

Martin Luther King Day 2009

Abundant Life Speech
University of Virginia

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Over the past several years, as our nation has been at war and the global community has grown ever more troubled and unstable, my thoughts have turned time and again to sermons preached by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the final years of his prophetic, Jesus-drenched ministry. You know these messages, “A Christmas Sermon on Peace”, “I See the Promised Land”, and the searing, heartbroken “A Time to Break Silence”—delivered at Riverside Church in New York one year to the date of his murder in Memphis. These sermons are intense and mournful and simmering with righteous anger.

In those late years of 1967 and 1968, with chaos and disillusionment all around, with many of his early supporters long gone, Dr. King railed against the idolatrous “prophesying of smooth patriotism” and those who had exchanged the Cross of Christ with the Southern Way of Life and with American ambitions. With the nation unhinged by violence at home and abroad, with the dream fast becoming *a nightmare*, Dr. King’s final sermons read as a lament for the nation.

“It is midnight in our world today,” King said, “We are experiencing a darkness so deep...we can hardly see which way to turn.”

“I fear that our nation’s soul has been poisoned.”

The words are poignant: ten years earlier this same Baptist preacher, while serving a church in Montgomery, Alabama, had summoned together a group of social gospel reformers calling themselves the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; their motto—their mission—was “redeeming the soul of America”. But now here he is questioning America. Now the prophet Martin fears that our nation’s soul has been poisoned.

And yet—as we know—even in the darkness of midnight, Dr. King could hear the quiet knocking of hope and he could glimpse the coming of a new day. Even in that late hour, a year before his murder in Memphis, Dr. King believed that the only hope that can lead us out of the darkness of war and poverty and hostility is an audacious hope. The hope of the Hebrew prophets, the hope of the lion lying down with the lamb; the audacious hope that the moral arc of the universe, though long, bends finally towards justice. That a new generation of men and women would rise from disillusionment and despair and rededicate themselves, as Dr. King said, “to the long and difficult but oh so beautiful struggle for a new world”.

You might remember that in 1956, Dr. King sat alone at midnight at his kitchen table afraid and anxious.

In recent weeks, the death threats had started to take a toll, increasing in number to thirty or forty each day, and he'd just received yet another.

King felt himself overcome with fear. He got out of bed and began to walk the floor. He said he "had heard these things before, but for some reason that night it got to [him]." Afraid and anxious, King sat down at his kitchen table. "I was ready to give up. I felt myself faltering," he said.

King thought of his little girl Yoki sleeping in her crib, of her "little gentle smile" and of Coretta, who had sacrificed her music career to follow her husband south.

Alone now in the midnight kitchen, with the silences of the Alabama night masking the great tumult in his soul, King grasped for the first time the utter and complete seriousness of his situation and with it the inescapable fact that his family could be snatched away from him at any minute, or more likely he from them. King felt his soul "melted because of trouble", as the Psalmists said, "at wit's end". "I couldn't take it any longer," King said. "I was weak."

But in the midnight kitchen, with his head buried in his hands, King bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. He said:

"Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I still think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid." Dr. King was at the end of his powers. He had nothing left. He'd come to the point where he couldn't do it alone.

With his prayer enveloping the midnight room and house, King then heard a voice, say, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world." King heard "the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."

In the darkness of midnight, amidst the terrors of the Jim Crow South, Dr. King heard a knocking of hope. It was the voice of Jesus, and in that hour of despair was born resilience and vision, courage and calm. Indeed, strength for the journey. King bet his life on the proposition that the love poured out in Jesus available to us here and now.

Later that same year (1956), in the final weeks of this 382-day protest that launched 20th century America's greatest social movement, Dr. King addressed a jubilant audience at the Holt Street Baptist Church that had just received word of the United States Supreme Court's decision in favor of the Montgomery Improvement Association. While we

will need to protest and to boycott, King said, the end is not the protest or the boycott. The end of our struggle is “reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community.”

What a beautiful vision: the beloved community.

The following week, sitting on a bus by a white minister and peaceworker from Texas, Glenn Smiley, King told reporters, “Now is the time to move from protest to reconciliation”.

Sometimes it feels that we as a nation and as a church are frozen at that very moment.

What became of the beloved community?

We gather on this day, January 19, 2009, in celebration of Dr. King’s vision, on the eve of the inauguration of President Barack Obama. We celebrate this historic moment as a glorious chapter in the unfolding of the Dream, the coming of a new day. I imagine Dr. King, in the company of the civil rights saints—Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray Adams, Aaron Henry, and E. D. Nixon—sitting down in heaven to a large banquet feast, filled with the great soulful food of the south, raising their glasses of sweetened iced tea to the election of an African American to President of the United States.

I do not want to sound partisan, but I must tell you that as a white southerner, the great-great grandchild of slave owners, pushing the button in the poll booth for Barack Obama felt like being swept up a

Pentecostal moment. So let us be joyful in this dawning of the daybreak of a new era in the history of our nation.

But when we ask the question, what became of the beloved community, we must also turn our sights in a different direction. For the hardest part of building beloved community is not envisioning the Dream, and believe it or not, it is not even the election of a black president; the hardest part of building beloved community is learning to live for mercy and justice long after the inaugural festivities have come to an end.

Some call it perseverance, others eschatological patience, others just keeping your hand to the plow.

The hardest part is figuring out how to be faithful in the meantime.

The hardest part is nurturing the hope we need to remain ambassadors of reconciliation, when the camera lights have been turned off, and we're left alone with the shock of an ordinary morning in an ordinary town.

One of the lessons I learned as a student of the civil rights movement was that as long as the movement remained anchored in the church—in the energies, convictions, images of worshipping communities—the movement had a vision. The work of organizing and

building communities in distressed and excluded places was nourished by the deep waters of faith.

That's why, in my humble opinion, it's important today to celebrate the mission and work of Abundant Life Ministry as a visible and concrete place that exemplifies the joys and the challenges of building beloved community.

Years ago, Amy Sherman shared with a group of students in my class the vision of shalom: "We are called to give people foretastes of the coming Kingdom."

Rydell and Hope and Lindsay and Brett and Eddie and Rebecca and all the people who form and have formed the community we call Abundant Life are as much the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream as the glorious election of Barack Obama, because here, you and all your other fellow travelers show us that the dream must be guarded in the everyday practices of mercy and justice.

Dr. King's dream was not his dream; it was not the dream of the 60's; Dr. King's dream was the dream of God, a gift of the spirit, the beloved community of Christ, a foretaste of the Kingdom, the mission of the Church to heal the broken body of the world.

So let us not forget that the long, hard road from Dr. King to President Barack Obama runs through Prospect and the simple and often unrecognized acts of kindness and compassion of Abundant Life,

and indeed through all of us here and everywhere involved in the difficult and agonizing but oh so beautiful struggle for a new world.

Amen—and Happy King Day!