

No One to God to but God
Isaiah 41:1-13 John 1:43-51

We begin today by walking into the very center of the spirit and thinking of Dr. King as he reflected on a sleepless night of threatening phone calls during the Bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama:

“I got out of bed and began to walk the floor.

Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee.

I was ready to give up.

I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward.

In this state of exhaustion, when my courage was almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God.

My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud,

The words I spoke to God at midnight are still vivid in my memory,

‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right, God.

But now I am afraid.

The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter.

I am at the end of my powers.

I have nothing left.

I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him.

It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying,

‘Stand up for righteousness.’

‘Stand up for truth.’

‘God will be at your side forever.’

Almost at once my fears began to pass from me.

My uncertainty disappeared.

I was ready for anything.

The outer situation remained the same.

But God had given me inner calm.’

Three nights later, our home was bombed.

Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly.

My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust.

I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life.”.....

Though not personally threatened in the same way, many of us feel the way Dr King felt amidst our current, multiple national crises.

We are invaded by fears that are completely real.

We feel threatened by forces which arrive on dark, powerful locomotives rushing through the tunnels of our sleepless nights.

We are simultaneously furious and afraid—

Not only for ourselves but for others, especially people directly in harm’s way.

Many of us are carrying out a personal test of the Jesus following teaching “*Love casts out fear*”—Does it really work?

Some of us are testing every day whether the Epiphany prayer “*And a star went before them....."a star is going before me*”—really provides us with some inward peace and direction.

I hope you have kept praying that simple prayer since we learned it from the Wise Men on Epiphany Sunday two weeks ago. I know I have.

“A star went before them.”

We know we must take every precaution that is available in order to protect ourselves and our loved ones and our elected leaders and beloved friends— from disease and from extremist violence—

Even so, towering clouds of uncertainty still rumble across our personal mental skies, causing us to shudder—and wonder!

This was Dr. King’s experience!

A recent film documentary has revealed that his companions in the freedom struggle felt, at a certain point, that the dark forces of hate that were assailing him had affected his mental condition enough that he needed psychiatric counseling.

Yet that path, they also believed, could not be taken because his enemy, J. Edgar Hoover, the Darth Vader of the FBI, would use it against him to discredit him.

For Dr. King, there was literally “*No One to Go to but God.*”

Many of us—for different reasons—have had this same experience.

We are having this experience right now.

Are our souls able to stand still long enough to hear?—

Stand up for righteousness.’

'Stand up for truth.

God will be at your side forever.;

You know, Dr. King had a mentor. The same person also mentored the first African American United States Senator since the post Civil War period, Barbara Jordan of Texas.

Both were mentored by Howard Thurman, Dean of the Chapel at Boston University when King was going to divinity school there and Jordan was in law school.

The other night, I shared with our elders a story Howard Thurman told about a time of fear in his life, during his childhood in Florida:

“It was the year of Halley’s comet. I was a little boy living in a sawmill town in Florida. I had not seen the comet in the sky because my mother made me go to bed with the setting of the sun. I heard my step father say one day when he came home for lunch that a man at the mill office was selling what he called “comet pills”, the theory being that if these pills were taken—when the tail of the comet struck the earth—the person would be immune.

One night, I was awakened by my mother, who asked if I wanted to see the comet.

I got up, dressed quickly and went out with her into the back yard.

There I saw in the heavens the awesome tail of the comet and stood transfixed. With deep anxiety I asked, without taking my eyes off it, *“What will happen to us when it falls out of the sky?”*

There was a long silence during which I felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on my shoulders; then I looked into her face and saw what I had seen on another occasion when, without knocking, I had rushed into her room and found her in prayer.

At last, she said, *“Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us.”*

In that moment something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me.

As I looked on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet.

It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled my panic.”

Fear not, I am with you.

Do not be dismayed; for I am your God:

At the root of our human problems, like the earthen soil that is beneath the roots of a great tree— is a spiritual problem and a spiritual resolution.

