

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.”

I have to say I am a little nervous. I am nervous because we have set aside today to remember the life and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr., and I am the wrong man for the job. Indeed, in so many ways I am the problem. I am a white man of privilege and I cannot change that. With all of the best intentions, and even a heart and a desire for change, I am still far too comfortable with the status quo; I still have the option when the going gets tough to step back. God forgive me the times my courage failed.

As I reviewed the many words of Dr. King I was struck by his struggle with courage, the courage to speak truth to power, and the courage to answer violence with non-violence. He worked in his ministry to frame the struggle for civil rights in America into the greater vision of God’s redemption of the world. In his “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, he ended by saying “...when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

It has been 52 years. There is still much work to be done to bring Dr. King’s dream to fruition. As I say “Dr. King’s dream” I wonder why it isn’t everyone’s dream. I wonder why it is so hard for us to leave racism behind? Why we continue to be so afraid of those who are different from us? One would think that in a world so connected by cell phone and internet, that we would get to know each other better, and so to see beyond the stereotypes, but that hasn’t been the case, at least not yet. Instead, the anonymity of the internet makes space for our lesser selves, and irrational fears released in the dark gather together and find strength, and the night becomes not a

place to dream but a place to fear. And it begins to feel like the fear may even overwhelm us. We feel so hopelessly alone. But the truth is we are not without hope. And we are not alone. God is with us and that is enough. So why doesn't it feel that way?

In the section from Isaiah that we heard this morning, the prophet is reminding the people that God is with them if they are with God.

“The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate.”

Isaiah reminds us as well. There is work to do, yes, much work, but if we remain true to God's dream for us that will be enough. God is with us if we are with God.

About a year before his death, Dr. King gave perhaps the most controversial speech of his life at the Riverside Church in New York. He was speaking about his growing dis-ease with American involvement in the Viet Nam War. Like many of Dr. King's words, they have import well beyond the limits of their original subject. To me these words speak clearly across the years to our current struggles with racism surrounding the issues of appropriate use of force by law enforcement.

“Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.”

“Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement well and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.”

A new way. You and I know, and I have no doubt that Dr. King knew as well, that the way he was speaking of was not really a new way, but in fact a very old way, the way taught to us long ago by Jesus; the way of love. Sadly it is a way we too often forget, and so we need to be reminded. Reminded that the Spirit of God works in us and through us. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, “Now there are

varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” We often hear this passage as a listing of the gifts of the Spirit, but notice that the manifestations of the Spirit are given for the common good. God works not for the aggrandizement of the individual, but for the common good of the community. This is a hard thing for us to hear in the land of personal freedom and opportunity. It is no wonder we are prone to forget.

When Dr. King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, on the walls of that Memorial are carved the following words from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural address. “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’” Lincoln saw the scourge of the Civil War as a true and righteous judgement on our country for its history of slavery. It was no more popular an observation then than it is now. We want to believe that God is on our side, but we all too often forget that it is our task to be sure we are on God’s side. I fear that if we cannot find a way to end the scourge of racism in our day, that God’s judgement will continue. My faith tells me that if we do not find a way, God’s judgement needs to continue.

It will take all of our gifts, all of them together. We all have a part to play. God will give us what we need, has given us all we could ask for. We must hold true to Dr. King’s dream; to God’s dream.

“Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, and your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the strong mountains, your justice like the great deep; you save both man and beast, O Lord. How priceless is your love, O God! your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings. They feast upon the abundance of your house;

you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the well of life, and in your light we see light. Continue your loving-kindness to those who know you, and your favor to those who are true of heart.”

Amen.