

Martin Luther King's Birthday
"Inheriting the Dream"

Amos 5:18-24

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This morning, our nation remembers the 94th anniversary of Martin Luther King's birth. We remember it, not just to recall the principles of justice and equality for which he stood and was eventually killed for, but to remind OURSELVES that the work of achieving such ideals-- BOTH INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY AS A NATION--is a NEVER-ENDING PROJECT. It was a commission that God, through his prophets, commanded his people--the Israelites--to practice. It served as a centerpiece to our LORD'S ministry and is now one which we, the Church, as the "BODY of Christ" have inherited.

Sixty years ago this August, Dr. King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and shared a dream, one NOT ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT from the dreams given to Amos and Micah and Isaiah and other prophets of the Old and New Testaments. In his speech, he drew attention to the plight of African-Americans in our country. He didn't lecture her on their years of slavery or for the entrenched social, political, and economic oppression his people had endured. Instead, he took ALL OF AMERICA—white and black, young and old, male and female--with him to that mountain top that TOGETHER we might look out upon the Promised Land God had given to his people.

And WHAT did he see? IT WAS A DREAM that one day this nation would rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal." IT WAS A DREAM that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners would be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood. IT WAS A DREAM that his four little children would one day live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character; where little black boys and black girls would be able to join hands with little white children and walk together as sisters and brothers. IT WAS A DREAM that one day every valley would be exalted, every hill and mountain be made low, the rough places made plain, and the crooked places made straight. The glory of the Lord would be revealed, and all flesh should see it together. It was an historic occasion with millions of Americans hearing from a race and class of people they had helped victimize- AS MUCH BY THEIR SILENCE as by any overt acts of injustice. White America listened to their grievances- that they were tired and angry at their third-class citizenship, of their lack of voting rights, of their denial of equal job opportunities, fair housing, and integrated eating and travel facilities that America, INCLUDING MANY WELL-MEANING CHRISTIANS, had denied them.

Today, Martin Luther King is one of the towering figures of the 20th century with his birthday now a federal holiday in all fifty states. In a poll that was taken in 1999, he was more popular than FDR, Pope John Paul II, and Winston Churchill with only Mother Teresa ranking higher. What we may NOT remember is that at the time of his death in April of 1968, he was MORE REVILED than admired by a majority of Americans with TWICE as many having an

UNFAVORABLE opinion of him as a favorable one. EVEN HIS MARCH ON WASHINGTON was considered controversial, both inside and outside the civil rights community. President Kennedy asked the leaders to cancel the event. The FBI tried to dissuade people from coming while racist Senators worked to discredit its leaders. The late Congressman John Lewis--who nearly died marching for voting rights in Selma, Alabama--had his speech censored to placate the archbishop of Washington while Malcolm X dubbed it the "Farce on Washington." It was a miracle that it ever took place AT ALL.

It was Martin Luther King standing up for ALL people who were denied rights and not just Afro-Americans that made him such a reviled figure, ESPECIALLY by those in power. As the movement grew, it went on to embrace, not just the issue of CIVIL RIGHTS but matters of ECONOMIC JUSTICE (when he was assassinated in Memphis, he was there on behalf of striking sanitation workers who were fighting for a living wage). His moral outrage was a product of his deep Christian faith and what he saw as Jesus's OWN commitment to the poor and the oppressed. As God's servant, King believed that his mission was to faithfully take up and remind people of God's dream for his world, even if it cost him his life.

King also knew that if it was ever going to succeed, such activism would require that its people possess an uncommon faith and courage that could ONLY come from God. Twenty years ago, while I was serving as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in downtown Syracuse, NY, Rev. Marie Jerge, a Lutheran minister in the city--was installed as the Bishop of Upstate New York in my neo-gothic stone sanctuary. It was a day I will never forget. The church was packed with dignitaries from all over the country representing every major denomination, including the head of the Lutheran Church. Throughout the service, I sat with Bishop Thomas Costello- the Roman Catholic Prelate for the Diocese of Syracuse. He had grown up in the city and was ordained a priest there in 1954 so he was well-acquainted with many of the religious leaders over the years. He was anxious to tell me about one of my predecessors- Rev. William McConnaghy, who served as pastor of First Pres from the early 50's through the early 70's and remained one of Tom's heroes. He said that Bill was truly one of the great religious leaders in the city. He was passionate about civil rights and yet despite how unpopular the issue was during those years, he fearlessly preached on it from that pulpit. He knew Dr. King personally, even marching with him in Selma and throughout other parts of the South. Bishop Costello said, "David, he was the closest thing to a prophet Syracuse ever had. Believe me, REGARDLESS of whether you were Catholic or Protestant, when Bill McConnaghy SPOKE, people LISTENED."