Of course, liberating laws, transformative polices and wise planning must arise from the roots—just as the trunk, limbs and leaves arise from the roots of the tree.

But at the root, our problems are spiritual.

The problems which give rise to this Martin Luther King holiday—anti-blackness and poverty—are first spiritual problems.

We first need to remove anti-blackness from our souls.

Whiteness, as James Baldwin persistently declared, is an attitude!

We need to remove that attitude from our souls, just like we might try to remove the propensity to lie or steal or live mired in jealousy, envy or some self harming habit.

Turn anti-Blackness into celebrating Blackness. Change our mindset from judgment to jubilation.

And then we need to remove from our souls our judgment on poverty.

Here is a spiritual adventure which Black, White and Brown people of every age and gender can take together.

Whatever personal failings people have, or lack of skills or even degrees of personal irresponsibility, none of these factors explain the vast chasm that has been created between rich and poor, in our nation and in our world.

Jesus said, in his Sermon on the Plain, “Blessed are the poor.”

What he meant was that the work of Jesus followers is to “Bless the poor”, not find reasons and excuses to judge.

For this reason, so many of us, last Friday, on Dr. King’s actual birthday, drove our cars in a caravan to McDonald’s and then to HCA owned Research hospital , both making billions in profits even in the pandemic, to join in supporting a nationwide strike on Friday to call for a \$15 minimum wage and essential benefits such as paid sick days and pension plans for low wage workers.

The deck is stacked against the poor and those unable to make a living wage, whatever your race. But because of the chokehold of anti-blackness, poverty is even harsher on Black and Brown people.

A few days ago, in a hospital in South Africa, a nineteen year old mother had to give birth to her baby through a Caeserian operation. But then that mother perished because there were no antibiotics available to give to her.

This, her family said, would not have happened to a young white mother.

Here in the U.S., the maternal mortality rate of Black mothers is much higher than for White mothers.

The twin evils of racism and poverty lie at the root of the tree.

The root is within our souls.

Why not choose to uproot the root and grow a new tree of spiritual and physical liberty!

Become truly free in an expanding democracy!.....

Finally, we desperately need to commit to Truth.

And committing to Truth is a spiritual commitment.

“Thou shalt not bear false witness.” Is one of the Ten Commandments.

We once hosted a series of great films here entitled “The Decalogue”, created by the luminous Krzysztof Kieslowski.

Each film examined, interpreted, wondered about, challenged and questioned each of the Ten Commandments.

In “Thou shalt not bear false witness”, a lie which changed the fates of many people for many years—was unearthed, examined and faced.

In today’s world, false witness comes in the form of disinformation and misinformation, leading to colossal consequences, global in scope.

The leading Christian ethicist of the 20th century argued that a major source of immorality and the genesis of “Man’s Inhumanity to Man” lies in our inability to live peacefully and successfully with massive, rapid technological advances.

The invention of the nuclear weapon is an example. A few minds could create it. Our collective hearts are unable to live with it. Even when we don’t use it, we waste trillions making them and protecting them.

Our human brain’s ingenuity in unearthing every last fossil fuel from the ground--- coal, oil and gas—is another example. We possess the technological skill to do it. But at first unknowingly, and now with full knowledge of the consequences, we still barrel toward heating the atmosphere so much that we are causing disastrous changes and death to the earth and all living beings.

Today, it is the internet with its capacity for great good, of course, a means of communications and source of information never before possible.

And yet, the danger, the threat of misinforming people and disinforming large swaths of the population, --including all of us—actually reduces and destroys our understanding and turns wealth of knowledge into poverty of knowledge.

Do you believe in Truth?

Here is a spiritual choice, an act of faithfulness even.

The Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative, directed by a former US Ambassador, Karen Kornbluh, recommends a number of steps. Here are three:

1. Clarify in law that what happens online is subject to the same legal standards as what happens in real life, update regulations and increase enforcement. Crackdown on deep fakes, fake accounts, hidden amplification and other clearly deceptive designs. Most of this can be done under existing laws.
2. Insist on democratic design—the so called digital code of conduct. An example would be, as on Wall Street amidst a financial panic, circuit breakers to slow down the viral spread of dangerous lies.
3. Creation of a PBS of the internet to strengthen our civic infrastructure and ensure a strong online supply of trustworthy, nonpartisan scientific and election information.

