

Lift Every Voice

Saint Mark PC

January 17, 2021

When we approach the holiday remembering Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday here in the United States, as we will do tomorrow, for me it is a time to remember the impact he had not only on fairness and social justice, but also on the way people of faith think about fairness and social justice.

I was leafing through some of Dr. King's writings from his autobiography collection, and I am reminded of the crucial difference that people of faith made at that time, but even more so, the hope that is contained in powerful scriptures Dr. King referenced, like Isaiah 40.

Today in 2021, with utter chaos in our political life, it is good to remember that other generations have faced tough times - maybe tougher times than these.

I realize that some of us here, maybe many of us were actively involved during the time when Dr. King was an activist and leader. What I love to share with people, which I think is often forgotten, is that during the 1960's, so many of the civil rights leaders were theologians, and pastors and people of faith. This is something I believe people minimize about Dr. King in particular:

Here is one of his quotes from his writings:

"Of course I was religious," he says. "I grew up in the church. My father is a preacher. My grandfather was a preacher. My great grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy's brother is a preacher. So I didn't have much choice!"

I suppose you could say he was called into the ministry. So Dr. King was a highly educated, Seminary trained theologian before he ever began thinking about leading any civil rights marches, bus boycotts or anything of the sort.

When I was at the Capitol Hill church, I had a staff member who, as a young girl, attended the 1963 March for Jobs and Justice, right down in DC at the National Mall, when Dr. King gave his most famous speech. Those words, she said, are just as meaningful today as they were 50 plus years ago.

Listen again to what he said that day, and feel their relevance for today:

"Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today my friends; so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow I still have a dream - it is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream"

Dr. King went on to lay out his ideals of freedom and justice, which of course included a reference to that Isaiah 40 passage we read today. Dr. King said;

"I have a dream that every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be a plain and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together"

"This is our hope. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."

How much do we all need a stone of hope today.

I think Dr. King used this Isaiah 40 passage for a very good reason.

When we look closer at that Isaiah passage, we quickly see that Isaiah writes in a difficult time for Israel. The people were in exile, captured, scattered from their homes by a powerful conquering army. They lost their homes, their possessions, some lost family members. Imagine the despair which would accompany that.

But it was worse for the Israelites for one reason. They also lost their spiritual center. For them it was a physical location. Literally the place where God met them was in the temple in Jerusalem, and now they were exiled from that sacred ground. It was catastrophic for their faith. It shook them to their very core.

Psalm 137 famously says, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept as our tormentors demanded songs from us. How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" It was an unthinkable tragedy.

SO into that God calls Isaiah to speak not a harsh word, not a word of judgment, but a word of grace and hope. *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem* God told Isaiah. Tell them that the time of judgment is over and a new era of hope has begun. For through suffering they have finally turned back to God.

When we read between the lines of scripture, we often see that God is meeting us in uncomfortable places - described as desert, or wilderness. In spiritually barren places where our need for God is obvious. It is in that place where God instructs Isaiah to give this message to God people: "Build a highway back to God"

It must have seemed ludicrous to those weeping in Babylon. A highway? With what? Here? They were thinking, God you build a highway for us!

But this highway was really a spiritual one, a prayer highway, a relational highway back to God. To find their spiritual center once again. For scripture tells

us that first and foremost is our covenant relationship with God, our communion with God's Spirit. The sense of that presence is the thing maybe the only thing that gives us peace and the ability to cope with the chaos that is around us.

So Isaiah says the result of that spiritual highway is going to be a way through the wilderness, the chaos.

The news for the exiles was,

get ready for a new day! This is surprising good news to the people who had been worn down by suffering and despair. It is the sense that we briefly referenced last week when John the Baptist is described as *a voice crying out in the wilderness - make straight the paths for God*. The Roman occupation in his time was another kind of wilderness. And, of course, Jesus in early days was called the way or the road to God.

So in 2021, we are called to continually clear that which blocks our spiritual highway. DO not lose sight of our spiritual center. Put 2020 in the rear-view mirror. Level the hills, raise up the low spots. It is that same strategy that railroads used when laying track through the western frontier - it is much easier to go through level ground, than up and down and around.

How can we take advantage of that spiritual wisdom of Isaiah? We have just finished a year of unthinkable chaos and disaster. The deaths of unarmed black men. Street violence. The out of control pandemic. Our beautiful capital city an armed camp. Several of my friends and maybe you too have said they hit the pandemic wall in January.

We are in need of a new day, we pray it is coming very soon. Isaiah says there is something we can do. We can take hold of Isaiah's message of hope. We can be the vehicle that God uses to bring comfort to people who are suffering or in despair.

SO here at Saint Mark, inspired by that old expression that we are the hands and feet of God - we are all grateful to those who organized this week of service for MLK day and Inaguration Day as a way to live out and claim that hope.

When I have struggled with the pandemic during this past year, getting to do something positive has helped me. Take a look at that terrific list and choose something that fits where you are right now.

We can bring a positive word of hope or encouragement. I think back in previous years over times of natural disaster how communities especially faith communities organized and sent supplies, teams to rebuild houses, help with the clean-up. This is just a different kind of clean-up I suppose.

In large and small ways we are working that highway to God, or in MLK's expression, bringing out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

A stone of hope came out of a hymn we will sing in just a moment, called "Lift Every Voice". I appreciate the backstory to so many of our hymns, and this one was originally written just as a poem as part of a celebration in 1900 of Abe Lincoln's birthday, before it became a song 5 years later.

It was first read to 500 school children at a segregated school in Jacksonville Fl to introduce that day's honored guest, Booker T Washington. The words were written by the school principal James Johnson, who wrote it as a protest to unjust Jim Crow conditions going on in the South - even a wave of lynchings.

Thus the line in the song, 'we have come over a way that with tears has been watered'

It has been appreciated ever since for its power in voicing the cry for justice and liberation. It has been called a National Anthem for oppressed people.

But here's the thing: for all the images of suffering in the song it contains words of immense faith and hope:

The last verse rings with hope and faith in God:

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears*

*Thou who has brought us thus far along the way*

*Thou who hast by thy might led us into the light*

*Keep us forever on the path we pray.*

A path, a highway to God. This is what Isaiah talks of, MLK dreamt of and James Johnson sang of. We need that highway across the desert. We need it to get out of any stark lifeless places we are in. We need it to help someone else find a way to hope and faith. A friend or family member - a co-worker, a teacher.

Why else do we need that highway? Dr. King so wisely said, "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities" - "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

As we at SMPC continue to build that prayer highway, that relationship highway, that openness to God through

Jesus Christ we become aware that we are all dependent on each other. 2020 taught us that for sure.

That as we go through this year of transition in our own church, if the way seems difficult, or changes come that seem challenging, remember God has brought us thus far along the way.

If you are struggling to get through the next few winter months, remember, God has brought us thus far along the way.

As that hymn says, "Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us; sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us."

And as you go about your daily work or school, Zoom meetings, especially if you are facing difficulty, or even unfairness, remember God's promises: be part of God's highway crew - through your prayer and study and your words and your actions.

Isaiah said it well

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. A new era of hope has begun.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low.*

*The uneven ground shall be made level and the rough places a plain. A highway to God - may it be so!*

