

## **The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. : A Prophet for Ordinary Time**

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New Covenant Fellowship, Champaign Illinois

During the season of advent, we tried to imagine ourselves back in time with the prophets of old, waiting for deliverance from an unjust world. A few weeks of that kind of time-travel helped us renew our joy about Christ's unprecedented birth, the radical way in which our messiah deliverer came as a helpless infant, born under occupation and poverty.

For advent, it's as if we pretend that Christ had not yet come. For me, there's a tension in that. The tension is this - that as we try to imagine a time before Christ came as King, it's a little too easy to look around and see the world as the same as before Christ came as King.

After all, we celebrate Advent in the darkest time of the year. And certainly when we look at the picture of the world Jeremiah lived in, or that Isaiah lived in, or that Mary lived it, it doesn't look all that different from ours sometimes.

Christmas is over, the king messiah has arrived – the traditional church calls this “Ordinary Time” - so how does the world look different? How are we changed? Exactly how are we delivered collectively from the deathly orders? We need help in seeing this sometimes. It turns out that we need prophets after the messiah's arrival as much as before – we just need them for something different.

Before the messiah came, the main job of prophets was to get God's people back into the right posture of waiting, an active kind of waiting that rehearsed the work God was preparing to do, helped make the visions real.

After the messiah came, the job of the prophets shifted. They still have to get us in to the right posture, but now it's not one of waiting, of alignment with the reality of work that is truly completed.

Before Christ's arrival, I think of prophetic work as radiating out from the prophets and the people who followed them. In the darkness, a few bright lights aligned themselves, shone out.

After the messiah's arrival and completed work, I think of the world as filled with light, while some of us still harbor darkness. Some who harbor darkness even band together and accomplish great evil – but they do so against the light, against what is real. The job of the prophet after Christmas, after the Messiah's arrival, is to help God's people, individually and collectively, open ourselves up to the light, the true state of the world.

We can read all the stories of the saints this way, from the early church figures throughout Acts and the Epistles to those even in recent times. And we have a great recent example of such a saint, such a prophet for Ordinary Time, in the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom our nation honors this weekend.

Let's look at Dr. King's work as a post-Messiah prophet, calling us into the light of Christ's completed work:

Dr. King spoke and wrote, as is well known, with prophetic directness about the evils of this world, and the evil record of this country in particular. He called out racial injustice both in the Jim Crow south and among white liberals like many of us. He called out economic injustice and how this nation's wealthy depend on keeping much of the world in poverty. Dr. King called out militarism, particularly in relation to this country's role in Vietnam. He called out colonialism and imperialism, and took heart in how many countries during his own lifetime found independence out from under colonial rule.

Importantly, King's judgments, like those of the best of prophets, came from a point of view, and with a particular analysis, a diagnostic. The people who kept these structures of inequality in place, in King's view, were working against the grain of the universe - they were ignoring the completed work of Christ. King looked at evil squarely - both the evil of white men turning powerful hoses and dogs on children, and the evil of white folks telling Black folks to wait until things inevitably worked out for good. Where Dr. King saw evil, he saw weeds that would be choked out, grass that would be cut down.

King once preached a sermon entitled "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore," which took Israel's escape from slavery across the Red Sea, and the dashing of their oppressors by that sea, as a starting point.

Here's an excerpt:

"Pharaoh stubbornly refused to respond to the cry of Moses, even when plague after plague threatened his domain. This tells us something about evil that we must never forget, namely that evil is recalcitrant and determined, and never voluntarily relinquishes its hold short of a persistent, almost fanatical resistance. But there is a checkpoint in the universe: evil cannot permanently organize itself."

King goes on in that sermon to seize on a King James Version translation of Hebrews 12:11:

"Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

Dr. King hones in on that **NEVERTHELESS AFTERWARD**. He sees in that **NEVERTHELESS AFTERWARD** an evidence of the real order of the universe. Yes we suffer but nevertheless afterward, peace is what lasts. Yes Pharaoh exploits God's people, **NEVERTHELESS AFTERWARD** they are rescued. Yes Pilate yields to the crowd and crucifies Jesus, **NEVERTHELESS AFTERWARD** Christ returns, defeating death and empire.

Lest you mistake this for a polyanna or sentimental admonition to "look for the silver lining," here's an excerpt from another sermon where Dr. King reveals a little more about his view of evil:

From his sermon entitled “Our God is Able”:

“Let us notice that God is able to subdue all the powers of evil. In affirming that God is able to conquer evil we admit the reality of evil. Christianity has never dismissed evil as illusory, or an error of the mortal mind. It reckons with evil as a force that has objective reality. But Christianity contends that evil contains the seed of its own destruction. History is the story of evil forces that advance with seemingly irresistible power only to be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice. There is a law in the moral world—a silent, invisible imperative, akin to the laws in the physical world—which reminds us that life will work only in a certain way.”

