

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
605 Madison St. Marshall, WI
January 19, 2020 + Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

An excerpt from Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963 (2nd reading)

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King arrived in Memphis and checked into the Lorraine Motel. He was in town to support a strike by the city's black sanitation workers, who the poorest and most abused city employees in the country. King was to address them that evening at the cavernous Mason Temple and participate in a march a few days later. His plane had been delayed that morning from Atlanta by a bomb scare, and tensions in Memphis ran high. He'd been told that death threats were so loud that something might actually happen.

By the time he left that night for the temple, strong storms had rolled in and tornado warnings had gone out. The din in the hall was tremendous. Later, a friend seated

on the stage later recounted that, before King went on, "The shutters kept banging – bam! bam! Every time they would bang, Martin would flinch He thought it was a shot."

King's speech was unremarkable until near the end, just as the storm was cresting and a tornado destroyed 40 trailer homes north of Memphis. "I don't know what will happen," King said. "We've got some difficult days ahead."

Then his voice grew in intensity. "But it really doesn't matter with me now...because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I have seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we as a people, will get to the Promised Land.

"So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!" The crowd was clapping, cheering, crying. King stumbled off the podium into the arms of his friend Ralph Abernathy and other preachers who were also crying.

The next day, King was assassinated on the balcony of his motel.

I contend that Martin Luther King, Jr., is the prophet of our age. His vision of equality and racial justice is straight out of the Bible. He often said that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount had inspired the character and dignity of the Civil Rights Movement, and in his speeches King drew frequently on the Old Testament prophets. "I Have a Dream" reaches its highest point with these soaring words from the prophet Isaiah: "I have a dream that

one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low ... and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

In our first reading we heard Isaiah speak as he whom God has called to be a light to the nations. It was certainly this 8th century prophet to whom King was referring in the excerpt we heard from his Letter from Birmingham Jail, as one who is compelled to bring God's word of justice far beyond the boundaries of his own hometown.

Biblical prophets were not saints but ordinary people who God called, often against their own will, to speak out against injustice using language that God inspired in them. Their vocation was not fortune-telling, but truth-telling. They tirelessly urged people to recognize how they had abandoned God and were now living in ways that were contrary to God's nature. At the same time, the prophets conveyed magnificent visions of the reconciliation of all creation in God's love--when the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the desert shall rejoice and bloom, and all people shall see the glory of the Lord.

King not only quoted the Hebrew prophets, he spoke powerfully of how much he admired them. "They did not believe that conscience is a still, small voice," he once said. "They believed that conscience thunders or it does not speak at all. They were articulate, passionate, and fearless, attacking injustice and corruption whether the guilty be kings or their own unrepentant people. Without physical protection, scornful of risks evoked by their unpopular messages, they went among the people with no shield other than truth."

Those prophets are needed today "because they taught that to love God was to love justice; that each human being has an inescapable obligation to denounce evil where

he sees it...[They are needed] because decent people must be imbued with the courage to speak the truth, to realize that silence may temporarily preserve status or security, but to live with a lie is a gross affront to God. The Hebrew prophets are needed today because we need their burning courage."

Martin Luther King, Jr. is needed today. We cannot afford to remember him only once a year. Like the ancient prophets, King was a truth-teller. Like them, his main concern was injustice, but with a modern American twist: If we are all children created by the same loving God, how is it that some are treated differently simply because of the color of their skin?

The injustice that the Civil Rights Movement peacefully protested was not just a matter of whites and blacks at different lunch counters. Segregation has been well described as an entrenched social, political, and economic system that placed blacks in an inferior position, disfranchised them, and was enforced by custom, law, and official and vigilante violence. It involved brutal, dehumanizing forms of oppression that tore even into the souls of young children. What is one to do, as King writes in his Birmingham Jail letter, "when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and [you] see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and [you] see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky....?"

Laws have changed in the half-century since then, but the fact is that racism lives on; in many ways it has just gone under cover. The truth King articulates with prophetic vision in his Letter from Birmingham Jail is that we are all in it together. Acts of injustice carried out by one person against another hurt one hurt us all. Remember these words: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

The image of a garment helps us visualize the implications of injustice committed by God’s people against each other. Imagine a finely knit shawl that, under stress, begins to come apart. Here a tear, then there, then several places, then all across its width. The shawl begins to lose its shape. The design becomes distorted. Finally, in tatters, it can no longer serve the purpose for which it was created.

Our garment of destiny is Jesus Christ. In him we are freed from the demons that tempt us to judge, to lord it over others, to dehumanize those who are different from us not—as King said so memorably--because of the content of their character, but because of the color of their skin. In Christ we are freed to live as God desires for us. In Christ we claim our identity as beloved children of God who are fully loved, fully known, and fully forgiven. In Christ we claim our destiny of love.

And in Jesus Christ, God’s living Word, we hear the call to proclaim that love to the coastlands, to the farthest ends of the earth. Let us now sing that call back to God: “Here I am, Lord. Send me!” Amen.