Epiphany 2-A: Celebration of Martin Luther King Day

Amos 4; Psalm 40; I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1: 29-42

Today, the Second Sunday after Epiphany, we have the lesson from John's gospel in which John the Baptist speaks most clearly about who Jesus really is. And due to this, two disciples of John follow Jesus to try and discover more about him. Jesus' simple direction to them is a succinct lesson for us, and also speaks to our particular remembrance this day: "Come and see," he says in response to their query. "Come and see."
If anyone ever lived a life exemplifying Jesus' words, it is the man who we honor today, and tomorrow in our National Holiday: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his whole ministry and the guidance we can take from his life, Dr. King lived out his beliefs consistently and completely. And we might well hear him say of how to remember his life: "Come and see."

And so I begin this morning, to invite us to "see" more of the message of his life; these are words which are well known to most of us, standing out among his most famous sermons and speeches. These words were spoken in a church the night before he was assassinated in Memphis, TN (April 4, 1968).

> "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. 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 up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. 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. And 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."[1]

The words still haunt us, even now. They generate speculation and debate. Some are convinced that King knew he would be killed. With the kind of turmoil King was creating and the general upheaval that was being witnessed from courthouse squares to college campuses, it doesn't require much imagination to envision a scenario wherein King would be gunned down. King noted on that very night that the "... nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around."[2] Others are equally certain that King did **not** have a premonition about his own death. John Cartwright, who holds

the professorship at Boston University which bears King's name, believes that King was not predicting his own death. Rather, according to Cartwright, **Dr. King was only aware that the arc of justice is long and that significant changes only happen over an extended period of time**. In other words, King knew that his words might articulate the dream, but the reality of the dream might not be experienced until generations later.[3]

II > We have debated the same issue with Jesus. Did Jesus know he was going to die? Did God send Jesus to earth to die? Or, as events evolved and pressure mounted, did it then become evident to Jesus that his faithfulness to God may bring about his own death? There are those who believe that Bethlehem and Calvary were interwoven into Jesus' life from the beginning. When John the Baptist declared that Jesus was the Lamb of God, it sounded like Jesus' crucifixion was certain from the outset. In a culture that sacrificed lambs twice a day in the temple, those words are a kiss of death. "Here is the Lamb of God" can be loosely understood to mean, "Hey, look here, everyone, here's the one that is going to be sacrificed." This Lamb of God imagery says something very different from "light of the world" or "bread of life" imagery. Jesus as the light of the world illumines and brings warmth. Jesus as the bread of life satisfies our deepest spiritual and physical hunger. Jesus as the Lamb of God speaks of one who was on his way to the cross.

Leslie Weatherhead disagreed with those who believe Jesus was destined to die on the cross from the beginning, saying that **God's plan was for people to follow Jesus, not kill him**.[4] The purpose of Jesus, from this point of view, was for Jesus to reveal the love of God, teach about God's ways, and proclaim God's rule in the world. The problem with assuming that Jesus was sent to die is that we don't take seriously the subversive nature of Jesus' ministry. Jesus railed against established practices and comfortable people. In the end, Jesus was killed by religious and political leaders who were threatened by his presence. We tend to forget or ignore those parts of the story which show Jesus in trouble. We are more attracted to the feeding of the five thousand than we are to the hometown folks who tried to stone Jesus after he preached a sermon. We are more fond of the woman who

pressed through the crowd to touch the hem of Jesus' garment than we are of those who told Jesus to go away.

The arc of justice is long, indeed. Some problems don't seem any closer to being solved now than they ever were. Even when the changes are for the good, there is resistance and opposition from those who are making a huge profit from things being the way they are now. Do you remember that story Luke tells of Jesus healing a demon-possessed man (Luke 8:26-39)? The demons left the man and went into a herd of pigs who proceeded to run over a cliff. Apparently the townspeople were more concerned about who was going to pay for the pigs than they were about the man who had been delivered from his illness. After all, they didn't thank Jesus or have a parade for him. They ran him out of town! Things were changing and people were becoming very frightened. **The solution was to get rid of the person behind the changes**. [5]

III > We have to realize that sometimes in the course of this long arc of justice there is death. Some black preacher from the South, equipped with an advanced degree from one of the North's premier schools (Boston University), begins preaching and everybody is okay with that. Then the preacher's words lead to bold actions on the part of the people. Established boundaries are challenged. Traditional ways of doing things are questioned. Demands are made. Changes are planned. People don't like what's happening. Maybe they all didn't want Dr. King dead, but those who didn't still wanted to construct obstacles enough to suppress the dream and silence the dreamer. Dr. King kept expanding his vision and callings; not long before his death, he stepped up this efforts to bring his organization and resources to economic empowerment of the poor (he was in Memphis to support the strike of sanitation workers there); and also to opposition of the war in Vietnam. He had concluded that racism, poverty, and military oppression are inextricably interrelated. The day after he preached the words we heard again today, he was assassinated by a sniper in Memphis.

