

“Jonathan Daniels: Faith Taking Wing”

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Church of the Redeemer, Morristown, New Jersey

Season of Sacred Story V 13 September 2015

Isaiah 6: 1-8; An excerpt from “Here Am I—Send Me: The Journey of Jonathan Daniels,”

a film by Larry Benaquist and Bill Sullivan; Luke 1:46–55

Not long ago I was having a conversation with my mother, who is 91. She had heard something on the news about 2015 being the 20th anniversary of the 1995 UN World Conference on Women and the Beijing Platform for Action. I had attended it as a representative of the Episcopal Church, and she was curious to know if I thought much had changed for women in the 20 years since the conference.

There was a part of me that was taken aback by the fact that it has been 20 years, but I realized as I listened to my mother that she looks at the sweep of history slightly differently than I do. I eventually said that, no, I didn't think a lot had changed, but as I get older, I don't think of twenty years as very long, either. And given how far women have to go, around the globe, to achieve parity with men, 20 years is probably a blink of an eye.

The “sweep of history” required for change is long, very long, but there are things along the way that can help speed that up a bit. For women in the Episcopal Church, for example, it was the ordination, long before it was “legal”, of 11 women to the priesthood in 1974. It set off a chain reaction that led to legislation that makes it possible for me to stand here today. Many people, mostly women, paid a very high price for the change to occur, and for them, I am grateful.

For African-Americans to be assured of the right to vote, and not be beaten and harassed and hindered by ridiculous made-up tests when they went to register vote, there were any number of events in the early 1960's that set off the chain reaction that led to what we know as the Voting Rights Act, and any number of events that followed the signing of it into law that insured that it was eventually enforced. Many people, mostly African-American, paid a very high price, and for them I am grateful.

Just as women in the Episcopal Church could never have gotten ordained without the work of sympathetic male allies, white allies were necessary in the struggle for justice for African Americans trying to exercise their right to vote. One who paid a very high price is the subject of our Sacred Story today.

Where to begin? The temptation is to want to tell you everything I know about Jonathan Daniels. But let me

start at the beginning—as Julie Andrews would say—a very good place to start, and then I'll tell you a little bit about why he is an inspiration to me.

Jonathan Myrick Daniels was born in Keene, New Hampshire, the son of a physician and stay at home mother, in 1939. As you heard a moment ago in the introduction to the PBS documentary made about his too-short life, he died at the age of 26, shielding a young African American woman from a shot gun blast. Jonathan was not raised in the Episcopal Church—he chose it during high school—but he is the only person the Episcopal Church can claim as a modern day civil rights martyr.

In what seems a bit of a contradiction, Jonathan attended the Virginia Military Institute, where he majored in English and was the class of 1961 Valedictorian. He began to question his religious faith during his sophomore year, conceivably because his father died and his sister suffered an extended illness at the same time.

In the fall of 1961, Jonathan began graduate studies at Harvard in English Literature. The following spring, during an Easter service at the Church of the Advent, a venerable Anglo-Catholic Episcopal Church in Boston, Jonathan felt the same call he had felt during high school (but had denied) to ordination. He started seminary in the fall of 1963, in Cambridge, and all things being equal, would have graduated in 1966.

As I know I don't have to tell you, all things weren't equal at that point in time, and still aren't today. It's been fifty years since Jonathan Daniels gave his life, and while blacks may be able to vote in the south, African-American tennis stars are being thrown to the ground and handcuffed today in the north. The “sweep of history” required for change is long, very long. But back to our story.

“Bloody Sunday” was a catalyst for change—albeit an horrific one—it set off the chain events that eventually led to Jonathan's death. But this story really isn't about his death, for me—it's about his life.

