

"KING AND KING OF KINGS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of a great American, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. And this weekend churches and synagogues are observing Dr. King's birthday joyously and contemplatively and hopefully imploring those in attendance to enlist in the battle against racism. I liked something Doc Rivers of the Knicks said this week.

"Talking about race makes people uncomfortable. But I guess the worst thing you can do is not talk about it".

I make no pretense of being neutral in my appraisal of Martin Luther King, Jr.. While I'm sure that he had his flaws and made his mistakes, I nevertheless hold him to be one of God's important men in this country and in this century - a Christian prophet who revealed an amazing degree of the love and the courage and the judgement which were incarnate in our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Dr. King represents greatness in our time. Let me review his life story with you.

LIFE STORY

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in Atlanta in 1929. His father, a Baptist minister, was the son of a share-cropper and had known the worst about poverty and ignorance and discrimination. He was determined to give his son another kind of heritage. Young Martin recalls the day when as a child he went to a downtown shoestore with his father.

"We sat down in the first empty seats at the front of the store. A young white clerk came up and murmured politely, 'I'll be happy to wait on you if you'll just move to those seats in the rear'. My father answered, 'There's nothing wrong with these seats. We're quite comfortable here'. 'Sorry' said the clerk, 'but you'll have to move.' 'We'll either buy shoes sitting here' my father said, 'or we won't buy shoes at all'. Whereupon he took me by the hand and walked out of the store. This was the first time I had ever seen my father so angry. I still remember walking down the street beside him as he muttered, 'I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it'".

Sensitive of spirit and keen of mind, young King finished High School at 15, and Morehouse College at 19. He thought of being a doctor, a lawyer, and at length decided on the ministry. He came north to enroll at Crozer Theological Seminary, a Baptist Seminary at Chester, Pennsylvania. There he was one of six blacks in a student body of 100. He led his class - both academically and as its President. He was given a Fellowship to study for his PhD at the University of his choice, and he chose Boston University, where he entered in the Fall of 1951. At both Crozer and Boston, he was introduced to the heritage of great minds and spirits - Kant, Hegel, Thoreau, Gandhi, Luther, Tillich, Niebuhr. In Boston, he was also introduced to the young lady who became his wife, Coretta Scott, who was a student at the New England Conservatory of Music.

In 1954, they went to Montgomery, Alabama, where Martin Luther King, Jr. became the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. That first year was simply a happy year - for the Church and for the parsonage family, but then on December 1st, 1955, there came the event, "the moment" that joined with "the man".

THE EVENT AND AFTERMATH

Late that afternoon, a black seamstress by the name of Rosa Parks boarded a bus to go home from her work in a city department store. She took her seat with other blacks toward the back of the bus, behind the white passengers. When later six whites boarded the bus, the driver asked the black folks nearest the front to give up their seats to the whites. Rosa Parks alone refused. Asked later why she had done it, she said,

"I don't really know why I couldn't move. There was no plan at all. I was just tired from shopping. My feet hurt."

The driver called the police who arrested her for violating the city's segregation ordinance.

That event stung and strengthened the black people in Montgomery as nothing else had done, and Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as their leader. A boycott against the busses developed and for a year the black people formed car pools, walked, drove wagons and rode mules. From the beginning, Dr. King set the thermostat for the manner of their protest. Addressing a mass meeting of people at the onset, he said,

"Love must be our regulating ideal. Once again we must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the centuries, 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you!' If you protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, 'There lived a great people - a black people - who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization!'"

It was a rough year with threats, pressures, arrests, bombs directed at King and his people. But they stood firm and when at length the Supreme Court struck down the city's bus segregation laws, the Montgomery buses were integrated and King had become a national figure. He was only 28 and that is pretty young to be famous and powerful. King knew it and earlier he said to a friends,

"Frankly, I'm worried to death. A man who hits the peak at 27 has a tough job ahead. People will be expecting me to pull rabbits out of the hat for the rest of my life!"

