



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., *Rector*

## Prophets, Dreams, & Fears

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 19, 2020*

*The Second Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Based on Ephesians 6:10-20; Luke 6: 27-36*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

Tomorrow is a national holiday. In 1983, Congress passed legislation making the third Monday in January a commemoration of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In all of American history, he is the only Christian minister to be so honored. Tomorrow banks, schools, and businesses will close, memorial services will be held in cities and towns across the nation, and retailers will give thanks for another three-day holiday.

I suspect that only a fraction of the folks who have tomorrow “off” will give much thought to the man whose memory is being honored, and that will make this holiday no different from most any other Federal Holiday. Labor Day, Veterans’ Day, Presidents’ Day—even the Fourth of July—are all observances that have lost some measure of their original intent.

Whenever I do hear people talking about The Reverend Dr. King, it seems to me that there’s something we are forgetting even as we, as a nation, seek to remember him. In the 37<sup>th</sup> year of this official commemoration and in the 52<sup>nd</sup> year after his death, there are videos and movies and books by the score that recall Dr. King’s ministry and his message. School children across the nation study his life and memorize his most famous addresses.

But I believe we’ve forgotten something crucial along the way. We have forgotten what Martin Luther King Jr. was like *before* he became a national icon. We’ve forgotten the fear he provoked in those who benefitted from the old systems of inequality and segregation. We’ve forgotten how his simple, biblically-based lessons on justice and equality provoked fear and anger in the hearts of so many otherwise level-headed men and women. Of course, not *everyone* is old enough to remember any such fear and countless others never saw his life or his ministry as a threat to their own well-being. For many he was a hero; an example of what a prophet can do when summoned by God and properly utilizing his gifts.

The news of Dr. King’s death created quite a stir in the suburban neighborhood where I grew up. Centerville, Ohio, is a long way from Selma or Montgomery, but even there, everyone knew The Reverend Dr. King. He had been on TV. He had led boycotts. He was a protestor. He had been arrested by the police. He was a troublemaker.

When a special news bulletin flashed across our television reporting that he was dead—shot and killed by a sniper in Memphis, Tennessee—the reporter made it sound as though his murder was shocking and unbelievable. But those were shocking and unbelievable times: We had seen children fire-hosed in the streets of Alabama. We had seen policemen stand idly by as angry mobs savagely beat non-violent advocates for integration. We had seen a state governor stand in a schoolhouse door, blocking the enrollment of a frightened young black student.

No, his death was not shocking. John F. Kennedy's death had been shocking; but Martin Luther King Jr's death was, I'm afraid, all too predictable. When King told his followers, "It really doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountain top," most of them understood they were listening to a man who was walking *every day of his life in the valley of the shadow of death*.

I was twelve years old at the time, which is a strange age, because when you're twelve, you see everything so clearly. Everything I knew about Dr. King had been explained to me by my parents, and so what I knew was that Martin Luther King wanted to disturb our family's peaceful and happy way of life. He wanted to change things somehow so that life would be better for his people and worse for mine. It was so clear as to be absolutely transparent.

Now my parents were very good people, and I love them very, very much. My father would have been the first person to offer a neighbor a helping-hand, and my mother never met a child she didn't have time to care for or play with. And they taught me that you're not supposed to tell everything you know, "Some things are best left unsaid," they used to say.

But the problem with preaching the gospel is that it's fundamentally an exercise in truth-telling. Preachers have a responsibility to retell holy stories and to recall and to remember the Truth. And the truth is, on the night when The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and killed, no one in our house was really very sad. We were not shocked, or surprised, or even angry, like so many of those I watched being interviewed on TV. We were quiet and serene, as if somehow a cosmic imbalance had just been righted; as if the very hand of God had re-established a peaceful and law-abiding equilibrium in the face of near chaos.

That dangerous man who had so threatened the status quo, was now gone!

Later on, when rioting began in a number of cities in response to King's assassination, it was rumored in our neighborhood that a mob of black activists from Dayton's West Side were coming to the white side of town to exact vengeance for King's death. And a powerful, irrational, uncontrollable fear fell over our family and some of the other families in our neighborhood. My father pulled the car out of the garage and I rode with him to the P & K Hardware Store, where he bought two boxes of shotgun shells.