Two things strike me here - this notion that Evil contains the seeds of its own destruction - and that this is a historical process, not an abstract one. Dr. King knows that evil is historical, and not abstract, because as a Black man in America, he sees the effects of historical violence every day. Dr. King knows that the crushing of evil is historical, and not abstract, not only because he is seeing it in his collective work for justice, but because he celebrates the historical defeat of evil accomplished at the cross.

As Dr. King said in his Christmas sermon of 1967, 50 years ago, “We stand in the Christmas Season and think of the Easter Season simultaneously, for the two somehow go together. Christ came to show us the way. Men love darkness rather than light, and they crucified Him, and there on Good Friday on the Cross it was still dark, but then Easter came, and Easter is an eternal reminder of the fact the truth-crushed earth will rise again. Easter justifies the saying that “No lie can live forever.”

This is all Martin Luther King, Jr. the prophet, calling us back to live in the truth of what Christ has accomplished.

But it bears looking even closer at where King draws his confidence. And for this we do have to go to Easter. For it is there that King finds both the clearest picture of undeserved and indeed unnatural suffering, and of unqualified and unheralded love as a response.

In his sermon “Love in Action,” Dr. King meditates not only on the teachings of Christ, but on the lesson offered in how those teachings find action. For Dr. King, the central moment of Christ’s ministry is not in his death, nor in his resurrection, but in the moment where he forgives his oppressors.

“The moment of testing emerges. Christ, the innocent Son of God, is stretched in painful agony on an uplifted cross. What place is there for love and forgiveness now? How will Jesus react? What will he say? The answer to these questions bursts forth in majestic splendor. Jesus lifts his thorn-crowned head and cries in words of cosmic proportions: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” This was Jesus’ finest hour; this was his heavenly response to his earthly rendezvous with destiny.”

Dr. King sees in such an act of love, a refusal to answer violence with violence or hate with hate, the revelation of the universe's true nature, that "law almost akin to the laws of the physical world." Jesus on the cross is more aligned with the world than his oppressors, is actually living in this world, where they are not. As Dr. King is often quoted, "only love can conquer hate."

Now we should take great care here, especially us White folks. Far too often, Whites point to that aspect of King's message and nod our heads, essentially saying yes, he's right, why aren't Black folks in America answering our White hate with love? To reduce King's work to the message of "love conquers hate" is to treat him as a moral teacher rather than a prophet. A prophet is someone who is fundamentally invested in action, not just teaching.

As a prophet, King is pointing to the way the world works, so that he can act on that order, and lead others to do the same. It is crucial that he sees the reason to answer hate with love as historical – based in the example of Jesus - and that he sees the opportunities to answer hate with love as also historical, as part of deliberate collective action within specific instances of and outgrowths of hate. And this is where, as with prophets of old, we should look at how Dr. King lived, and how he sought to put his vision of the world's true moral character into action.

Dr. King's leadership in 1963 in Birmingham Alabama is a great place to see King the prophet at work. I'll summarize those important efforts here briefly, toward getting to a singular and prophetic moment that occurs at the center of the story.

In Birmingham in late 1962 and early 1963, Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began to work with a consortium of Black churches to plan and push for change in a few key aspects of life there in Alabama. It's important to note that this effort, like many, was in concert with parallel efforts to bring cases to the courts for prosecution and deliberation. But in Birmingham the primary object was not first to get laws changed, but to get White business owners to end their working even within the law to keep a regime of terror in place.

In Birmingham, by law Black folks could shop at stores, but they couldn't eat at lunch counters in those stores. They had separate bathrooms, water fountains, entrances and exits. They were kept from key civic positions of influence. And so Whites were able to keep an order in place every day meant to intimidate Blacks into submission and sub-human status.

To change this – and indeed to bring their White brothers and sisters into compliance with the law of the nation and of the universe - Dr. King and other leaders worked out a careful strategy based on nonviolence - a plan to "fill up the jails" and peacefully render a system of enforcing white supremacy unable to function.

It was a brilliant campaign. They mapped out every whites-only lunch counter in town, counted seats and stools, mapped the entrances and exits. They chose a time to boycott the town's busiest stores during Easter season, the second-busiest time of the year. They traveled the country to raise money for bailing protestors out of jail once the effort began. And then they carried out both the boycott and lunch counter sit-ins. Peaceful arrests began, followed by protests, marches, and prayer gatherings in the streets, which led to more arrests.