But this will only happen when we as a society make a spiritual commitment to believe in the significance of the Truth.

I want to close by coming back to Dr. King, a personal story in his own words.

“On Coretta’s and my journey to India, we visited “Land’s End”, so named because it is actually where the land of comes to an end.....Nothing stretches before you but three great bodies of water—the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.....

.....Seated on a huge rock that slightly protrudes into the ocean, we were enthralled the ocean’s vastness and its terrifying immensities.....

....to the west we saw the magnificent sun, a great cosmic ball of fire, appear to sink into the ocean. Coretta touched me and said, “*Look, Martin, isn’t it beautiful?*”

I looked around and saw the moon, another ball of scintillating beauty. As the sun appeared to be sinking into the ocean, the moon appeared to be rising from the ocean.

When the sun finally passed completely beyond sight, darkness engulfed the earth. But in the east, the radiant light of the rising moon shone supreme.

To Coretta I said, *“This is an analogy of what often happens in life. We have experiences when the light of day vanishes. Leaving us in some dark and desolate midnight...during such moments, our spirits are almost overcome by gloom and despair, and we feel there is no light anywhere. But ever and again, we look toward the east, and discover there is another light that shines even in the darkness.*

This would be an unbearable world were God to have only a single light, but we may be consoled that God has two lights, a light to guide us in the brightness of day when hopes are fulfilled and circumstances are favorable, and a light to guide us in the darkness when we are thwarted and the slumbering giants of gloom and hopelessness rise in our souls.

The testimony of the Psalmist is that we shall never walk in darkness:

“ If the darkness shall cover me, even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee. But the night shineth as the day,
The darkness and the light are alike to Thee.

So may be the sustaining faithfulness for all who come to a crossroads where there is no one to turn to but God.

And that is more than enough. Amen.

O God, we thank you for the fact that you have inspired men and women in all nations and in all cultures. We call you different names: some call you Allah; some call you Elohim; some call you Jehovah; some call you Brahma; some call you the Unmoved Mover. But we know that these are all names for one and the same God. Grant that we will follow you and become so committed to your way and your kingdom that we will be able to establish in our lives and in this world a brother and sisterhood, that we will be able to establish here a kingdom of understanding, where men and women will live together as brothers and sisters and respect the dignity and worth of every human being. In the name and spirit of Jesus. Amen.

God, give us strength of body to keep walking for freedom. God, give us strength to remain nonviolent, even though we may face death.

God, grant that we wage the struggle with dignity and discipline. May all who suffer oppression in this world reject the self-defeating method of retaliatory violence and choose the method that seeks to redeem.

God, remove all bitterness from my heart and give me the strength and courage to face any disaster that comes my way.

O God, we thank you for the lives of great saints and prophets in the past, who have revealed to us that we can stand up amid the problems and difficulties and trials of life and not give in. We thank you for our foreparents, who've given us something in the midst of the darkness of exploitation and oppression to keep going. Grant that we will go on with the proper faith and the proper determination of will, so that we will be able to make a creative contribution to this world. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray.

O God, make us willing to do your will, come what may. Increase the number of persons of good will and moral sensitivity. Give us renewed confidence in nonviolence and the way of love as taught by Christ. Amen.

Eternal God, out of whose mind this great cosmic universe, we bless you. Help us to seek that which is high, noble and good. Help us in the moment of difficult decision. Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brother/sisterhood that transcends race or color.

God, we thank you for the inspiration of Jesus. Grant that we will love you with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, even our enemy neighbors. And we ask you, God, in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, to be with us

in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawn. Amen.

We thank you for your church, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you. Help us to realize that humanity was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace. Help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God's children -- Black, White, Red, Brown and Yellow -- will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the reign of our Lord and of our God, we pray. Amen.