This past week, Casey Hayden—a native Texan and wife of an Episcopal priest--died at the age of 85. I'm sure that's a name that will have very little resonance for any of you but back in the early '60's, she was a small, white graduate student at the University of Texas who became one of the few WHITE students to join BLACK students in anti-segregation protests. She wrote, "Twenty-two years old, I had a strong Southern drawl and hardly spoke above a whisper. I cannot say to a person who suffers injustice, 'Wait.' Perhaps YOU can; I CAN'T. And having decided that I cannot urge caution, I MUST STAND WITH HIM." For the rest of her life, her faith compelled that small frame and tiny voice to become a mighty megaphone and she NEVER STOPPED standing up and speaking out about the huge disparities and injustices that have continued to separate people- not just between Blacks and Whites BUT NO LESS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN. In the process, she INSPIRED OTHERS to become

EQUALLY active in addressing the great injustices facing our nation, including the sexism SHE was repeatedly forced to contend with.

In his “I Have a Dream” speech, King quoted from or alluded to some of the most important writings in Western Civilization including the Gettysburg Address, Shakespeare, the Declaration of Independence, and of course, the Bible. In particular, he paraphrased a verse he had evoked many times during his career- Amos 5:24: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing-stream.” Today, that same verse can be found inscribed on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama where a waterfall of water—signifying the justice and righteousness of God--flows continuously over a circular black granite table.

The book of Amos is the earliest of any of the Old Testament prophetic writings. Prophesying around 762 B.C., he lashed out against the people of Northern Israel for what he saw was their perverted justice and social oppression. There was a rot at the core of society that was about to bring destruction from God upon them. Although for the nation it was a period of great peace and prosperity, he saw rampant cheating going on in business, judges being bribed in the courts, gross mistreatment of the poor, religion that had become shallow and meaningless, and a people who had grown lax and lazy both morally and spiritually- conditions not altogether different from what one might see today. But Amos’s words were much more than just a rousing call for believers to change their ways and work for a more fair and compassionate society- it represented divine outrage from a God who saw injustice everywhere, a cry of sadness from One who grieved over what his own people had become.

But what did the prophet mean by “justice?” Today, we think justice is when the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. In the Old Testament, however, the Hebrew word for justice—*mishpat*—meant that the neediest in society are cared for. A “just” society was one that helped care for those who were poor and powerless and in need while an “unjust” society was one which abandoned people to fend for themselves. Therefore, the prophet commands, “Let justice roll down like an ever-flowing stream!”

History has shown that it’s never easy being a prophet of God. John the Baptist was beheaded for speaking truth to power and even JESUS came close to being killed on numerous occasions for his strident pronouncements. Luke tells the story of when Jesus returned to the congregation he’d grown up in to deliver his very first sermon, he declared that he’d been anointed by God to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. He was indicating to them that he was first and foremost a “liberator,” that he was the new Moses who was taking his people out of the land of bondage and on his way to the Promised Land. However, rather than congratulating him and assuring him that he had a tremendous future in the church, they were so outraged by his words that they sought to seize him and throw him over a cliff. Thus Jesus knew first-hand how a prophet is never accepted in his own CONGREGATION much less his own country.

The fact is that the church NEEDS the prophet to keep it honest. Whenever the church has become too cozy with the agenda of the state, she then abandons her prophetic task and loses her voice. When she is too closely allied with the social and political ideologies or agendas on either THE RIGHT OR THE LEFT, when she becomes too comfortable with reigning political and national institutions in the pursuit of her own power and influence, she then CEASES to be

the church. This doesn't mean that the church can't speak out against moral and social corruption when she sees it for that's an essential part of her calling. In fact, the church has an OBLIGATION to address issues concerning war and peace, poverty and discrimination, and exploitation and inequality when they arise; like Martin Luther King and Amos and Isaiah before him, we have a duty to offer a vision and promote a dream of a new and better society, a world reflecting the values of God's OWN kingdom. To love our neighbor as ourselves involves working for a just and equitable society in which every person is valued, respected, and treated with dignity. As the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, the former Presiding Bishop and leader of the Episcopal Church, said in a sermon based upon this morning's text:

We're here to do justice, and love mercy. We're here to walk humbly with God and bring good news to the poor. That good news of justice and mercy looks like the ancient visions of the commonweal of God where everyone has enough to eat, no one goes thirsty or homeless, all have access to meaningful employment and health care, the wealthy powerful do not exploit the weak, and no one studies war any more. It includes the work of building community and caring for the earth, both of which are essential to the health of a spiritually rooted person, in right relationship with God and neighbor. This Church, with its partners both sacred and secular, is part of that mission of God's to bring that holy dream to reality.

