

Last week I had the opportunity to meet a young woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo who was in the US to receive the 2017 Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award. This award recognizes women around the globe who have demonstrated exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for peace, justice, human rights, gender equality, and women's empowerment, often at great personal risk. Rebecca Kabugho is an activist with a citizen movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo that through peaceful demonstrations, advocates positive change in the Congo through non-violent means. She has been imprisoned twice in the last year because of these protests, which has slowed down her college education. I would estimate that she's about 23 or 24.

Rebecca came to Iowa to learn from CCI more about organizing and grassroots activism. The invitation I received from CCI said, and I quote, "Sounds like she's a bad-ass, which is a good thing. She is coming here to learn about how we do community organizing and civic engagement in IA, but really – we have a lot to learn from her tenacity and courage." So of course I had to go, to see a bad-ass peaceful resister, plus I happen to have studied up on the Democratic Republic of Congo last fall, when we were talking about systemic change versus direct aid. The Congo is a country with rich natural resources, but the resources are being siphoned out by oligarchs closely tied to the government, who then conceal their money in offshore accounts so they can avoid paying taxes. This leaves the great majority of Congolese in dire poverty, without roads, clinics, or accessible schools. I wanted to hear what Rebecca's movement is doing.

It was interesting to me that she did not seem to have this birds-eye view of

the problem—that is, she wasn't aware of the role of shell corporations and financial chicanery. What she knew was that no matter how hard people try, they can't ever get ahead. There are no roads to transport your crops, if you start a business you soon have to close it because you will have no customers, and efforts to hold public officials accountable result in torture and imprisonment. The first time she was arrested, she was waterboarded. The second time, she served six months in prison, where many people starve because the prison serves food only twice a week. She says she and her companions have to resist because otherwise their souls will die. I would say she is definitely a bad-ass, and if someone told her to quiet down, the very stones would start to shout.

Luke prefaces the story of Palm Sunday with the parable of the unjust king, the nobleman who travelled abroad to receive authority to become a king and returned to slaughter unproductive servants. It may be that Luke is deliberately echoing the story of Archelaus, who on the death of his father, Herod the Great in 4 BCE, had returned to Jerusalem and ruled with great cruelty until deposed by the Romans 10 years later in 6 CE. People would have shuddered at the memory of Archelaus, and contrasted it with the humble and peaceful entry that Jesus is making.

People would also have remembered the destruction of Jerusalem—not only the Roman destruction that took place shortly before Luke wrote his gospel, but also the Babylonian destruction in the 6th century BCE. Prophets like Isaiah had told Judah that their failure to care for the vulnerable among them would result in their own destruction: “I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down . . . For

the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry.” (5:5-7) The prophet Habakkuk had also alluded to stones that speak, when he condemned Israel’s injustice: “The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.” When Jesus weeps for Jerusalem, he says, “If you . . . had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will . . . crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, . . . because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.” Jerusalem’s collusion with Rome, its failure to care for the poor has set them on the road to ruin.

In case we still don’t get the point, Luke has the disciples (not a crowd of strangers in Luke) crying out, “Blessed is *the king* who comes in the name of the Lord!” so we know he represents the alternative to Caesar, and “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven,” which is what the angels said at Jesus’ birth.

“Archelaus brought no peace. The people of Jerusalem refused the way of peace. Jesus offered the way to peace. Peace hailed as heavenly is also peace made for earth. By recalling this scene Luke is recovering for us the cries for liberation among God’s favoured people, Israel, and all who belong to her. Luke brings Christmas and Easter together.” (William Loader)

<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPalmSunday.htm>

Luke sees the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached as community lived out in the kind of inclusivity and wholeness demonstrated in Jesus’ ministry. Riding with

Jesus are the hopes of the oppressed and exploited peoples and the oppressed and exploited individuals. His ministry demonstrated some realization of that hope. He will carry that hope through suffering and death. On this Luke's community will feed and in it find its mission. The kingdom of God is so necessary that were people to be silent, the very stones would cry out that this is the time, now is the moment for the kingdom to be enacted.

Palm Sunday is an almost unbearable mixture of celebration and hope, dread and foreboding. With the disciples, we celebrate the coming of the king, but with Jesus, we know that the resistance will be lethal. But lethality is not enough to deter Jesus.

Going into Holy Week, I think of Rebecca Kabugho and her courage and clarity. What's going on in the Congo is wrong; it is not to be tolerated; the time to change is now. Asked if she was afraid, she said that they cannot afford to be afraid. When she was imprisoned, she said, for several days she felt bad and forgotten, but then she realized that prison was to be her education for a while. Asked if it's hard to work with mostly men in her organization, she said if you have something to say, you have to speak up. You cannot sit and wait for permission. The woman has grit. She obviously has a gut understanding of the power arrayed against her, but also a clear intention to persist because to cease to do so is death.

Toward the end of our meeting, one of the organizers at CCI asked Rebecca to teach us one of her group's chants, and she turned from very serious to very mirthful, grabbed a green marker (because green is the color of hope), and wrote a chant in Swahili on the whiteboard. Then she taught it to us. Then that organizer

gave her a CCI t-shirt, which she pulled on over her traditional Congolese dress, and then she showed us how her group members greet each other: fingers are my strengths, the spaces between them are my weaknesses. We use our left hands because they are closest to our hearts, and we clasp the other's left hand—and their strengths fill in my weaknesses, and my strengths fill in their weaknesses.

That community of wholeness and inclusion lived out in Jesus' ministry is alive and well in Rebecca's movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They follow Jesus into the jaws of death, but they know that to do so is the only way to be truly alive. With Rebecca, I hope we can also live joyously in the tension between the forces of sin and death *and* the abundant life that refuses to be so limited.

Let us pray: May we follow you, Jesus, palms in one hand bread and wine in the other hosannas in our throats and questions on our minds, trusting your love even as we hesitate at its cost. May we follow you, Jesus, there at the beginning right to the end. Hosanna, Lord.

Amen.