

**“Traveling through the Land of Unlikeness”
A Sermon from a Sunday Worship Service
at First Congregational Church in Bristol, RI
Sunday, November 5, 2023
by the Rev. Nancy Hamlin Soukup, M.Div., M.A., D.Min.**

During my first year in seminary, some forty years ago, my pastoral counselor, Rita Rainsford Rouner, shared the poem I read for our morning’s meditation. It is the Chorus from W. H. Auden’s Christmas Oratorio “For the Time Being.”

“He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.”¹

My friends, Auden captured in this Christmas chorus the spirit of what it means to travel through the “Land of Unlikeness”—what it means to follow the Way, the Truth, and the Life—the place where we find those “rare beasts” and have “unique adventures.” We don’t often think of our journey into the life of Christ this way. But whenever my mind and heart returns to this poem and my wonderful friend Rita, I realize the enormous wisdom contained in this brief poem. And I feel so grateful that at an early stage of my own spiritual formation she shared it with me

I have to say that my own journey in Christ has provided me with plenty of “rare beasts” and “unique adventures.” I think this is true when reflecting on the saints, as we do today on All Saints’ Day. I grew up as an Episcopalian—a denomination that held onto the practice of recognizing the lives of the saints despite its break with Catholicism. Most saints I learned about were a contradiction from the societal norms of their day. They never seemed to fit into the worlds they inhabited, or they left comfort to pursue a truth few around them recognized, or in a moment out of characteristic from the life they were leading they committed an unparalleled act of courage. Or all of these things. It’s actually difficult for me to think of a saint who did fit into their own world.

What I loved about my Episcopal tradition was that we added contemporary saints to our Rota. For instance, one saint within our tradition was a young seminarian, Jonathan Daniels. Jonathan hailed from Keene, New Hampshire, grew up as an Episcopalian, and attended the Virginia Military Institute, where he was the 1961 valedictorian. He received the prestigious Danforth Fellowship and decided to pursue postgraduate work at Harvard in English Literature. Clearly,

¹ Jeffrey Reimer, “What Comes After: W.H. Auden’s Cure for the Post- Christmas Blues” in *Commonweal*, December 25, 2020, [What Comes After | Commonweal Magazine](#). Auden’s poem is embedded in Reimer’s article.

Jonathan's life was on a certain trajectory—he was from a white, privileged New England family, went to military school, and wanted to study English at one of the most elite universities in the world. We can all see where this was going.

However, just around the corner from Harvard was a smaller school, the Episcopal Theological School (ETS). It was the early 1960s, and Jonathan felt a pull across the Cambridge Commons from Harvard to ETS on Brattle Street. It's funny how the Holy Spirit works. He abandoned his degree at Harvard, enrolled at ETS, and began to pursue ordination. In fact, he spent one summer as an intern in an Episcopal Church in South Providence—a church which sadly closed many years ago. While at ETS, Jonathan's heart was captured by the work and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement. Jonathan felt compelled to go to Alabama to become involved in the voting rights campaign sweeping the south in 1965. One of Jonathan's friends once said that he had decided to take a year off from seminary to devote full-time to voter registration in that state. What happened next is best described in Jonathan's biography from the Virginia Military Institute:

“In August 1965 Daniels and 22 others were arrested for participating in a voter rights demonstration in Fort Deposit, Alabama, and transferred to the county jail in nearby Hayneville. Shortly after being released on August 20, Richard Morrisroe, a Catholic priest, and Daniels accompanied two black teenagers, Joyce Bailey and Ruby Sales, to a Hayneville store to buy a soda. They were met on the steps by Tom Coleman, a construction worker, and part-time deputy sheriff, who was carrying a shotgun. Coleman aimed his gun at sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales; Daniels pushed her to the ground in order to protect her, saving her life. The shotgun blast killed Daniels instantly; Morrisroe was seriously wounded. When he heard of the tragedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, ‘One of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels.’”²

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:6–10)

In the moment Jonathan stepped in front of that shotgun, he simultaneously died from that bullet and was sent him into immortality. Jonathan is now considered a martyr in the Episcopal Church. Ruby Sales lived and relived those terrible moments for many years. For the first seven months after the shooting, Ruby could barely speak, but as her biography states she ultimately decided to testify against Coleman, who was later acquitted by 12 white men. Unrepentant from his act of violence, Coleman later said he would do it all over again if given the chance.³

² “Jonathan Daniels, Civil Rights Hero” in Virginian Military Institute, [Jonathan Daniels, Civil Rights Hero - VMI Archives - Virginia Military Institute](#).

³ “Ruby Sales,” [Ruby Sales - Wikipedia](#).

Ruby, who had already been active in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) before the shooting, did not allow her advocacy for civil rights to go silent. Instead, she received degrees from Tuskegee Institute, Manhattanville College, and Princeton University. Eventually in the late 1990s, she received a Master of Divinity from the Episcopal Divinity School. Ruby is now considered one of the major civil and human rights advocates in this country and is the founder of Spirit House, a non-profit organization and inner-city mission dedicated to Jonathan.⁴

I am humbled to say that I attended the same seminary as Jonathan and Ruby. I went to the Episcopal Divinity School just 15 years after Jonathan's death, so I heard this story directly from those who knew both Jonathan and Ruby. It reaffirmed a trajectory I had been on since I was very young, when I witnessed the riots in my hometown of Wilmington, DE, after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April 1968. I grew up admiring a young African American Episcopal priest serving our church in the middle of city. Lloyd's actions on behalf of our church and the Black community during those riots so captured my attention that I decided I wanted to be a priest too. Never in my wildest dreams did I realize where the road would take me.

“He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.”

I came to that decision even before women were ordained in the Episcopal Church. I went to the Episcopal Divinity School just three years after women's ordination was made “legal” in the denomination. There was much to deter me from taking this road. But I have to tell you every time I have veered off of my vocational path I felt so uncomfortable in my being that I felt compelled to return to that “great city that has expected my return.” I had to resettle myself on that unexpected path to feel once again at home in who I was.

“He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.”

Furthermore, whenever I have brought my faith life right into the real world—into that “World of the Flesh”—I have known a sense of union, a rightness that cannot be explained away. Much the way I felt when I received your Call earlier this fall to be your Designated Term Minister. My friends, I have been in your sphere for about a decade. I have prayed for and with you when profound tragedy befell you. I have watched as you tried to move beyond those times and struggle to reclaim your mission in the world. Since then, you have been thwarted on occasion, yet you have consistently and constantly Loved Christ in the “World of the Flesh” through countless mission efforts—you are not deterred from loving your neighbor.

Frankly, I have loved you and admired your fortitude for many years. And now I am honored and deeply humbled to journey with you through the “Land of Unlikeness.” My prayer is that we will experience that dance for joy you so deserve to know—the dance of bringing Christ into this world. God bless you, God keep you, God love you! AMEN.

⁴ Ibid.

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