The revolution would grow and grow, eventually meeting with success in realizing all their goals in Birmingham. And though the Black citizens of the town paid a price in enduring violent, deathly, retaliation by Whites, things did change in that town. More people, Black and White, were able to live in the light, oriented to the true world of love.

At the center of this season of action was a pivotal, prophetic moment for Dr. King. First, some time after the protests began, Dr. King and the leaders decided to violate an injunction against further public gatherings - their first actual breaking of a law. Then they decided that King and another leader should finally be arrested themselves, after spending so much time behind the scenes. But on the evening of their planned arrest, they learned that the funds used for bail had been frozen.

King faced a decision. Either he would proceed with being publicly arrested, risking a dangerous stay in jail for him and 300 others without sufficient bail, or he would leave town to raise more funds. By leaving town in the middle of the action, he risked weakening the movement through appearing to be avoiding putting his own life on the line. By proceeding with the plan he risked actual death, and potential harm to himself and others.

King relates making his decision at the Birmingham hotel where they were planning the events. It's a scene straight out of the stories of the prophets of old:

“I walked to another room in the back of the suite, and stood in the center of the floor. I think I was standing also at the center of all that my life had brought me to be. I thought of the twenty-four people, waiting in the next room. I thought of the three hundred, waiting in prison. I thought of the Birmingham Negro community, waiting. Then my mind leaped beyond the Gaston Motel, past the city jail, past city lines and state lines, and I thought of twenty million black people who dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promised land of integration and freedom. There was no more room for doubt. I pulled off my shirt and pants, got into work clothes and went.”

Dr. King would be arrested on Good Friday and not heard from through Easter weekend, kept in solitary confinement and without contact with lawyers or his family. And Dr. King's act of faith was rewarded, for others without his aid raised money for their release.

This was a key moment of the campaign, a prophet acting on his vision of God's reality. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, he emerged unscathed. Like Elijah in the desert, God came to feed him. Like Mary, he actively claimed his place in the grand narrative of salvation.

Dr. King was acting in confidence that the order of evil and death keeping the Black citizens of Birmingham in terror could not last. And he was acting in confidence that the reality to which he should align himself, should wholly give himself over – was love.

When I look at Dr. King's writings, what moves me so much as a White person, a man who benefits every day from continued White Supremacy in this country, is that he acted out of love and sacrifice first on behalf of his brothers and sisters, but also on behalf of me.

“If our white brothers are to master fear,” King wrote, “they must depend not only on their commitment to Christian love but also on the Christ-like love which the Negro generates toward them.”

That’s an incredible statement, a truly Christ-like one reflected in his decision to surrender himself to arrest in a city ruled by Whites who saw him as sub-human. For Dr. King, to love was to sacrifice for ones brothers and sisters, but also for one’s enemies. He clearly saw his enemies in Birmingham as missing out on the reality of God’s love. Dr. King was fighting yes firstly and strongly for Black Liberation. But he was also working for liberation of the oppressors from their own hate.

That’s how just as at Advent this season I found new reason to be thankful for Mary as a prophet, this Martin Luther King weekend I’m finding new reason to be thankful for Dr. King as a prophet.

The more I learn about just how far from the light Whites live in this country, and the more I experience of the light and truth and love of the Black Liberational church, the more I see the very salvation of White Americans as dependent on the love shown them by Black Americans. I have been learning so much more about God of late through the art, scholarship, actions and teaching of Black folks, and for that I am so grateful.

As a man from a long line of Americans who benefitted greatly from White supremacy, it is by God’s mercy that I know Jesus at all. The wells I have to draw from are truly poisoned, in that many of my family and ancestors did not live as if Christ had come, as if love was the order of the day. They clung instead to darkness.

I owe people of color in this country an unpayable debt, and endless labors to right the wrongs that still exist in this country. That in the midst of that I should still receive from people of color any benefit, any glimpse of the light of God that enriches me and lets me further into God’s love, is just crushing, breathtaking.

And yet that is the kind of God we celebrate here at New Covenant. I shouldn’t be surprised when I see it again, but I always am.

When we go to the communion tables each week, we most always remember how gracious the gift of God’s love is, that we receive it even when we struggle to give it to others. This week, I would invite you to go to the table keeping in mind the particular, amazing grace of our receiving God’s love even from and through those whom we have oppressed, those today and in history on whose oppression our livelihoods depend.

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