I know this description of the mission of the church, just like King's dream, seems highly unrealistic, perhaps even UTOPIAN. Martin yearned for a better world where historical wrongs had been righted and where good prevailed- but then that's why his dream remains so stirring still to this day. The prophet Joel said that in the last days, God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, and their sons and daughters would prophesy, their young men would see visions, and their old men would dream dreams. That promise was answered centuries later on the Day of Pentecost and it is a promise that continues to be fulfilled TODAY. True, we can't live on dreams alone. But the ABSENCE of dreams diminishes us; our thinking becomes dull and unimaginative without a clear moral center. Besides, as one commentator has observed, if nobody ever dreamed of a better world, then what would there be for any of us to WAKE UP to?

On August 28, 1983--forty years ago this year--I was ministering in a church in the Redwood National Park in Northern California. Aware of the significance of that date, that it was the 20th anniversary of King's March on Washington, I preached a special sermon on the event just as I am doing this morning. Following the service, my music director approached me and I could see she was visibly agitated. I asked, "What's the matter, Martha?" She said, "David, how dare you talk about that man from this pulpit. I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota and I tell you, the blacks there were perfectly happy and peaceful until HE came to our city and told them they could live just as good as us whites"- her exact words. I was dumbfounded by what I had just heard, that to her mind King was a trouble-maker merely because he dared to tell black men and women and their children there that they could live "just as good as us whites."

Now Martha was a wonderful Christian woman and did many charitable things for people; I would never question her character OR her faith. What I DID question that day was her NARROWNESS OF VISION. I would hope none of US would possess any personal animosity, any overt or conscious prejudice towards persons of other races or religions, of different ethnicities or sexual orientations. I would hope we share the common assumption that

ALL people are equal and should be treated with the same dignity and respect and have access to the same opportunities as we would want for OURSELVES. However, what I and many of us are often unable to see is how the system at large, the institutions we live and work in, continue to perpetuate discrimination in very subtle ways- in our hiring practices, in equal access to housing and healthcare, in our legal-justice system- a system which we all participate in but all-too-often refuse to accept any responsibility for.

Some years ago, Cal Thomas, the conservative newspaper and television commentator, gave an address at Chatauqua- the famed cultural and educational institute in Western New York which I attend for several weeks every summer. He spoke then of how when Dr. King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, he stood not less than fifty feet away from him. He said he could never forget how it awakened in him his OWN shame for his many years of silence as a Christian, that by doing nothing, he was actually PROMOTING racism and discrimination. It also awakened him to the great responsibility before the church- that it was up to the CHURCH to reach out to those in need because through such service, we proved to the world that we were indeed the People of God. He said we can't authenticate ourselves by simply showing big smiles on Sunday mornings, by professing one thing but doing nothing. Constructive change can ONLY come about if persons are willing to stand with and assume the same risks as Amos and Micah and Isaiah and Jesus and Dr. King- regardless of the risks it might pose to one's reputation or possibly even THE DANGER it might bring to one's LIFE.

All this is to say that King's dream was NEVER his own but rather it belonged to an even GREATER King- to JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF. Through a long line of prophets and apostles, that SAME dream--like a mantle--was passed from our LORD'S shoulders onto those of Dr. King, and from HIS shoulders, it's now been passed onto our OWN as the dream of God has now become the dream of his CHURCH in 2023. This means that as Christians, regardless of where we live--whether in the crowded centers of America's great inner cities or the backwaters of her small towns and rural villages--we can never just close our eyes or stop our ears to those inequalities and injustices that go on all around us; we must never allow the bowels of our compassion to dry up or stop fighting for those who may be different or much weaker than ourselves, especially at a time when the evils of racism and anti-semitism; anti-Islamism and anti-Asianism, anti-immigrationism and homophobia are currently on the rise all across our nation. As Jesus demonstrated through his life and teachings, one's sympathies and concerns must always be LARGE and EVER-EXPANDING, not SMALL and SHRINKING FURTHER. Thus, he invites us today to DREAM GOD'S dream- a dream rooted in the earliest pages of the Bible, a dream based upon love and mercy and peace and justice, and, if we remain faithful to it, a dream that we'll one day pass on to those who, in turn, will FOLLOW US. Let us pray...

Gracious God, you created us and love us and make us to live together in community. We thank you for the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr. and ALL your prophets whom you have sent both past and present who have been filled with your vision for our lives and who have worked so selflessly to turn your vision into a reality. At the risk of their lives, they were courageous in promoting your vision for ALL your people, inhabiting ALL your creation. Guide us to live by that SAME vision, working to build the beloved community where EVERYONE is welcome, ALL are valued, POWER is shared, PRIVILEGE is no more, and ALL YOUR CHILDREN shall know wholeness and well-being. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen and amen.