



DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S BIRTHDAY (BELOVED COMMUNITY DAY)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

Each year around the world, people of good will who believe in justice and the dignity of all people celebrate the birthday of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They focus on aspects of Dr. King's work and seek ways to emulate his efforts. This year, the lectionary has selected his work as a visionary as its focus. In order to change a city, a state, a nation or the world, vision is needed. Dr. King showed us that each of us can participate in the vision to make the world a place of peace, where all persons are treated with dignity, and have the opportunity to pursue life, liberty and happiness.

Dr. King made a difference and so can we. In your time and in your space by God's grace, you can make a difference. In my time and in my space by God's grace, I can make a difference. In our time and in our space by God's grace, we can make a difference.

When the strain is heavy--

When day is dangerous--

When the night is dreary and weary--

When the pain is too much to bear--

When the burden feels like the weight of the world is upon us--

that is often the moment when God uses us to help change the world and write a new chapter in history. Each of us can make a difference where we stand and serve now.



Dr. King and Mrs. Coretta Scott King

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in the Georgia State Prison, Reidsville, Georgia, October 1960, he wrote the following words to his beloved wife, Mrs. Coretta Scott King:

I have the faith to believe that this excessive suffering that is now coming to our family will in some little way serve to make Atlanta a better city, Georgia a better state, and America a better country.

Just how I do not yet know, But I have faith to believe it will. If I am correct then our suffering is not in vain.

*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
October 26, 1960
Georgia State Prison
Reidsville, GA

The above quote is personal, affectionate, prophetic and historic. It is an affirmation of faith, hope, love, courage and devotion to family. It is a declaration of the ultimate triumph of righteousness over evil and injustice. It is the transformational witness of non-violence in a violent world.

The above witness is the kind of commitment that can lift our nation from the shackles of hate and incivility in the twenty-first century. These shackles are anchored in fear, injustice, poverty and violence.

II. Dr. King Supported the Least of These



Why was Dr. King in a Georgia prison in October 1960? He was in prison because a group of students representing The Committee on Appeal for Human Rights, led by Mr. Lonnie C. King, a student at Morehouse College, had called for his help. Dr. King delayed his trip to Nigeria and joined the student sit-in movement of Atlanta, Georgia. This response by Dr. King became a prophetic and historic moment in the student movement for Atlanta and the nation. He believed he could make a difference in some “small way.”

Fifty years later, it is significant to remember that Dr. King came to the aid of students. These students were from Morehouse College, Atlanta University, Clark College (now Clark Atlanta University), Spelman College, Morris Brown College, and The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), who said to him we need your help. Dr. King was only thirty-one years old at the time of this Macedonian appeal. (See Acts 15: 9-10) He made a difference and so did these students.



From Montgomery to Memphis, Dr. King was constantly, consistently, non-violently, and prophetically responding to some special call for help. Let it never be forgotten that he **died supporting sanitation workers (garbage workers)** in Memphis, Tennessee. He lived and died fighting for “the least of these.” (See Matt. 25:31-40)

III. The Prison Sentence Heard Around the Country

What happened to Dr. King that did not happen to the students that were arrested in the same demonstration? Dr. King was transferred to the Dekalb County Jail and charged with parole violation. Some six months earlier he had been issued a citation for a minor traffic violation. He paid the fine and went on with his life. Judge J. Oscar Mitchell claimed Dr. King was also given twelve months probation. This was not known to Dr. King or his representative who paid the fine for the minor traffic violation.

Judge Oscar Mitchell of Dekalb County proceeded to sentence Dr. King to four month's hard labor in the Georgia State Prison for a minor traffic violation. This was the first time such a sentence had been imposed in the history of the state of Georgia! Around four o'clock a.m. the next morning, officers of the law put chains (shackles) on Dr. King, threw him in the prison vehicle, drove 230 miles across the state and incarcerated him in Reidsville State Prison. This was brutality, injustice and evil in high places.

However, within less than twenty-four hours the nation and the world responded. A young senator from Massachusetts intervened on the side of justice. Senator John F. Kennedy took a risk for righteousness in support of Dr. King. Judge Mitchell reversed his ruling. This single act of moral and political courage tipped the scales in the presidential election of 1960. Dr. King made a difference nationally.

