

Tell Them About the Dream

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Scripture

Isaiah 51:1-6

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the Lord.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah, who bore you,
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Listen to me, my people,
and give heed to me, my nation,
for a teaching will go out from me
and my justice for a light to the peoples.
I will bring near my deliverance swiftly;
my salvation has gone out,
and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me,
and for my arm they hope.
Lift up your eyes to the heavens
and look at the earth beneath,
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats,
but my salvation will be forever,
and my deliverance will never be ended.

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon

On August 28, 1963—sixty years ago tomorrow—more than 250,000 people gathered in the nation's capital for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The march was the brainchild of longtime civil rights activist and labor leader A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979). With the support of the gifted organizer Bayard Rustin (1912-1987), the march was a collaboration of all factions of the civil rights movement. Randolph and Rustin worked tirelessly for nearly two years, eventually convincing the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to set aside their difference and join the effort. The event focused economic inequalities, employment discrimination, civil rights abuses against Black Americans, Latinos, and other disenfranchised groups, and support for the Civil Rights Act, which was before Congress.

When the day came, thousands poured into the city from all over the country, arriving by bus, train, car, and plane. Chicago and New York officially declared August 28 "Freedom Day" and gave workers the day off. Until several years ago, I had never met anyone who was there that day in D.C. until I met Al Davies, a Presbyterian minister, who retired here in Baltimore with his wife, Wylene, and worshipped with us here. Al remained a member of his former presbytery, and Wylene joined CPC in December 2011. Al was serving a church in Ohio at the time and arrived in Washington, D.C., by bus. When he told me what it was like to be there that day to witness history, his whole face lit up with his broad smile. Al passed away in November 2021. With the sixtieth anniversary of the march this weekend, I've been thinking a lot about Al and what it must have been like to be there.

Many feared the march would become violent; the Pentagon put 19,000 troops in the suburbs, just in case. But there was no violence that day. There wasn't a single arrest. The marchers peacefully sang and chanted along the National Mall, the nation's front yard, to the Lincoln Memorial. The program had sixteen speakers, including John Lewis, Jane Baker, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The speech most remembered from that day is, of course, Dr. King's, one of the most celebrated pieces of oratory in American history, part sermon, party rallying cry. I love that

there's a brass plaque on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the actual place where Dr. King spoke to the crowd that day. Whenever I'm at the Lincoln Memorial, my favorite monument in D.C., I stand near there, look at the plaque—holy ground—and think back to that day; I always find myself deeply moved.

Most of the speech revolved around the idea that America has not made good on the many promises it has given African Americans; the country has thus far defaulted, King declared, on that "promissory note." A promise made and fulfilled—for some, but certainly not for all. In this respect, King was really preaching, not as a pastor, but taking on the mantle of a prophet. Not as one who predicts the future, like a psychic, but in the biblical sense, the way the prophets, including Jesus, stood apart and held the people accountable before God's moral law.

A prophet calls God's people back to their roots, to their original identity and purpose, to the original promise, to the primary relationship with God, the covenant, and reminds the people who God is and what God expects of God's people. It's a calling back to remember the promise and then a calling forward, to live into the future with promise and hope. In this sense, the prophet is both conservative, trying to preserve something essential, and progressive at the same time. That's what we find going on in this text from Isaiah. Yes, there can be and will be comfort and blessings in Zion, joy and gladness and thanksgiving, but only when the people listen to the voice of the Lord and look to the promises made at the beginning to Abraham and Sarah. "Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples" (Is. 51:4). When we have this teaching in our hearts and souls and feet and voices, grounded and rooted in God's justice, then and only then we will see salvation and deliverance for God's people.

That's what King was about, which is what made his message and non-violent activism so radical. Many, particularly politicians who love to quote Dr. King, especially around his birthday, tend to water down or domesticate what he said. We have yet to hear fully, have yet to internalize and claim fully, and have yet to live fully into what he said. And, as the church needs to remember, what many fail to realize these days is that King's voice and vision were rooted in scripture, the words of the prophets, and the difficult, demanding teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. King read the Bible seriously; not literally, but seriously—and there's a world of difference between the two ways. And he allowed it to speak God's difficult-demanding-yet-gracious word, first to himself and then to a nation, a nation that loves to claim its Christian roots yet, in many seasons of its history, has demonstrated its alienation and rejection from God's Kingdom. Many times, King was gripped by the power of the Spirit, who compelled him to say what the majority did not want to hear and were not ready to hear, and he paid the price for it.

There was a moment at the end of the speech when the Spirit surprised him and caught him off guard. Actually, it was the Spirit in the words of Mahalia Jackson (1911-1972), who was also taken up that day with the prophetic vision, who shouted something to King during his speech. Mahalia Jackson sang the Gospel hymn "How I Got Over" just before King approached the lectern (or pulpit). Earlier that summer, on June 23, Jackson had been in Detroit for the Walk to Freedom demonstration to honor the 20th anniversary of the Detroit race riot of 1943 and heard

Dr. King speak that day. In that speech, King used the stirring refrain, "I have a dream." And so there, weeks later, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, listening to King and remembering what he said in Detroit, Jackson called out to him, "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" "Tell them about the dream!" And then King went off script and told us about the dream.

