

January 19, 2020
Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-12
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield,
down by the riverside,
down by the riverside,
down by the riverside.
I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield,
down by the riverside,
and study war no more.

I ain't gonna study war no more,
I ain't gonna study war no more.

That's how the annual Day School Martin Luther King chapel celebration began on Thursday. Our singing was accompanied by sixth-graders playing ukuleles and shakers. The Day School students are too young to fully appreciate the history and significance of those words. But that fact makes their singing of them no less powerful and perhaps even more poignant. Remember, "Down by the Riverside" is a very old African American spiritual that was adopted by the anti-Vietnam War movement. The lyrics suggest Christian baptism; they allude to the crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land, and to the beating of swords into plowshares promised by the prophet Isaiah.¹ It's an excellent selection for an MLK celebration.

This year, as every year, the highlight of the Day School event was the fifth-graders' recitation of King's "I Have a Dream ..." speech in its entirety. This year, as every year, I am stirred anew. King delivered that speech at the 1963 March on Washington, and it still rings with power and truth. If you haven't read or listened to it recently, I suggest you do. I was tempted to spend this time reading the whole thing to you, but instead I'll offer this part:

In a sense we've come to our nation's Capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.²

For most of the recitation, the Day School fifth-graders took turns reading from various locations including the lectern and pulpit. But the last part they recited in unison, lined up in front of the altar and holding hands, and even singing the last part. I should mention that the fifth-grade class is wonderfully diverse. You might imagine that as I read it. Here's how it goes:

... when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"³

It was lovely to witness those children, who embodied a vision of what it might look to attain Martin's dream. It felt like an epiphany. This is the season of the church year in which we celebrate epiphanies. Most narrowly, it is about manifestations of the divinity of Jesus. More broadly, I think it's about manifestations of the holiness that infuses all creation. These manifestations give us hope, and hope allows us to live with joy.

Children often give us hope. We see them being so much better than we were. We imagine them doing so much better than we did. But I worry sometimes that we use that to let ourselves off the hook, to leave for them too much of the work it will take to truly make things right. The hope we find in them should nudge us not to *complacency* but to *action*.

That's what epiphanies do in the gospels. Today's reading from John includes the baptism of Jesus and the call of the first disciples. It's a reminder that our role is not just to *see*; our role is also to *follow*. We witness the manifestation of the divine, and we go where God calls us. If Jesus is our example, God invariably calls us into lives of service and justice. Our actions honor the holiness that surrounds us.

With all this in mind, it occurred to me to also reread King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail."⁴ That letter is the source of King's famous line, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." It was also written in 1963, about four months before the March on Washington. I'll remind you that it was addressed to eight Alabama clergymen, two of whom were Episcopal bishops. Together they had written an open letter to the press in which they disagreed with the demonstrations going on in Birmingham and criticized King as an outside agitator. Those eight were actually generally progressive on integration, but they disagreed with the movement's tactics.

In his letter, King offered a lengthy and damning reply, one that also still rings with power and truth. His words remain especially pertinent for white Christians today. As a white preacher in a predominantly white congregation, I needed to hear them again. I'll offer for you just a few choice parts. Calling out those "white moderates," King offers this: "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection." In response to being labeled an "extremist," King counters, "Was not Jesus an extremist for love"? He continues, "Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in need of creative extremists." And then there's this:

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

I'm going to repeat that part: they "have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows." Even today that line convicts and resonates. And so it occurs to me that Dr. King offered and continues to offer white Christians epiphanies of another sort. And, well, that's the thing: epiphanies aren't always easy. Sometimes epiphanies are painful or disturbing or hard. Even when they are, we aren't to turn away; especially when they are, God still calls us to follow.

On Friday night, I was one of many clergy who participated in the annual MLK Day interfaith worship service at Congregation Mishkan Israel. Congregation Mishkan Israel has hosted an MLK service every year since the year after King died. That congregation feels a strong connection with Dr. King, who in 1961 preached from their pulpit. He was supposed to have preached there a year earlier for the dedication of the sanctuary, but he got arrested shortly before the dedication date and had to telegram his regrets from jail.

Friday's service was as always a wonderful occasion, with representatives from local Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist, and Baha'i communities. There is a lot I could say about it, but I will highlight just one thing. The interfaith portions of worship were woven through a regular Shabbat service, which included the usual Shabbat prayers for the dead. The prayers for the dead closed with this: "May the Source of strength who blessed the ones before us help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing."

As we remember the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., let that be our prayer: “May the Source of strength who blessed the ones before us help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing.”

Notes

¹ Isaiah 2:2-4.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream . . .,” August 28, 1963. The text is widely available online, including on the website of the National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf> (accessed January 19, 2020).

³ Ibid.

⁴ All quotes following are from Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963. The text is widely available online, including 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 19, 2020).