

## Reverend King's Day

Were you startled when I asked you to stand for the reading of our Scripture passages this morning? Or when we sang "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory?" It's not a hymn that is part of our regular repertoire here at Good Shepherd, although I'm willing to bet that most of us grew up singing it in church and perhaps in school as well. There is a point to these actions this morning, a method to my madness. Today, rather than following the liturgical tradition of Epiphany and focusing on the ways in which Jesus was revealed as the Son of God, we are heeding a more modern and wholly American tradition: celebrating the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Three of the four hymns we have sung and will sing this morning are commonly associated with the aspirations of Black folk in their struggle to be recognized as full citizens with equal rights in our country. The Scripture passages I just read are also associated with this struggle and the Psalms in this morning's Call to Worship were chosen to reinforce the message of the other passages.

As to my asking you to stand during a time not customary for us here at Good Shepherd, well, you might call that a further act of solidarity with our African-American brothers and sisters this morning. Those of you who grew up Catholic will know that it is customary in that tradition to rise for the reading of the Gospel passage at each Mass. But since I don't see anyone here this morning that grew up in the Black Church tradition, you may not know that in many of those churches, worshippers get to their feet for every reading of Scripture. As with every ritual, religious or civic, this action can lose its meaning when repeated automatically and not considered. But at its most meaningful, the act of rising for the reading of the Bible causes us to recall the importance of the words being read or which we are reading together. I hope that because this rite is not habitual for us and because I'm calling attention to it that it will function for us as a reminder of the importance of the Bible in our lives, to the long-held Christian belief, particularly emphasized in the history of the Baptist Movement, that in these pages we find the Word of God as written by inspired men and women in the long history of God's redemption of Creation.

I also hope to call us this morning to more than a mere acknowledgement of Dr. King, more than a simple acquiescence to a civic celebration of this great man of God. As I wrote for our local newspaper, *The Weekly Herald*, in a column published this week, "It is right and just for our nation to honor Dr. King each year. To truly honor him (however), we must continue his work by guarding the rights of all persons." So we will begin our considerations this morning with a look at the original and Civil Rights Era contexts of the Bible passages for which you stood and then take a look at the ways in which the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. for the freedom and rights of all people must still continue today. These will be words of challenge and words of hope. As I reminded a friend this week, preachers are called both to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. I don't intend that anyone here should be entirely comfortable this morning.

The story of the Exodus is one of the best known stories in the Bible. Seeking relief from a famine in the land of Canaan, the Children of Israel, the sons of Jacob and their families, take refuge in Egypt where their previously despised brother, Joseph, he of the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, has become Prime Minister and built up a surplus of grain to weather the seven years of bad crops of which God had warned Pharaoh in a dream. In the safety of Egypt, the former herders grew strong and multiplied. But then, as we read in the Scriptures, a Pharaoh arose "who

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knew not Joseph.” Seeing the Hebrews encamped in his land as a threat, he enslaved them and they were treated cruelly. In their distress, the slaves cried out to their God and to our God, the God of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, the God of Abraham and Sarah. And God, whose ears are always tuned to the prayers of the oppressed, heard them. God provided a leader for the Israelites, Moses, who guided them back to their Promised Land and shared with them the way of life that he learned from God on the mountain so that they could live in their new land with righteousness and justice.

The history of the Chosen People, of course, does not end there. Like all of us, they were not always very good at following the calling of God. Their fortunes rose and fell according to the strength and weakness of their neighbors, the ability of their leaders, and their own fidelity to righteousness. When the Word of God came to the prophet Amos, the Twelve Tribes were divided into two competing and often warring nations. In the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the few had become rich on the backs of the many, proclaiming their success as proof of the blessings of God upon them while ignoring the Torah regulations that would have meant sharing their wealth with the poor and caring for the least, the lost and the left out. They did not heed the warning of the prophets and the rottenness of the kingdom was revealed when the power-seeking policies of the leaders failed to keep the peace with the Assyrian Empire and the deep division of the country between rich and poor left them an easy target for defeat and dispersal.

The relevance for these texts in the Civil Rights Era should be plain to us all. The descendants of slaves, given their freedom *de jure* by the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln during the Civil War, still felt the bondage of slavery *de facto* in their exclusion from full participation in our nation's life and prosperity thanks to the Jim Crow laws that had been enacted all over these United States following that bloody conflict. “Mister Charlie,” their collective term for the members of the white power elite, was still every bit as much Pharaoh as the plantation owners had been. Unable to vote, to own property in the best sections of town, to eat or to sleep in any restaurant or hotel they chose, and facing a thousand other little exclusions to remind them that they were not full members of society, they cried out to God and God heard them – their God and our God, the God of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, the God of Abraham and Sarah. And God raised up leaders, Dr. King chief among them, to echo the call of Moses to Pharaoh: “Let my people go!”

