

“Moral Midnight”
April 25, 2021

Luke 11:5-13

“Darkness blanketed the city of Charleston, South Carolina, in the early hours of May 13, 1862, as a light breeze carried the briny scent of marshes across its quiet harbor. Only the occasional ringing of a ship’s bell competed with the sounds of waves lapping against the wooden wharf where a Confederate sidewheel steamer named the *Planter* was moored. The wharf stood a few miles from Fort Sumter, where the first shots of the Civil War had been fired just a little more than a year before.

As thick wisps of smoke rose from the vessel’s smokestack high above the pilothouse, a 23-year-old enslaved man named Robert Smalls stood on the deck. In the next few hours, he and his young family would either find freedom from slavery or face certain death. Their future, he knew, now depended largely on his courage and the strength of his plan.” (1)

So begins the little-known historical account of Robert Smalls, who risked his own life and the life of his crew to liberate his young family from slavery. Despite his relative anonymity, however, Smalls goes down in the overall Civil War narrative as both a hero and a legend for those who benefitted from his bravery and those who hear his amazing story generations later.

In a nutshell, Smalls’ daring plan was to commandeer the Confederate ship the *Planter* in the middle of the night, stop on his way out of the harbor to pick up his wife, his four-year old daughter, and his infant son, and then steer the ship to the safety and freedom of the fleet of Union ships anchored not far outside the Charleston shores.

Before Smalls could even begin to execute his plan, though, he had to inform the other enslaved crew members and secure their acquiescence. And he had to wait for a night when the three white ship officers, against Confederate regulations, decided to leave the ship and spend the night with their families in the city of Charleston...thereby leaving Smalls and the crew in charge of the *Planter*.

Though the Charleston harbor wharf and the Union fleet were only about ten miles apart from each other, Smalls knew he would have to pass several heavily armed Confederate forts and numerous gun batteries along the harbor shoreline. All without raising any suspicion. As it turned out, the only way Smalls could accomplish the escape was to impersonate the white ship’s captain while counting on the cover of darkness to conceal his own identity.

On a night when the white officers were staying in the city and when Smalls judged the timing was right, he ordered the crew to leave the port. It was a foggy evening and the crew raised two flags. One was the official Confederate flag and the other was South Carolina’s official blue and white state flag.

The Confederate guard stationed about 50 yards away from the *Planter* saw the ship leaving its moorings and watched her go by, but he assumed the white officers were in command and never raised an alarm. A police detective also saw the ship leaving and made a similar assumption.

The *Planter* proceeded to stop at the North Atlantic Wharf to pick up Smalls' family and a few other slaves. After this stop, there were seventeen total people aboard the ship, including six crew members and the Smalls family of four.

At 4:15am, the *Planter* finally neared Fort Sumter. Everyone on board the ship was terrified, except for Robert Smalls. As the ship approached the Fort, Smalls, who was now wearing the official captain's hat, pulled the whistle cord. He offered two long blows and a short one, which was the Confederate signal required of all ships in order to pass and which Smalls had memorized over previous trips.

The Fort Sumter sentry yelled out, "Blow those Yankees to hell, or bring one of them in." Smalls stayed in character and simply called out, "Aye aye." Once the *Planter* was beyond the sentry's sight, Smalls ordered the crew to quickly take down the Confederate and South Carolina flags and hoist a white bedsheet in their place...a sign to the Union ships a few miles away that they were surrendering.

By the time the first Union ship saw the *Planter* approaching, the fog had lifted just enough for the Union crew to recognize the white bed sheet and avoid opening fire. A few moments later, the *Planter* pulled alongside the Union ship, and all seventeen slaves on the Confederate ship knew they were free for the first time in their lives...(2)

In subsequent wartime years, Robert Smalls went on to become a decorated hero for the Union navy. After the Civil War, Smalls returned to South Carolina where he was elected a congressman during the time of the Reconstruction. And eventually, Robert Smalls died at age 76 leaving behind a bold and storied legacy...