And the rest of his life was little more than 11 years...hard to believe... but those years were crammed with troubles and triumphs. We can only touch the high spots. He was the guiding spirit in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which summoned blacks to,

"Assert their human dignity (and) to accept Christian love in full knowledge of its power to defy evil."

In 1959, he and his wife went to India to visit Gandhi's country. In 1960, they moved to Atlanta where the younger King became co-pastor with his father, yet actually devoted most of his time to a ministry that was nationwide. He wrote. He lectured. He led his people during crises in Albany, Georgia, in Birmingham, in St. Augustine and in Selma. Old customs and old laws that were designed to

keep blacks "in their place" were challenged (meaning an inferior place in a segregated society.) He did it with dignity and a steady plea for non-violence. He was often in prison. His home was bombed. He was stabbed, but he went on.

Remember 1963 and how he organized the March on Washington, an event that TIME described as,

"A spectacle of disorganized order, with a stateliness that no amount of planning could have produced."

Some 200,000 strong - whites and blacks and people of all ages - walked from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial and there the man gave one of his most moving addresses with the recurring theme, "I have a dream...." In 1964 he won the Nobel Peace Prize, the youngest "Peace Laureate" in history.

Early in April of 1968, King was in Memphis to rally support for the garbage workers of that city and at the age of 39 he was killed by an assassin's bullet. Many of us can remember just where we were and what we were doing early that evening as the news came to us in this city that King had been shot...murdered. I was at the corner of Second Avenue and 86th Street waiting for a light to change when I heard what had happened. I couldn't believe it and if it hadn't been for Mayor John Lindsey who walked the streets of Harlem that night, things could have been bad. Things could have been very bad.

That was 26 years ago this April, but as so often happens, a man in death is as much a force to be reckoned with as a man in life. And just as a New Testament writer said of a predecessor, so we can say of King,

"He died, but through his faith, he is still speaking to us".

FAITH IN GOD

And so he is. For myself, the "ongoing" message of his life stems from the Christian characteristics of his life, the first of which is his faith in God...in the purposes and power of God.

The manner of this man's life was deeply rooted in the manner of his faith. It was his faith that kept clear his vision of true freedom for his people. He would often say,

"God is working through history for the salvation of His children. As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us!"

His faith gave him a high measure of calmness and steadiness. There's a passage that concerns a night in Montgomery (in his writings)...when after a particularly strenuous day, his sleep had been interrupted by one more call threatening his life. Sleepless and distraught, the minister went downstairs and over the kitchen table, he payed aloud in words he later remembered to be,

"I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. 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."

Wrote King about that particular experience,

"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 to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm."

There is nothing in that experience that has to do with a man's color or his country or his century. That is the experience that God has promised to any person and every person, "My grace is sufficient for you". First, his faith in God.

RELIANCE ON NON-VIOLENCE

Second, his reliance on non-violence. Of the Montgomery protest, he is reported to have said,

"The principle of non-violence became the guiding light of our movement. Christ furnished the spirit and the motivation, and Gandhi furnished the method."

If people think of non-violence as synonymous with subservience, timidity, appeasement then Dr. King does not fit the picture. He was determined, insistent and courageous. After his house had been bombed in Montgomery, a crowd of angry black people gathered round, ready to return force with force, but Dr. King calmed them by calling out,

"Don't get panicky. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. We are not advocating violence. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them, love them and let them know you love them."

One night back in the Spring of 1966, I remember hearing King speak at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and sitting not far from where the man stood, I recall how with great eloquence he proclaimed that love and non-violence were stronger weapons than bombs and bullets. For me that night was an unforgettable spiritual experience, one of those moments when the "heavens opened". Not long after he said,

"If every black in the United States turns to violence, I will chose to be that one lone voice preaching that this is the wrong way."

