**Dr. King, Prophet and Priest**

**Jeremiah 1:4-10, 19**

**January 15, 2023**

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. He followed in his father’s footsteps, becoming a Baptist minister and a civil rights activist. All of his activism was grounded in his ministry, it came out of that context, which is why his speeches sound a lot like sermons. They were! He saw himself in the same role as the Old Testament prophets that he was fond of quoting – Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah.

Those Old Testament prophets were the individuals who spoke God’s word to the Israelites when they wandered off the path, when they worshipped other gods, when they forgot Yahweh’s saving actions of the past. Those prophets spoke truth to power and just like today, people had a hard time hearing them.

We’re having Zoom-church today so you can hear King’s words for yourself and be reminded of the power of his preaching. All of his great speeches come from the 1960’s – fifty-some years ago – and they are all applicable today. When you speak the truth clearly, the words hold up. We’ve made progress, and we have work still to do.

Dr. King’s civil rights activism was inspired by the life of Mahatma Gandhi, and he believed firmly in the methods of nonviolence and civil disobedience. As he said in an interview with Sander Vanocur, the methods of nonviolence were both morally the right way and also the only really practical way for Black people to protest. Violence would have been met with violence, as it always is, and poor people are hopelessly outmatched in firepower.

His leadership of protests in the South led to the 1963 March on Washington and his famous “I have a dream” speech to 250,000 marchers at the Lincoln Memorial. Here is that speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP4iY1TtS3s>

The Civil Rights Movement led to important legislative gains in 1964, when Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. The Voting Rights Act followed in 1965 and the Fair Housing Act in 1968. In October of 1964 Dr. King received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work combatting racial inequality through nonviolent resistance.

But racial inequality doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It’s intertwined with all the aspects of American life, from the economy to the military. When the war in Vietnam started, Dr. King was a vocal opponent. On April 4, 1967, exactly a year before his death, he gave an important speech at Riverside Church in New Year called “Beyond Vietnam.” The whole speech is almost an hour, but here is a short excerpt to give you a sense of his implacable logic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqM9FQmRW1w>

Prophets tell the truth. They hold up a mirror and say, “Look at yourselves. Look at what you are doing.” It’s a dangerous occupation, being a prophet.

A year later he was in Memphis, and the night before he died he gave a speech that turned out to be his last. His choice of imagery, invoking Moses who didn’t make it to the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the desert, turned out to be prophetic in the foretelling-the-future sense. Here are the last few minutes of that “I’ve been to the mountaintop” speech:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xsbt3a7K-8>

I’ll just close with a short poem by American poet Gwendolyn Brooks:

A man went forth with gifts.

He was a prose poem.  
He was a tragic grace.  
He was a warm music.

He tried to heal the vivid volcanoes.  
His ashes are  
reading the world.

His Dream still wishes to anoint  
the barricades of faith and of control.

His word still burns the center of the sun  
above the thousands and the  
hundred thousands.

The word was Justice. It was spoken.

So it shall be spoken.  
So it shall be done.