And when we came home, he carefully loaded his 12-gauge shotgun with the shells, and the sound of those shells being racked into chamber of that gun in *our living room* is a sound I will never forget as long as I live. Because I was certain that someone would be killed by one of those shells as my father fought to protect our home and our family. He filled a metal bucket with water and put it in the middle of the living room floor and explained that the bucket was there in case someone threw a firebomb through our broad picture window. Then my Dad sat down in a chair in the living room and, with the shotgun resting across his lap, he lit a cigarette and stared nervously down our quiet suburban street, waiting for the angry mob that never, ever, came.

In fact, they had never even existed.

Eventually my mother, wearied by the entire escapade, emptied the bucket of water onto the marigolds in the back yard and my father ejected the shells from the shotgun, one by one, and, wiping it down with an old rag, he slid the gun back into its case and put it far back in the master bedroom closet. Now my parents and their neighbors were not madmen and women. They were not *radical* in their racism, nor were they uncaring or soulless. They were common, hard-working people struggling to create a decent future for themselves and for the children they loved. Lower on the economic ladder than many, they feared that in a progressive and more racially integrated society, they would be the final losers. They were simply frightened, and frightened people do frightening things.

My Old Testament professor Frank VanDevellder used to say, "We read the Bible as a story and every part of the story has a purpose. Sometimes you need to know the entire story to understand its parts. It has not been laundered and it is not necessarily even a nice book. If you are offended by life, or by parts of life, you will certainly be offended by the Bible."

And prophets are part and parcel of this Biblical story and the role of a prophet is seldom nice. It took Israel a long time to determine what kind of God they were being called to serve, and the prophets sought to guide Israel in the midst of this confusing “discernment process.” The Israelites were faced with challenges on every side: poor leadership, cruel enemies, hostile terrain, and enticing new religions which beguiled the people. And, if you follow their progress over the course of the entire biblical narrative, you will note that the Israelites succumbed, at one point or another, to each and every one of them!

Still, in spite of misjudgment, calamity, and faithlessness, the prophets continued to point the way through. But you can ask Joseph about his encounter with his brothers. To be given a dream by God is not all clouds and glory and gates of gold.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream. He said: *“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character... I have a dream today...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 a 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.”*

To be given a dream by God is not all clouds, and glory, and gates of gold. To be a prophet one must be willing to speak truth to power and Dr. King knew all too well what the cost of such leadership could be. “Freedom,” he once wrote, “is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” To make such bold demands, while remaining resolute to a commitment to non-violence, required tenacity, courage, and the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Dr. King also said, “A man who won’t die for something is not fit to live.”

In the Biblical story, God does not send spaceships, or letters, or any other objects to God’s people. God’s *Word* must become *flesh*. God sends this Word to God’s prophets and this Word becomes incarnate and enfleshed in human voice. And this, this is the very pattern which culminates in God sending us Jesus, The Christ, in whom the Word was enfleshed and in whom the divine purposes of God are completely and utterly revealed.

Now some Americans may never see The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as any kind of hero. But my parents (and countless other Americans), came to see that his dream for justice and racial equality was God’s dream. Over time they came to understand he was an authentic prophet for the people of God and that he did, truly and faithfully, deliver the Word he had been given.

The dream Dr. King shared with us is not fully realized. The recent rise of White nationalist and supremacist movements is a powerful reminder that there is still work to be done. In far too many places, we know his dream is only a faint and distant hope. But I remember an occasion when my young son’s pre-school class baked a birthday cake in honor of Dr. King. And my four- year-old son helped make that cake along with Adissa, an African-American girl, and Jonathan, an Asian-American boy, and Jesse, who is Jewish. Their little hands worked together to put the white flour into the measuring cups (and all over themselves) and, later, to cover the surface of that cake with a rich chocolate icing and bright red and yellow candles. It was a cake of many colors and it symbolized a hope that the dream of God held by Dr. King may one day be realized by all of us.

Tomorrow is a national holiday. And I pray that my son, now a young man, and perhaps one day, *his* daughter, will be able to retell the story of what a brave and loving prophet once did in a frightened and angry world. Amen.

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For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)

325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022