The non-violent student sit-in movement was eventually victorious. A Catholic was elected President of the United States of America. A new chapter was etched into American and world history. A barrier was broken forever. America became a better nation. The Freedom Movement was blessed. Unearned suffering became redemptive. The agony, pain, shock and tears we experienced in Judge Mitchell's courtroom that autumn morning turned into smiles and joy. (See Matt. 5:11-12)

IV. Timeless Principles Affirmed by Dr. King

The affirmation and timeless principles of non-violence blossomed into morning stars of hope and living testimonies. (See Zechariah 4:6) The teachings of the ancient prophets came alive in contemporary realities. The message of Jesus Christ became living waters anew before our very eyes.

Throughout the nation and world, the eloquent voice of Dr. King rang out like a "trumpet of conscience" as he quoted the great voices of the ages saying: "We are going to win because William Cullen Bryant was right; 'Truth crushed to earth will rise again.' We are going to win because Carlisle was right; 'No lie can live forever.' We are going to win because 'the moral arc of the universe may be wide but it bends towards justice.' We are going to win because the Bible is right; 'Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.'" (Isaiah 40:4-5) Dr. King made a difference globally.

It is my unshakeable belief that with this faith, calling, commission and divine urgency in the 21st century, you can make a difference; we can make a difference wherever we stand and serve.

V. Songs for this Moment

Some of Dr. King's favorite songs include "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "We Shall Overcome."

Precious Lord

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light:

Refrain

Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

When my way grows drear,
Precious Lord, linger near,
When my life is almost gone,
Hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand lest I fall:

Refrain

When the darkness appears
And the night draws near,
And the day is past and gone,
At the river I stand,
Guide my feet, hold my hand:

Refrain¹

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

1. When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died;
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ, my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

3. See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown.

4. Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.²

We Shall Overcome

1. We shall overcome
We shall overcome
We shall overcome some day

CHORUS:

Oh, deep in my heart
I do believe
We shall overcome
some day

2. We'll walk hand in hand
We'll walk hand in hand
We'll walk hand in hand some day

CHORUS

3. We shall all be free
We shall all be free
We shall all be free some day

CHORUS

4. We are not afraid
We are not afraid
We are not afraid some day

CHORUS

5. We are not alone
We are not alone
We are not alone some day

CHORUS

6. The whole wide world around
The whole wide world around
The whole wide world around some day

CHORUS

7. We shall overcome
We shall overcome
We shall overcome some day.³

VI. Resources

Speeches

Include in the sermon and in other aspects of the worship experience and during Sunday School, Bible Study and Youth Meetings, excerpts from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches, "I Have a Dream" and "I've Seen the Promised Land," both of which highlight a vision of the beloved community that is grounded in spiritual and moral values.

Suggested Books

King, Martin Luther, Jr. The Trumpet of Conscience. Massey lectures, 1967. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

King, Martin Luther, and James Melvin Washington. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1991.

VII. Questions for Further Reflection:

What does having a *vision* mean for you?

Distinguish between a *dream* and a *vision*?

How would King distinguish a *dream* from a *vision*?

Are visionaries born, called by God, or both?

Do you believe that King's vision of the beloved community will ultimately be actualized in human history? Why? Why not?

Can the beloved community vision find expression in inter-personal, inter-group, and international relations?

Have there been, in your view, approximations of the beloved community in history?

What contributions can you make to the creation of the beloved community, which is a completed integrated society and world based on the *agape* love ethic?

What does it mean to move from beloved community as a *vision* to beloved community as an *ethical ideal* that is put into practice?

Notes

1. "Precious Lord." (Precious Lord Take My Hand)". Words and Music by Thomas A. Dorsey © 1938 (Renewed 1965)
- 2."When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Text by Isaac Watts. Music by Lowell Mason. Tune: (HAMBURG), Meter: LM.
3. "We Shall Overcome." The lyrics for this song were derived from Charles Tindley's gospel song "I'll Overcome Some Day" (1900), and the opening and closing melody from the 19th-century spiritual "No More Auction Block for Me" (a song that dates before the Civil War).

*King, Martin Luther, and Tenisha Armstrong. The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. 5, Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959 - December 1960 / Vol. Senior Editor, Clayborn Carson. Ed. Tenisha Armstrong, and Andrienne Clay. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2005. pp. 531-32.

**The suggested resources and questions for further reflection were provided by today's lectionary commentator, Lewis V. Baldwin.