In his famous “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King took to task the liberal white pastors who should have been among the most outspoken proponents of the Civil Rights Movement but who had remained timidly on the sidelines or who had excoriated Dr. King and his colleagues for “pushing too hard too fast.” Throughout his career, Dr. King kept up the pressure on Christians who gave lip service to the righteousness of God but who failed to live it out. All of these should have heard their own failures in the words of Amos to those who oppressed the poor and powerless of his time. They should have heard the warning that God was not satisfied with ritual only but demanded justice and righteousness. Whenever I hear the words, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream,” I hear the powerful voice of that other American Baptist preacher, whose life we celebrate this week, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for this was a passage he quoted often and for good reason.

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In our comfortable, mostly middle-class lives here in South Snohomish and North King Counties, I think it is easy for us to lose sight of just how much of Dr. King's work remains undone. We are particularly blessed here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church to be members of the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches, where so much effort has been put into bringing Euro-Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans together in honest relationships of equality and Christian love. But if we listen to our black and brown brothers and sisters, truly listen, they will tell us what it has been like for them and what it is still like for their children to grow up as minorities in America. They will tell us about places they do not drive and about how their assumptions of interactions with police are different from ours. They will tell us about the racial epithets they still hear and the subtler forms of discrimination that are still prevalent in our society. Our federal government may have created a holiday in his honor, there may be a monument to his work on the National Mall, our state's most populous county may be named after him, but the work of Martin Luther King is far from done. Too many people around the world, too many people here in the United States, still live with their natural freedom curtailed, with the rights we take for granted abrogated, with the chains of slavery still winding about them.

You may be surprised that I use the word "slavery." We were done with that in 1865, weren't we? Well, not exactly. Today, we call it "human trafficking," defined by the United Nations as "The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or any other forms of coercion, of abduction, or fraud, deception, of the abuse of power or of position of vulnerability or of giving or receiving payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation." Or in simpler terms from Lutheran Community Services, "human trafficking is defined by anyone who works against their will for food, housing, money or anything else essential for survival." Sounds like slavery to me. According to the organization Seattle Against Slavery, "An estimated 29 million people are enslaved around the world today. Human trafficking is the 2nd most lucrative criminal industry worldwide, after drug trafficking, bringing in approximately \$32 billion annually. The US Dept. of State estimates that as many as 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the US every year, and The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking suggests that between 100,000 and 300,000 domestic minors are trafficked within our nation's borders."

The fact that an organization like Seattle Against Slavery even exists should alert us to the fact that our "enlightened" region is not immune to this problem. According to law enforcement and other agencies, Seattle is a hub for human trafficking in the U.S. because of easy access to international borders and ports and because of the I-5 corridor that connects the major cities of the Pacific Coast. Perhaps this is why Seattle was listed by the F.B.I. in February 2009 as the number one city for underage prostitution, one of the vilest but most common aspects of modern human trafficking. Our local governments have been responding to this under-reported crisis, with the State of Washington becoming the first state to criminalize human trafficking in 2003 and King County successfully prosecuting the state's first case in 2009. This past week, Washington and King County officials joined President Obama and the U.S. Congress in declaring January 11 as Human Trafficking Awareness Day. Still, there is much to be done and much that can be done by people of faith who are willing to reach out to victims and provide the

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support and services they need. Your bulletin insert this morning lists some local organization looking for volunteers to serve in various ways in this effort.

Nearly forty-four years after Dr. King's assassination, there are still ways in which the rights of American citizens are abridged that give evidence of racial discrimination, even in our supposedly "post-racial" society. Michelle Alexander is a highly acclaimed legal scholar and civil rights lawyer. A graduate of Vanderbilt University and Stanford Law School, she served as a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun early in her career and has held posts on the law faculties of both her alma mater and of the Ohio State University. She writes that early in her career she dismissed out of hand charges that the federal government's War on Drugs was just another attempt by the powerful to deny the rights of people of color. But as she continued to work on civil rights cases, she began to suspect that there was indeed merit to these claims. In 2005, she won a Soros Justice Fellowship that allowed her to research the issue and, in 2010, she published the results of her research as The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. Alexander shows convincingly that whatever may have been the intentions of the architects of the War on Drugs, the result has been the creation or re-creation of a legal undercaste made up almost entirely of people of color. She writes, "Jarvious Cotton's great-great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Klu Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation; his father was barred by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole."

