

Sermon

Feast of MLK, Jr. | Matthew 2:13-23 | Peter Lane

In 1964, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was named Time Magazine's "Man of the Year." It was shortly after the March on Washington and King's leadership against legal segregation in the South made him a commanding figure, the fourth most admired American according to the Gallup poll. Only 37% of respondents viewed him negatively. But by 1967, King's popularity had significantly declined—63% viewed him negatively. You see it was during those critical years, when King articulated how the legal segregation he had dramatized in the South was woven into a much bigger cloak of injustice which included threads of militarism, materialism, and structural racism. Some who appreciated King standing up against the vicious racists like Bull Connor did not appreciate him standing up against the structural racism of Chicago's City Hall where Mayor Daley formed his alliance with those six African-American Aldermen. Also, when King spoke out against the Vietnam war, Lyndon Johnson dis-invited him from the White House and 167 newspapers immediately condemned King. And many of those who thought of racism as merely an individual disposition did not appreciate King tying it to the materialism of this country and organizing a Poor People's Campaign. King had changed. As esteemed theologian James Cone puts it, "Instead of trusting human allies to produce a victory over the forces of organized evil, Martin's hope was now a transcendent one, focusing on the biblical God of the oppressed whom he called 'a great benign power in the universe...who is able to make a way out of no way'" (Cone, 236).

Tomorrow, many of us are off from school and work to observe MLK day. Can I share a pet peeve? A recent invite from the Art Institute spoke of Dr. Martin Luther King, not the Rev. Dr. So many of our institutions think they can take away offense by removing King from his religious context. I'm not trying to take away his Doctorate—oh no—but let's not pretend he studied political theory at Boston University. (He got his Ph.D. in systematic theology.) His faith was a central driver of his convictions. King is as deserving of a civic holiday as anybody. But today, we don't celebrate the civic holiday. We celebrate the feast of Blessed Martin, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On

any feast day for a saint, we remember the christian virtues they embodied, giving thanks for the good work they did but also trying to tune our lives to be in harmony with theirs and thus in harmony with God's.

One particular saintly quality of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was that, in the midst of storms he had hope. He knew what it was to have life ask more from him than he thought he had. But he was not undone. He developed courage and moral fortitude and virtue. One of the peculiar concepts of Christianity is that as we lose our lives we gain them. King exemplified this. Let's look at his very last speech, given in Memphis on April 3, 1968. He begins with what seems an offhand comment about the weather, but I think it is a comment exemplifying his virtue. He writes, "I'm delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow." In the midst of storms, he had hope. In the face of a storm warning, he gave others hope. King had been bombed and stabbed and hit in the head with a brick and yet, he had hope. He well understand the metaphorical storms that crisscrossed America and yet he says if God allowed him to live in any time in all of history he would pick America in the second half of the 20th century. King goes on to say, "Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding." King sought to overcome what was in front of him. He developed courage and moral fortitude and virtue. By that night in Memphis, he knew he had what it took, he knew God has what it takes. King did not deny the storms, but his faith gave him hope. He walked tall even when the big drops were falling.

Let me switch gears and talk about our Gospel for today, a passage that exemplifies having hope amidst the storm. Matthew's Christmas story is quite short. You could miss the actual birth of Jesus, which is snuck in with the words, "she (Mary) had born a son." The famous part of Mathew's infancy

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narrative is the visit of those Kings, an auspicious, royal start although one in which Joseph is invisible and Mary & Jesus are silent. Their action starts once the Kings leave. Jesus' story begins with a storm warning. Herod wants to kill him and so the family goes as refugees to Egypt. The home they finally come back to is not the home they left, because Herod's son was just as much a tyrant and they needed to avoid his area of control. Jesus' life was marked by storms.

But look at what Matthew is doing, using echoes from the Old Testament to show that Jesus' refugee experience is actually a journey to promise. Matthew was finding meaning in the tradition. In the first part Matthew borrows from Hosea to show that when Jesus is asked to do more than he thinks possible, he'll have enough. After all, Matthew puts Hosea's words back in God's mouth now referring to Jesus, "Out of Egypt I call my son." In the second part we see the deep sadness of Rachel weeping after the slaughter of the innocent children. But a bit of investigation shows that the 31st chapter of Jeremiah, where that quote comes from, is one of great hope—it is where the new covenant is promised to the captives in Babylon. Hope amidst the storm. And finally, when Joseph is told to go back to Israel, we can all have the triumphant Exodus in our hearts. The Scriptures are not so much an instruction book as a script. Jesus acted it beautifully. Martin Luther King acted it beautifully. No, we must act.

How can we tune our lives to King's life? How can we tune our lives to Jesus' life? Be in harmony with the saints and in deep resonance with the justice of the universe? We know storms too? Don't we. The ones of our personal lives—cancer, pain, etc. And we know the ones of our national life. First of all, stand up in the midst of the rain. You might not feel you have enough. You do. Give thanks that God let you live in the 1st quarter of the 21st Century. Then consider taking an action. I offer two that you can do with SPR, but I bet you also know what action has been waiting for you for a while.

I hope you will consider reading Drew Hart's book, "Trouble I've Seen." We will discuss it on three straight Sundays during

February. We can't fully resonate with God when our society is out of tune, when our own parish has grown used to the disharmony of racism.

I also hope you will consider volunteering to help welcome the 2nd refugee family that SPR has supported. Learn more in the St. Cecilia room today at 10:20. I think King would be for our efforts. In 1966, King sent a telegram to Cesar Chavez, head of the United Farm Workers, a union largely comprised of undocumented immigrant workers. King wrote, "As brothers in the fight for equality.... Our struggles are really one: a struggle for freedom, for dignity and for humanity."

We will never know the identity of the Egyptians who helped Jesus and Mary and Joseph during their time as refugees. Whoever they were, in helping, they resonated with the deep justice of the universe. We must do the same. Or as King said at the end of his letter from Birmingham Jail, "Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty." That is resonating with God. That is hope in the face of a storm warning. AMEN.

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