

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977)

Hearing the call of Jesus (1962)

Fannie Lou Hamer had endured the burdens of white racism for forty-four years, living the hard life of a field hand on the Marlowe cotton plantation near Ruleville, a small town in the Delta...On that night in August 1962, she had not even heard about her civil rights. "We hadn't heard anything about registering to vote because when you see this flat land in here, when the people would get out of the fields, if they had a radio, they'd be too tired to play it. So we didn't know what was going on in the rest of the state even; much less in other places." But [what she heard at the mass meeting] spoke deeply to Mrs. Hamer's longing for justice. Her imagination was charged by new moral and spiritual energies; ...

Mrs. Hamer understood that her life would be very different from this point on. "When they asked for those to raise their hands who'd go down to the courthouse the next day, I raised mine. Had it up as high as I could get it. I guess if I'd had any sense I'd a-been a little scared, but what was the point of being scared. The only thing [the whites] could do was kill me and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time since I could remember."

She heard the call of Jesus--and James Bevel--a call demanding sacrifice, but a call also promising freedom and empowerment...Mrs. Hamer had been made ready by her involvement in church life to "step out on God's word of promise"--to put her faith into action. She was ready to move, and did the next week when she joined a busload of people heading to the county courthouse to register to vote. {from *God's Long Summer* by Charles Marsh}

From Fannie Lou Hamer's speech before a mass meeting, Indianola, Mississippi, 1964

Now, the question I raise: is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave? Where people are being murdered, lynched, and killed, because we want to register and vote?...We have prayed for a change in the state of Mississippi for years. And God made it so plain He sent Moses down in Egypt-land to tell Pharaoh to let my people go. And He sent [civil rights leader] Bob Moses down in Mississippi, to tell all of these hate groups to let his people go.

This is one of the next things that I don't like: every church door in the state of Mississippi should be open for these meetings; but preachers have preached for years what he didn't believe himself. And if he's willing to trust God, if he's willing to trust God, he won't mind opening the church door. Because the first words of Jesus's public ministry was: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim and bring relief to the captive." And you know we are living in a captivated society today. And we know the things we doing is right. The thirty-seventh of Psalms said, "Fret not thouselves because of evildoers, neither be thy envious against the workers of iniquity for they shall be cut down like the green grass and wither away as the green herb. Delight thouselves in the Lord and verily thou shalt be filled." And we are determined to be filled in Mississippi today....

We can no longer ignore the fact, America is not the land of the free and the home of the brave. When just because people want to register and vote and be treated like human beings, Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman is dead today. A house divided against itself cannot stand; America is divided against itself and without their considering us human beings, one day America



will crumble. Because God is not pleased. God is not pleased at all the murdering, and all of the brutality, and all the killings for no reason at all. God is not pleased at the Negro children in the state of Mississippi suffering from malnutrition. God is not pleased because we have to go raggedy each day. God is not pleased because we have to go to the field and work from ten to eleven hours for three lousy dollars....

We have prayed and we have hoped for God to bring about a change. And now the time have come for people to stand up....Because God care. God care and we care. And we can no longer ignore the fact that we can't sit down and wait for things to change because as long as they can keep their feet on our neck, they will always do it. But it's time for us to stand up and be women and men....

We are not fighting against these people because we hate them, but we are fighting these people because we love them and we're the only thing can save them now. We are fighting to save these people from their hate and from all the things that would be so bad against them. We want them to see the right way. Every night of my life that I lay down before I go to sleep, I pray for these people that despitefully use me. And Christ said, "The meek shall inherit the earth." And He said before one-tenth—one jot—of his word would fail, heaven and earth would pass away. But His word would stand forever. And I believe tonight, that one day in Mississippi—if I have to die for this—we shall overcome....

I want you to say, "I'm with you." And we'll go up this freedom road together. Before I leave you, I would like to quote from an old hymn my mother used to sing: "Should earth against my soul engage, and fiery darts be hurled, then I can smile at Satan's rage and face this frowning world."

In the Winona Jail, arrested & beaten along with other civil rights workers, 1963

...The torture of Mrs. Hamer might very well have ended in death had not an unidentified white man come into the bullpen and announced, "That's enough...." though hours later Mrs. Hamer could hear the police officers in the booking room planning her murder....Mrs. Hamer's suffering and humiliation left her with the certainty that death was imminent. There was no singing at this nightfall.

But then the next day something happened that slowly transformed the killing despair of the jail and dispersed the power of death. "When you're in a brick cell, locked up, and haven't done anything to anybody but still you're locked up there, well sometimes words just begin to come to you and you begin to sing," she said. Song broke free. Mrs. Hamer sang: Paul and Silas was bound in jail, let my people go. Had no money for to go their bail, let my people go. Paul and Silas began to shout, let my people go. Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go "Singing brings out the soul," she said. And at Winona, singing brought out the soul of the black struggle for freedom, for Mrs. Hamer did not sing alone. Sitting in their cells down the hall, June Johnson, Annelle Ponder, Euvester Simpson, and Lawrence Guyot joined her in song. Church broke out, empowering them to "stay on 'the Gospel train' until it reaches the Kingdom."

Mrs. Hamer "really suffered in that jail from that beating," June Johnson said. The physical and psychological effects of Winona stayed with her for a long time--she almost never talked about her life without talking about Winona. Even so, her songs of freedom gave voice to her suffering and the suffering she shared with her friends. Their singing did not remove their suffering or the particularities of their humiliation; rather, it embraced the suffering, named it, and emplotted it in a cosmic story of hope and deliverance....Despair turned into a steady resoluteness to keep on going. A miracle happened. And at least for Mrs. Hamer, a peaceable composure, incomprehensible apart from a deep river of faith, transformed not only her diminished self-perception but the perception of her torturers. She said astonishingly, "It wouldn't solve any problem for me to hate whites just because they hate me. Oh, there's so much hate, only God has kept the Negro sane."... Later, when Mrs. Hamer was escorted by the jailer himself to her trial, she put the question to the very man who had helped carry out her beating just a few days earlier, "Do you people ever think or wonder how you'll feel when the time comes you'll have to meet God?" His response was full of embarrassment and vigorous denial. "Who you talking about?" he mumbled. In fact, Mrs. Hamer knew all too well what had happened. "I hit them with the truth, and it hurts them," she said.... {from *God's Long Summer* by Charles Marsh}