Martin and the Lamb of God have both shown us what selfless acts look like, and it is these examples that call us to lose sight of our own lives so

that we and all of God's children might know a greater life. We wouldn't expect the call from the Lamb of God to be about anything other than taking up crosses, even when we know that means the death of many things in our lives that we have learned to love. We wouldn't expect the call from the Lamb of God to be about anything other than a painstaking faithfulness that dismisses the popularity we have worked so hard to cultivate over the years. People concerned with remaining popular rarely find time to carry crosses. Dr. King reminded us that we are not fit to live until we have discovered something that we would die for.[5]

In the end, the extent to which love is known in the earth and peace reigns on the earth is directly related to the extent to which we open our lives to the possibility that we too have to die to certain things. **God works in the lives of all those who allow it**, but our hands and hearts are full of things which get in the way. Sometimes we are the ones who resist and oppose the good that God offers. We must die to those things which nurture a divided devotion. We must refuse to keep company with distracting options.

There is a promised land where people live in peace and fairness with one another. Yet, without a willingness to sacrifice, the best we will ever do is see it from a distance.

---

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., April 3, 1968 speech: *The Murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), pp. 116-117.
2. ibid, p. 114.
3. John Cartwright, Lecture at Lexington Theological Seminary, Lexington, Kentucky, January, 1996.
4. Leslie Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1944), p. 12.
5. This and other excerpts from: *MLK, Jesus, and Premonition* by William B. Kincaid, III from the book: *"And Then Came The Angel: Gospel Sermons For Advent/Christmas/Epiphany"*

(SEE FOLLOWING PAGE)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

I include a portion of a sermon I preached on Trinity Sunday. May 31, 2015 at St. Andrew's in Millinocket, ME. It is a section of a speech by Dr. King, at the courthouse in Montgomery AL at the conclusion of the march from Selma. It is one of the best and most devastating analyses of racism and slavery which I have ever read:

III > "Our whole campaign in Alabama has been centered around the right to vote. In focusing the attention of the nation and the world today on the flagrant denial of the right to vote, we are exposing the very origin, the root cause, of racial segregation in the Southland. Racial segregation as a way of life did not come about as a natural result of hatred between the races immediately after the Civil War. **There were no laws segregating the races then.** And as the noted historian, C. Vann Woodward, in his book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, clearly points out, the segregation of the races was really a **political strateg(y)** employed by the emerging [aristocrat-planter] interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land. You see, it was a simple thing to keep the poor white masses working for near-starvation wages in the years that followed the Civil War. Why, if the poor white plantation or mill worker became dissatisfied with his low wages, the owner would merely threaten to fire him and hire former Negro slaves and pay him even less. **Thus, the southern wage level was kept almost unbearably low**.

Toward the end of the Reconstruction era, when white workers began talking to blacks and voting with them, the southern aristocracy began immediately to engineer the development of a segregated society. I want you to follow me through here because this is very important to see the roots of racism and the denial of the right to vote. Through their control of mass media, they revised the doctrine of white supremacy. They saturated the thinking of the poor white masses with it, then directed the passage of laws that **made it a crime for Negroes and whites to come together as equals at any level**. And that did it. That crippled and eventually destroyed [any racial unity in the late] nineteenth century.

>> **<u>If</u>** it may be said of the slavery era that the **white man took the world and gave the Negro Jesus**, then it may be said of the Reconstruction era that the **southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow**. He gave him Jim Crow. And when his wrinkled stomach cried out for the food that his empty pockets could not provide, he ate Jim Crow, a psychological bird that told him that no matter how bad off he was, **at least he was a white man,** better than the black man. And he ate Jim Crow. And when his undernourished children cried out for the necessities that his low wages could not provide, his children, too, learned to feed upon Jim Crow, their last outpost of psychological oblivion.[1.] "

Dr. King went on to express gratitude for all the people, of many races and belief systems, who showed up to stand down the terror and injustice in Alabama. But most of all, he applied his Christian principles to countless instances which denied justice, human dignity, and the respect which his faith called upon him to live out in all levels of his life.

When we stand in faith for the hard issues of injustice, imposition of a malevolent will, or any form of mistreatment, are moving in glory, not of our own making but of God, freely given. And we FIND, not simply understand, what it means to be born from above. As Dr. King exhorted those who gathered in Selma: "We are not about to turn around. We are on the move now. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; O, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet!

Our God is marching on.[1,]"

1. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr: *Our God is Marching On!*
(Speech at Montgomery Alabama Capitol, March 25, 1965)

And finally, a lighter reflection on our gospel reading!

I like another story, of two robins sitting in a tree. "**I'm really hungry**," said the first one. "Me too," said the second one. "Let's fly down and find some lunch." They flew to the ground and found a nice plot of plowed ground full of worms. They ate and ate and ate and ate 'til they could eat no more.

"I'm so full I don't think I can fly back up to the tree," said the one. "Me either." said the second. "Let's just lay here and bask in the warm sun." "O.K.," said the first robin. They plopped down, basking in the sun. No sooner had they fallen asleep than a big fat cat snuck up and gobbled them up. As he sat washing his face after his meal, the cat thought, **"I love baskin' robins."**

Will we be people **who have eaten so much of God's good food** that we sit and bask? **Or, will we invite others**. Will we go out of our way to say to people, "Come and see?"