Listen to some of the facts uncovered by Michelle Alexander in her careful study of patterns of prosecution, conviction and sentencing: "There are more African Americans under correctional control today -- in prison or jail, on probation or parole -- than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began. As of 2004, more African American men were disenfranchised (due to felon disenfranchisement laws) than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race. A black child born today is less likely to be raised by both parents than a black child born during slavery. The recent disintegration of the African American family is due in large part to the mass imprisonment of black fathers. If you take into account prisoners, a large majority of African American men in some urban areas, like Chicago, have been labeled felons for life. These men are part of a growing undercaste -- a group of people who are permanently relegated, by law, to an inferior second-class status. They can be denied the right to vote, automatically excluded from juries, and legally discriminated against in employment, housing, access to education, and public benefits -- much as their grandparents and great-grandparents once were during the Jim Crow era."

It would be a mistake to attribute these findings to a crime wave among African American men. While crime rates have dipped to historic lows in the last few years, imprisonment rates have quintupled. The percentage of the population that is imprisoned in the United States is among the highest in the world, five times that of Germany, for example. "Studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates. In fact, some studies indicate that white youth are significantly more likely to engage in illegal drug dealing than black youth. White youth also have about three times the number of drug-related visits to the emergency room as their African American counterparts. Yet in some states, African Americans comprise 80%-

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90% of all drug offenders sent to prison.” Is the War On Drugs putting away dangerous criminals? Hardly. “In 2005, four out of five drug arrests were for possession, only one out of five for sales. Most people in state prison have no history of violence or even of significant selling activity. In fact, during the 1990s—the period of the most dramatic expansion of the drug war—nearly 80% of the increase in drug arrests was for marijuana possession, a drug generally considered less harmful than alcohol or tobacco and at least as prevalent in middle-class white communities as in the inner city.” Instead of moving closer to the Beloved Community promoted by Dr. King, we have allowed a return to the conditions he fought against.

We need a new Civil Rights Campaign to protect the rights of citizens who have lost their right to vote forever because they were caught with a couple of joints. We need a new Civil Rights Campaign to protect the rights of the old and the young and the poor who are losing their rights to vote because they do not have a driver's license. We need another Poor People's Campaign like the one Dr. King was working on in 1968 when he was murdered. In 1968, when Dr. King was speaking up for the poor, the Census Bureau reported that nearly 13 percent of the people in our country, 25 million people, were living below the poverty line. In 2010, the Census Bureau recorded an official poverty rate of 15.1 percent, 46.2 million people, the fourth straight year of increase. Broken down, these numbers are even more troubling: 9.9 percent of Whites live in poverty, 12 percent of Asian Americans, 26.6 percent of Hispanic Americans and 27.4 percent of African Americans. 22 percent of children under 18 live in poverty in the greatest and richest nation in the world.

I could go on for a long time this morning. Dr. King spoke out against war. He reminded us that “wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows.” Yet still we are at war, depriving our young men and women of normal lives, turning them into trained killers, wasting the resources that could be used to support those without jobs and to create the public works projects that have successfully carried us through tough times in the past, the resources that could go to make sure that all our children are getting the kind of education that allows them to compete in today's workforce, the resources that could go to the rehabilitation of addicts rather than into the gaping maw of both publicly and privately run correctional institutions. I've not yet mentioned the civil rights legislation that is coming before our state legislature this year – an act to grant the rights of marriage to consenting gay and lesbian adults. Dr. King never spoke out for the rights of homosexual persons but his widow certainly did. Speaking on the subject of gay marriage, Coretta Scott King said, “Gay and lesbian people have families, and their families should have legal protection... For too long, our nation has tolerated the insidious form of discrimination against this group of Americans, who have worked as hard as any group, paid their taxes like everyone else, and yet have been denied equal protection under the law.” People of faith and good will are deeply divided regarding the place of homosexual persons in the church but there is no reason to deny a basic human right such as marriage to these citizens.

And so, my sisters and my brothers, God's challenge comes to all of us this morning, this morning when we celebrate the Civil Rights work of our American Baptist brother, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. How do we honor his work? By taking a day off? By singing old Negro Spirituals? By sitting side by side with our Black brothers and sister in the Evergreen Association? Oh, yes, by all means let us do these things. But let us also rise up with Martin and with Moses to challenge the Pharaohs of our time to let our people go free! Let us be sure that

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our rites and our liturgies are full of meaning as we harken to the voice of our God! Let us live our lives with courage and in obedience to God so that justice may roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream!

Does it sound daunting? It should. But God promised Moses that God would be waiting for him and the newly freed people to be joined to God in worship and so God waits for us at the end of our struggle. Jesus told his disciples, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these..." Jesus went to the Father and left with us the Holy Spirit, who both guides and empowers us to amazing things in the name of God. We have no reason to fear, no reason to be timid. Just as the old song says, we *shall* overcome. So let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream! And we will find that the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will guide us and keep us all of our days, leading us to the Beloved Community for which Jesus, and his servant Martin, gave their lives. Amen.