Listen to how he described his decision to go to Selma:

At two o'clock in the afternoon of March eighth, I dashed into the T.V. room of the Episcopal Theological School for an

Executive Committee meeting. As I grabbed a cup of coffee and found a seat, I had just time to overhear one of the brethren say that his wife planned to fly down before the chairman called the meeting to order. At some point on the agenda past yawning, the brother whose wife was flying was encouraged to make his pitch. There was trouble in Selma, as we all knew from Huntley-Brinkley, and Dr. King had asked for northern volunteers. That was where his wife was flying, and he was trying to raise money for her travel expenses. A strategy was speedily devised for that purpose, and as we went our several ways there was excited talk about the possibility of sending other members of the community.

I raced back to Lawrence Hall, flew up the three flights, and hurled myself into the room of a friend. The friend had been asleep, but graciously composed himself for what was visibly my latest insanity. I delicately reminded him that he had invited me to go south with him over the spring holidays (to talk with Bishop Allin of Mississippi and others) and suggested that we go now. My friend was not free to go, and I went off to study, a little disconsolate. From time to time I mused: could I spare the time? Did I want to spare the time? Did He want.... Reluctantly I admitted to myself that the idea was impractical, and, with a faintly tarnished feeling, I tucked in an envelope my contribution to the proposed "Selma fund."

"My soul doth magnify the lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" I had come to Evening Prayer as usual that evening, and as usual I was singing the Magnificat with the special love and reverence I have always felt for Mary's glad song. "He hath showed strength with his arm." As the lovely hymn of the God-bearer continued, I found myself peculiarly alert, suddenly straining toward the decisive, luminous, Spirit-filled "moment" that would, in retrospect, remind me of others - particularly of one at Easter three years ago. Then it came. "He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things" I knew then that I must go to Selma. The Virgin's song was to grow more and more dear in the weeks ahead.

For me, the most profound part of Jonathan's story is that he *stayed* in Selma. He could have left when all but one of his classmates returned to school. Many from "away" did leave. But the job wasn't done, and he wanted to be there. As he said, "Something happened to me while I was in Selma...I could not stand by in benevolent dispassion any longer...the imperative was too clear, the stakes were too high, my own identity was called too nakedly into question...I had been blinded by what I saw here, and the road to Damascus led, for me, back here."

What exactly did he do that had Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., say of him, "one of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels," or President Lyndon Johnson write to his mother and say after his death, "...we labor toward the day when the cause of brotherhood may prevail and the violence that sometimes scars America may be ended...?"

Sometimes we take to the streets, sometimes we yawn through interminable meetings, sometimes we talk with white men in their homes and offices, sometimes we sit out a murderous night with an alcoholic and his family because we love him and cannot stand apart. Sometimes we confront the posse, and sometimes we hold a child. Sometimes we stand with men who have learned to hate, and sometimes we must stand a little apart from them. Our lives in Selma are filled with ambiguity, and in that we share with men everywhere. We are beginning to see the world as we never saw it before. We are truly in the world, and yet ultimately not of it. For through the bramble bush of doubt and fear and supposed success we are groping our way to the realization that above all else, we are called to be saints. That is the mission of the Church everywhere. And in this Selma, Alabama, is like all the world: it needs the life and witness of militant Saints.

Jonathan Daniels is one of only two Americans listed in the Book of Heroes and Martyrs at Canterbury Cathedral in England. Fittingly, the entry for him is on the page opposite Dr. King.

August 20th of this year marked 50 years since Jonathan Daniels' death. In a variation on my mother's question that I began with, if she were to ask you if much had changed for African-Americans in the last 50 years, what would you say?

Not long before he died, Jonathan submitted a theology paper in fulfillment of the academic requirements that he negotiated with the seminary when he first went to Selma and missed the remaining part of the spring semester. What no one could have known at the time was that it would be read, in its entirety, as the sermon at his funeral. He would say of his experience: "The faith with which I went to Selma has not changed: it has grown. Darkening coals have kindled. Faith has taken wing and flown with a song in its wings."

May that faith continue to take wing and fly today.