So much has changed in the nation in these sixty years, as we know. We have made great strides. We are more aware that race itself is a social construct forged by those in power (including the church) over centuries to subjugate and "use" a people considered inferior or less-than. There is a greater understanding and awareness of racism's insidious poison running through our collective past. Before the 1960s, Black Americans had limited or no access to many areas of society, today, Black Americans have access to education and professions undreamed in 1963, serving as CEOs of corporations and presidents of universities. There have been and are Black judges, including the Supreme Court, governors, members of Congress, and a president. Undreamed of in 1963.

And yet, it feels like so much hasn't changed, doesn't it? The closing song in the musical *Hairspray* (2002), set in Baltimore, says it well, "I know we've come so far/But we've got so far to go." Poet Langston Hughes (1901-1967) asked in his poem "Harlem," from 1951, "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore— And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat?" [1] I think we know what the answer is. There's a reason we have to say boldly, unapologetically, Black Lives Matter because far too many believe and act like they don't. We have the deaths of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, George Floyd in Minneapolis, Breonna Taylor in Louisville. White Nationalists march, terrorize, and murder in Charlottesville. The legacy of racism in the United States, the legacy of white Christian nationalism, has left nothing but pain and suffering in its wake.

Consider the systemic inequalities Black Americans, Native Americans, and other racial and ethnic minority groups face in the United States:

- The net worth of a typical white family is close to ten times greater than that of a typical Black family. This gap has increased since 2000.
- As of 2019, just under 6 percent of white Americans do not have health insurance. Over 10 percent of Black Americans and over 19 percent of Native Americans are uninsured.
- The 2021 American Community Survey estimates show only 44 percent of Black Americans and 51 percent of Native Americans own their homes, compared to 74 percent of white Americans.
- In 2018, the prison incarceration rate for Black men is almost six times the rate for white men. The rate for Hispanic men is over two and a half times the rate for white men. [2]

This, of course, is only a sampling of statistics.

When Jesus asked Peter (and by extension, the church), "Who do you say that I am?" he posed that question in Caesarea Philippi, a region known for its temples to Greek and Roman gods, temples representing the principalities and powers of the world, including the Emperor. There's even a cave there considered the gate of Hades, the doorway to the underworld. You can see it today. It's before the prevailing gods of the age, including the power of Caesar, that

Jesus compels his followers to answer what is perhaps the most significant question for us to answer, "Who do you say that I am?" And if we say, like Peter, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," that answer now compels us to live out our answer in a world where other gods, such as hate and greed, continue to wield their demonic powers in the world. It means that the church—if it is the church of the Son of the living God—claiming the love and justice of God, must make this claim, this confession before the principalities and powers that continue to rob God's people of the dream.

And it's the White church, in particular, that has a terrible track record regarding racism in America. Remember, Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail (April 16, 1963) was addressed to eight clergy of Birmingham, pastors (including a Presbyterian), priests and rabbis of Birmingham who failed to take up the cause of equality because it was too controversial, in a statement titled "A Call for Unity"—which was essentially a call to do nothing. [3] Many religious leaders refused to denounce racism from their pulpits. The church often did not lead the way; we were sheepish. Al Davies knew that the pulpit had to speak on the issue; the church could not afford to be silent. He invited the leading preachers of his day to contribute a sermon for a book he edited and titled *The Pulpit Speaks on Race*, first published in 1956. My copy indicates that there were subsequent printings in 1958, 1960, 1963, and 1965. [4] I'm not sure when it went out of print. In the Preface, Al writes:

The major denominations have frequently and prophetically spoken on the national board, conference, or assembly levels with official statements, pronouncements, and resolutions. But the words that are ultimately most effect must be uttered on the local level. Regrettably, however, the pulpit record on this level has been disappointing. In fact, most if not all of the civil rights leaders have written off the local congregations and many of their ministers as effective allies in this human rights movement.

But, disappointing as this has been, good things have been spoke in some pulpits of our churches, and it is my hope that this book will not only reflect the Christian concern that is present but will serve as a source book to stimulate a more articulate message in these critical days.

Preachers such as Eugene Carson Blake, former Stated Clerk of the PCUSA, submitted a sermon; so did the Baptist minister Gardner Taylor, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., university chaplain at Yale University, as well as Martin Luther King, Jr., who contributed a sermon titled "Love in Action."

Yes, remind us, tell us, again, Martin, about the dream, for we have terrible memories. Here's what he said sixty years ago:

"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. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. ...

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made 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.

...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." [5]

Sources

- [1] Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951).
- [2] Cited in Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023), 142-143.
- [3] You can view the clergy listed on the *Letter From the Birmingham Jail* on a typed copy held by Samford University Library:
<https://library.samford.edu/special/treasures/2013/king-letter-bham-jail.html>
- [4] Alfred T. Davies, ed. *The Pulpit Speaks on Race* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965).
- [5] The transcript of King's "I Have a Dream" Speech may be found here:
<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.