In light of this morning's Scripture lesson and the story of Robert Smalls, the question that arises for me is, "what are you and I willing to do at midnight?" When a friend comes and knocks on our door at midnight, as recorded in today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, what are we willing to do? In light of the story of Robert Smalls, who risked his life to lead seventeen slaves to freedom under the cover of darkness, what are we willing to do at midnight?

What I'm asking may sound like a personal question. When someone knocks on the door of your house at midnight, what are you willing to do? Are you willing to risk your own life to save your family and seek life-changing freedom when midnight comes?

But the question I'm posing this morning is not designed to be personal. Rather, it's meant to be a question posed to our nation at this inflection point in our nation's

history. Particularly right now, when it feels to me like midnight in the United States of America, what are we as a country willing to do?

It's also a question addressed to the church. In this poignant, fragile time when too many of God's people are caught up in violence and destruction instead of offering basic human compassion, where does the church fit? In this time when the clock is striking midnight, what is Wapping Community Church, what is the Christian church in general, willing and able to do...?

On Tuesday a jury in Minneapolis found Derek Chauvin responsible for causing George Floyd's senseless death and millions of people across this land felt some rightful measure of justice in his conviction. Especially our black brothers and sisters who have waited for certain police officers and local systems of justice to be held accountable for far too long.

Yet in the wake of the George Floyd verdict, the reality set in once again. The striking lack of accountability for Breonna Taylor's death. And Ahmaud Arbery's death. And Philando Castile's death. And Tamir Rice's death. And Emmett Till's death. One after another, numerous black men and women and children killed and no one held responsible. Along with how much work we still have to do in this nation to combat institutionalized racism and build a more equitable, more humane criminal justice system across the board.

Too many of our brothers and sisters of color are being killed and it feels like moral midnight in this country. Furthermore, it feels like moral midnight in the church. What are people of faith going to do? Will we continue to choose the darkness of doing things the way we did them yesterday and the day before and generations earlier? Or will we choose, in the name of the Prophet Micah, to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God towards the dawn of a new day...?

Meanwhile, nearly every day we watch the news and hear about a new mass shooting somewhere in this country. The proliferation of high-tech weapons and people accumulating vast stockpiles of ammunition inspires widespread fear and anxiety. Common sense gun control laws are favored by a vast majority of Americans and yet we live in a country where it's easier to obtain a gun than it is to obtain a college scholarship.

Gun violence is out of control and it feels like moral midnight among us. Are we going to choose the darkness of keeping gun laws and practices the way they are? Or will we choose, in the name of the Prophet Isaiah, to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks as we greet a new day?

People of all ages across our land are going to bed hungry. It's moral midnight and men and women and youth and children are knocking on the doors of the community and the doors of the church to give them bread to eat. Will we keep the doors shut and not respond to the need? Or will we open the door and offer basic foodstuffs and a hot meal?

And people of all ages are waiting until the cover of darkness to cross our borders in an effort to escape violence and persecution in their homelands. It's moral midnight and our sisters and brothers are seeking asylum. Will we separate families and deport parents back to their own countries while we warehouse their children in various detention centers? Or will we reunite separated families and welcome the needy and the oppressed and create manageable pathways to American citizenship?

It's moral midnight in our country and in the church. What are we going to do about it? Will we go back and embrace the darkness of the tomb where people suffer and die needlessly? Or will we go forward and embrace the darkness of the womb where we wait to birth new possibilities and engender new hope?

Luke's Gospel urges us to open the door when we hear the knock of someone in need. Robert Smalls sets the example of how to act boldly and courageously in the face of injustice, no matter the risks.

It's our turn. God is calling us to do better and to be better, the same way God has been calling human beings down through history.

Moral midnight is upon us here and now and when the clock strikes 12:01, our choice needs to be clear. Amen.

- (1) Cate Lineberry, *Be Free or Die: The Amazing Story of Robert Smalls' Escape from Slavery to Union Hero*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017) Chapter I excerpted, pgs. 4-28.
- (2) Ibid, pgs. 4-28.