And to the end he remained a consistent apostle of non-violence. So he lived and so he died. Part of his legacy is found in his belief of a first century hope,

"That love is better than spite...that courage is better than fear....that faith is truer than doubt."

DIGNITY OF MAN

And finally, his concern for the dignity of man. Born black in a society that was accustomed to treating black people with something less than respect and dignity, and because of an incident in a Montgomery bus, he found himself the leader of a powerful movement to restore self-respect for black people and to insist upon equal justice and opportunity. And he did it by reaffirming the Christian ideal and the American dream.

In what has become a famous letter written from a Birmingham jail, he wrote,

"One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage."

There is something in our human nature that feeds upon the notion of superiority and supremacy. And it is not good. In the day of Jesus, it was the Jew over the Samaritan. In Hitler's day, it was the German Aryans over the Jews. In our day, it has often been the white over the non-white. So many have been taught in one way or another, verbally or non-verbally, that minority people are inferior. Martin Luther King had a vital part in challenging old concepts and old customs and restoring a people to an assertion of self-hood and a sense of dignity.

Let us always remember that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ultimate dream was not one of brokenness, but of brotherhood. That day in Washington, thirty years ago last August...perhaps you were there...he said:

"I have a dream that one day...the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood."

Again, a 20th century hope that reminds us of a First century dream of St. Paul,

"For there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female - for you are all ONE in Christ Jesus".

PRAYER

On this special weekend, we pause to thank you, O God, for a man of our time whose faith in You was unbelievable, whose reliance on non-violence as the way for us to walk, and whose belief in the dignity of all Your children is still a challenge to us. For this great prophet of our century, we give You thanks. In the name and the spirit of the King of Kings, we offer this prayer. Amen.

Before I review his life's story and talk about his legacy, let me say a few personal words so you'll know where I'm coming from. I came to this city in 1956 with something of a "dream" of my own...that of building a church that was "open" to all people...inclusive and diverse....interracial, inter-denominational and international.

Growing up upstate, the son of a Methodist minister, I can now look back and say that "my dream" was nourished by several persons....a father who when we lived in Albany in the late thirties and early forties, often took me with him on visits to the Washing Carver Center on lower Second Street. It was a dream that was nourished as a teenager attending Summer Church camps where I was introduced to an articular black man in his mid twenties by the name of Jim Farmer. Farmer became head of CORE, at the same time that King was head of the Southern Leadership Conference. Jim Farmer spent a weekend in our home in Gloversville when I was 16 or 17. He became a hero to my youthful years. There was another man by the name of Bill James who came up to a Summer Church Conference in Poultney, Vermont from NYC. Little did I realize that one day Bill James would be a colleague in ministry down here in this city where for close to 35 years he was minister of Metropolitan Community Methodist Church, 126th Street and Madison Avenue. Some of you know Bill. He's always been one of my heroes. ever since that day when I first hear hi spe k to a group of high school kids in the summer of 1946.

In coming here in 1956, I recall that in January of 1957...about this time of the year, there was a black gentleman by the name of Joseph Paul who would come in here on a Sunday morning, listen to the choir rehearse and then leave around a quarter to eveln. He never felt comfortable staying for the service. We've come a long ways.

King entered Boston University the same Fall I did and althought I did not know him there, the chances are we took course together in Social Ethics, and Systematice Theology and Church History. You'll remember that it was Dr. Harold DeWolfe of Boston University School of Theology who brought the eulgoiy at King's funeral in 1968.

I do remember from my Boston days that on occasional trips in 1954 to see a special person in Richmond, Virginia that in order to help pay for those trips I would advertise that I was going south...and so often two or three blacks friend from Seminary would ride along with me...getting in a trip "home". perhaps in Baltimore or Richmond. We would come to the end of the NJ Turnpikem cross the Delaware Memorial Bridge and then it was time for a cup of coffee and a hamburger...and I would pull over at a terminal and take the orders from my friends becuase, as they put it,

"Phill....we're not welcome inside...bring it out to us....a hamburger would be fine...some coffee....we don't want to start a riot or go to jail....not now...we just wanna get home safely"
(The sit-ins and bus rides began two years later).

