

January 17, 2021
Second Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20)
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

Today is the Second Sunday after the Epiphany. It's also the Sunday before Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Among my preaching friends, last week's Facebook chatter was filled with references to the need to recognize Dr. King today. The chatter seemed busier than in past years, and reflected events over the last couple of weeks and the last several months. Because many of my preaching friends are white mainline Protestants, there were a lot of references King's Letter from Birmingham Jail. Its implications resonate especially deeply this year.

The Letter from Birmingham Jail turned up in my sermon last year at this time. In light of the national news, it's worth revisiting. I should remind you that King wrote it in 1963, about four months before the March on Washington. He addressed it to eight white Alabama clergymen, two of whom were Episcopal bishops. Those eight were actually generally progressive on integration, but they objected to the movement's tactics. Together they had written an open letter to the press in which they disagreed with the demonstrations going on in Birmingham, advocated for more gradual change, and criticized King as an outside agitator.

On Facebook, one of my former seminary colleagues referenced a particular part of the Letter from Birmingham Jail. I went back to the original, and want to read both what he posted and the part leading up to that. It goes like this:

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven,” called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.¹

Dr. King was trying to motivate white Christians, and his words remain for Christians like us a call to action by Christians. But this year, I can't help but read them in the shadow of the Capitol Building. Imagine the Christians insurrectionists of January 6. They certainly are motivated, but not in the way King imagined. White fundamentalist Christianity has power like never before thanks to the mutually beneficial relationship it negotiated with the White House. White nationalist Christianity is willing to suffer and to disturb the peace. As various news outlets have reported, they see the current moment as a "holy war."²

The seminary colleague who posted that quote from Dr. King on Facebook, Peter Jarrett Schell, is a white male Episcopal priest who is married to a black female Episcopal priest. They have a biracial son. In 2019, Peter published a book called *Seeing My Skin: A Story of Wrestling With Whiteness*. I read it when it first came out, and I highly recommend it. Last week I looked it up on Amazon and noticed the reviews, which were overall quite positive. But there was a single one-star reviewer, who probably hadn't read the book. Here's the first part of what he said:

Color isn't the problem, Racism in any direction is the problem. It's 100% ok to be any Color, Creed or Culture, but don't tell others their [sic] Racist if they happen to be White, Christian, and a Patriot! I don't feel bad or guilty for being White, but I do feel deeply offended when others try to tell me I shouldn't recognize myself. I REFUSE to self denigrate for others [sic] insecurity or feelings of oppression, because modern Day oppression or White Privilege is a MYTH.³

It goes on, but I'll stop there. You get the drift.

All that might seem far away from us. But you might be surprised. Preachers aren't supposed to talk about the process or experience of preaching, but I will for just a moment, to say this: for many mainline pastors, preaching the last four years has been a challenge. I'm relatively fortunate, in that I can quote Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, and no one complains. That's not true for many of my colleagues, even here in Connecticut. The Connecticut Episcopal clergy seem to agree about what we understand as the gospel imperative to justice, but our congregations do not. For example, one of my close colleagues reported last week that two of her parishioners were at the Capitol on January 6. Another reported conflict about the anti-racism training the Diocese is now requiring of lay leaders. I don't know what I would say if I was preaching in their churches.

This week, at least until Wednesday, it's going to be an effort just to keep breathing. I want the inauguration to be over. If you're Facebook friends with our friend Gabe Simerson, you've seen his posts from Washington, DC. He lives near the Capitol and has posted photos of and stories about the security measures he's seen increasing since last week. It's been sobering. With his permission, I want to share a few of his photos. This first one was taken just outside his front door:



This one was taken near the Capitol:



This last one is a photo of St. John's, Lafayette Square, with Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ flags nearby:



Even after the inauguration, it won't be over. And, really, the election turmoil has been a distraction from more important matters. In tomorrow's report, the number of people in the United States officially confirmed dead from COVID-19 will exceed 400,000. That's just the confirmed number, and the real total is undoubtedly much higher. As we noted early on, the disparate impact of the pandemic is one symptom of continuing racial inequities that are lodged throughout our social structures.

Today's Hebrew Scripture and Gospel readings are stories about call. From my first reading of them on Monday, that's what I planned to talk about today. It seemed a logical extension of a brief comment I made last week, when I said that God called me to the church, and God called you, too. But all I could think about all week was those other Christians. I expect they would also say that God called them. Who's right? Them? Us? Everyone? No one?

I puzzled over this all week. I don't know that I yet have anything profound to say about it. All I can say is that the test of our behavior as Christians must be the life of Jesus. Sometimes it really does come down to asking this question: What would Jesus do? And if you want to know what Jesus would do, all you have to do is to read the gospels. Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry and socialized with the marginalized. Sometimes he talked trash to the folks in charge, but always in defense of his habits of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and socializing with the marginalized. What would Jesus do today? He would keep doing what he did back then. In his humble kindness was great power.

We can't forget that. In his humble kindness was great power. That was the power of the early church. I expect that is our power, too. We just have to keep doing it. I'm not sure we mainliners have fully grasped that. But I think we're closer now than we have ever been, in part because of the events of the past year.

God is calling, and we have something particular to lend right now. God has been calling. Just like in those gospels, God keeps calling until we hear. I hope we've heard. I think our time is here. I think our time is now.

Notes

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963. The text is widely available online, including a transcribed at https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html (accessed January 17, 2021). A scanned image of the original letter is available on the website of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Education Institute at Stanford University,

http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf (accessed January 17, 2021).

² See, for example, Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham, "How White Evangelical Christians Fused with Trump Extremism," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2021, available online at

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/how-white-evangelical-christians-fused-with-trump-extremism.html> (accessed January 17, 2021).

³ The book is Peter Jarrett-Schell, *Seeing My Skin: A Story of Wrestling with Whiteness* (New York: Church Publishing, 2019). The comment on Amazon.com was made by someone identifying himself as

BMXReDliNeR1D3rX and is available at https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R1EC0PW5N99DXQ/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_viewpnt?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1640651926#R1EC0PW5N99DXQ (accessed January 17, 2021).