

Epiphany 2A-26 (MLK) Sermon

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Trinity Episcopal Church

The Rev. Sarah D. Thomas

“Where are you staying, Jesus? We want to know.” “Come and see,” he says.

61 years ago, more than 8000 people marched from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in a series of nonviolent civil rights demonstrations demanding voting rights for African Americans. They were nonviolent, in that the marchers were peaceful and non-retaliatory, following the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This did not mean, however, that there wasn’t violence. The marches began with what is known as “Bloody Sunday,” when 600 peaceful marchers were violently attacked by state police on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. As some of you may remember, this brutal violence was televised and it shocked the country. These marches helped expose racism and violence in a way that could not be denied, and they played a key role in the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Two years later, in a lecture, Dr. King said, “We do not have much time … If the anger of the peoples of the world at the injustice of things is to be channeled into a revolution of love and creativity, we must begin now to work, urgently, with all the peoples, to shape a new world.”

The peoples of today’s world are angry right now, and justifiably so. There is much to be angry about. How timely to have Dr. Martin Luther King speaking to us today as we honor his legacy

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Eleven days ago, Renee Good, a 47 year-old white mother, was killed by a federal ICE agent, shot three or four times at close range while attempting to drive away. She was called “disorderly, obstructing and resisting, willful and vicious” by some of our elected leaders. Some blamed for her own death. In Dr. King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he had some critique against what he called “the white moderate,” who he said prioritized keeping the peace over creating the necessary tension that strives for justice. I think it’s safe to say Renee Good and her wife Becca were not falling into the trap of the white moderate. They were agitating. They were bearing witness. And they were making a little trouble, standing up for their immigrant neighbors. It cost Renee her life.

Renee Good’s death took place about one mile from where George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020. It is worth noting that Renee Good’s privilege as a white woman did not protect her. But it certainly is getting her death a lot of attention. It is also worth noting that on New Year’s Eve, just a few weeks ago, a 43-year-old Black father of two was shot and killed by an off-duty ICE agent. His name was Keith Porter. This story got significantly less press coverage and less outrage. The narrative of his killing reeks of racist assumptions. Perhaps an arrest was warranted, but not a killing. We have a long way to go in the fight for racial justice.

Violence against people of color is still ignored, diminished, erased.

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Last week, I attended a volunteer rapid response training put on by the 805 Undocufund. Hundreds of people packed the room at UCSB, motivated by the killing of Renee Good, as well as the escalation of aggressive immigration abductions. The evening began with a young community organizer reading a litany of names of people along the central coast who were taken by ICE over a four day period a few weeks ago, in often aggressive and traumatic ways. 144 people were taken across four days, many in Santa Maria, and some in Santa Barbara and Montecito. After reading the names and the intersections and streets where they were taken, the reader ended with “The first day.” Then more names and intersections and streets: “The second day.” And so on. It was like an anti-creation story and the room was very silent during this litany of loss.

More people are seeking out ways to help. But anger is growing. As is the violence, which has come to a tipping point in Minneapolis where over 2000 armed federal agents are militarizing the streets and meeting protesters with unimaginable brutality. When I take in the news and the videos, the stories from friends who tell me the situation in Minneapolis is worse than the media is portraying, when I hear the stories of our local neighbors being terrorized, I see in front of my eyes what Dr. King called the “triple evils of poverty, racism, and militarism.” Lord have mercy. To counteract these evils, Dr. King created what he called the six principles of nonviolence, which he calls a way of life, a spirituality, not tactics.

One of the principles states that “Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, or evil, not people. It recognizes that evildoers are also victims” of corrupt systems. Another one states that “unearned suffering for a cause is redemptive and has tremendous educational and transforming possibilities.” As Richard Rohr puts it, this means “a willingness to bear the pain has the power to transform and absorb the evil in the opponent, the nonviolent resister, and even the spectator,”

which is what took place on the bridge in Selma when peaceful protesters did not retaliate against the violence unleashed upon them, but remained grounded in the steady march of fearless love. Another principle, which is easier said than done, especially in times of turmoil, says “the nonviolent resister has deep faith that justice will eventually win.”

If I’m honest, while I’m inspired by these principles, they can seem a bit unattainable – like a set of lofty ideals that only set us up to fail. How does one actually live this way? Dr. King took these from Jesus, whose teachings can sometimes leave us feeling like we can never be good enough or brave enough.

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When I follow him to where he’s going, I realize he isn’t asking me to figure this out on my own.

Only in community can we find our way. Only in the body of Christ, where he is animating us and breathing in us and calling us. It’s not about achieving or perfection or not being afraid. It’s about caring. And bearing witness. And believing despite the evidence that progress is still being

made and that justice will come. And studying the past when people did, when they came together, accomplish more than they would have thought possible.

A group of 18 Buddhist monks are currently walking 2,300 miles from Fort Worth, Texas to Washington DC to promote peace and compassion. So far, they have made it to North Carolina. Some of them are walking barefoot. They have a beloved dog walking with them. Their social media account has reached over a million followers.

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In Minneapolis, people of faith are organizing and singing and not backing down. A group called “singing resistance” has popped up in which hundreds of people are serenading neighborhoods that have been affected by ICE. Community organizers teach that one of the most powerful tools to de-escalate violence in a crowd is to get a group of people singing. Song grounds us in our faith, connects us to our breath, calms our nervous systems, and reminds us of our collective humanity. And it feels good to do.

Yesterday, a group called Ringshout offered an interactive performance in our parish hall in honor of MLK weekend. They are a local group who engage in the African American tradition of the ring shout: call and response singing and stomping and clapping and creating rhythms with a stick. It is loud and it is stirring. I wasn’t able to attend, but a friend sent me a video. It was a diverse crowd, and it ended with the whole room dancing.

When our faith falters, we need others to remind us of the hope that our faith calls us to. Fr. John Dear, a Catholic priest and peace activist who has spent his life studying Dr. King, is one of those people. He writes, “Like the early [Christian] community, we rejoice knowing that death does not get the last word; that the culture of violence, war, empire, and death itself is falling away; that God’s reign is coming through the steadfast grassroots movements of peace and nonviolence; that Jesus lives among us.”

“Where are you staying, Jesus? We want to know.” “Come and see,” he says as we follow him to where he is staying, where he is abiding, among the grieving and fearful, as well as among those who are trying to go forth in indomitable joy and electrifying love.

Not all of us are able to hit the streets and protest. Not all of us have the capacity to join the rapid response network. We all are at different stages in life with unique circumstances. But each of us can grow in nonviolence – toward ourselves, toward our family members, toward our neighbors, toward those different from us, and toward our opponents.

“Where are you staying, Jesus? We want to know.” “Come and see,” he says as he makes his way to our center where our hearts beat. I am here, too.