It was en "eye-opener" to me. We've come a long ways....I remember their names, those friends - David Bridell...Bob Williams....Cornish Rogers....

Phil Cousins -

PASTORAL PRAYER: January 16, 1994

ETERNAL SPIRIT - WHO...whether we walk through green pastures,
beside life's still waters, or
through the valley of the shadow of death,
canst be our guide and our helper -

BEHOLD US NOW - here in this sacred place of worship,
seeking in a common prayer, light upon our
separate ways, and strength and illumination
within our individual lives.

SEEK US OUT - one by one - in those special circumstances of
individual need that have drawn us here to this
sanctuary on this cold January Sunday morning,

AND HERE - lift up the unhappy souls into joy...the discouraged souls into
encouragement...the defeated souls into victory - and thus
enable each of us:

"To fight the good fight,
To keep the faith,
To finish the course".

BREATHE into our hearts, dear God, goodwill and generosity.

BREAKDOWN our stubborn prejudices.

SAVE US from letting un-Christlike attitudes and actions take
hold within us.

FORGIVE US that at times we can be such a part of the problems of
this world and such a small fraction of its solutions.

COMFORT US, LORD, where we are hurting.

GUIDE AND UPHOLD US through the days of this week that is ahead that we may
be more than conquerors in the inner struggle against
all that is cheap, hurtful, degrading in ourselves and
in society.

HELP THOSE GATHERED HERE IN WORSHIP and who take Jesus seriously and who
try to follow in His footsteps always to be:

Agents of His love....pure in thought, and
gracious in speech, kind, charitable and
courageous in judgements of others and in
their own actions.

AND FINALLY, DEAR GOD, FATHER OF US ALL...

"Grant us the SERENITY to accept the things we cannot
change; the COURAGE to change the things we can; and
the WISDOM to know the difference."

In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, January 16, 1994

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of welcome to the visitors....delighted you're here, and we hope.....greet you in a more personal way...either at... be free in the sharing of your name...fill out, or sing... Come, worship with us....come, work with us....
- B. Doing the Lord's work here at this busy corner...since 1837. Fourth building out of which this congregation has served.... Beacone of light and love to thousands. Roots are deep in the....
- C. We minister in the name of Christ...and it is in HIS loving spirit.....members: wear your name tags and step out and make some new friends, remembering how someone reached to you and made you feel "at home" on your first Sunday....

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are given you in your bulletin. Review them carefully...noting such things as the study groups. The "Hounds" are beginning the study of a new book, Why Do Good Things Happen to Bad People....that should bring in some new "Hounds"....
- B. Remember the Pot-Luck Supper and Hymn Sing scheduled for this evening....the time is....and the place is the third floor. It's going to be a grand evening...some personal reminiscences by one or two members who knew and worked with Dr. King.... Gary Klein will be at the piano and Karen Oldham will assist with the hymn sing. Hymn sings are always fun....bring along your choices...reminds me of a hymn sing we had here some time back....."I'll take HIM, and HIM, and HIM"...
- C. Special appeal today for which envelopes are in the bulletin. We invite you to respond with a gift....it's for a good cause. It's called HUMAN RELATIONS....one of six special appeals of the UM Church across the year. Respond to this appeal with \$200.00.
- D. Financial notes. Pledge cards still coming in....we're now up and over the \$ 160,000 mark....\$ 5,000 to go. Be sure to pick up your box of envelopes if you asked for a box. Save postage.
- E. One last word. Several of us leave for Israel tonight...for a 10 day trip with our Bishop around the Holy Land. While there, I shall put in a call to the Lord...local call there...and get some word on the Super Bowl prediction which I shall have for you two weeks from today. I know some of you can't wait to hear the word from...

OFFERING

- A. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" Let us...

