fund to compensate individuals who were targeted or mistreated by previous administrations. Both were created in secrecy and little public accountability, just like the war in Iran, and they were not passed by Congress. Our tax dollars will be used to fund them. This is hard to fathom.

Paul writes while imprisoned, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel." We must not give up, and we must strive for what we know and believe in our hearts to be true and just. We must continue to sing our songs of freedom, our songs of democracy, songs of hope.

Tomorrow, we celebrate this nation's 159th Memorial Day, a time to remember, honor and mourn those in all branches of our armed forces past and present across all historical conflicts. Men and women who gave their lives in honor of our democracy and the values of our great country. At its founding, the day was intended for a pause as a unified Nation, to come together

to acknowledge the human cost of protecting American freedoms. These freedoms and our democracy are the guiding light of this great country and cannot be sacrificed by ideals of power and greed. We owe our fallen heroes and our heroes serving the armed forces today to make this day one of a strong commitment to hold fast to the democracy and freedom that are dear to our hearts to cry out with our “Emmanuel voice” to lift up every caged bird’s voice, and with them and for them sing out against injustices rampant in our country and world today. Our freedom is not a singular event, but it is intrinsically connected to the freedom of all. We cannot separate the two. Our “Emmanuel voice” is not only for us but for the other, and we sing out for freedom and democracy. Maya Angelou wrote, “History despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage need not be lived again.” To make this a reality, we must “lift every voice and sing....” Amen.

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