



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Saints, Radicals, & Prophets

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 17, 2021

The Commemoration of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Exodus 3:7-12; 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

We are just a little confused about saints. We often use the word “saint” to refer to someone whom we believe to be exceptionally good or holy. In the Christian church, however, the term “saint” has a more precise meaning: A saint is someone who has led a life of “heroic virtue.” Heroic and, I would be quick to point out, not always perfect.

Now, given the choice, we prefer our saints to be perfect. We prefer our saints to be completely different from all other created human beings because, if they are, then there’s a little less pressure on the rest of us “mere mortals” to become just like them. We enjoy pushing holy people to the top of heavenly pedestals only to find an inexplicable satisfaction in pulling them back down to earth. Even Jesus we push towards being “fully divine” and away from being “fully human,” although we know, theologically at least, that Jesus paradoxically occupies both realms. We’re just a *little* bit more comfortable with his being God than we are with his being human.

In 1983, Congress passed legislation making the third Monday in January a commemoration of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In American history, he’s the only Christian minister to be honored in this manner. The Reverend Dr. King was born on January 15, 1929. If he were still living, he would be 92 years old! When he was born, the name on his birth certificate was Michael, and it was his father who decided to change his own name, as well as his son’s, after he made a trip to Germany and was inspired by the ministry of the 16th century reformer Martin Luther.

- It’s appropriate for him to be named after that courageous monk who, at 37 years of age, boldly ended his address to Charles the 5th, the Holy Roman Emperor, at the Imperial Assembly, by saying, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”
- It is appropriate for a modern prophet who was imprisoned nearly 30 times and martyred before the age of 40 to be so named.

Was Martin Luther King Jr. an American saint? He clearly would have said, “No.” He spoke candidly with friends and family about his deep fears and about his limitations as a leader. We know he had other human failings as well. Heroic, yes. Perfect? Probably not.

Of course, Dr. King finds himself in good company. In the reading we just heard from the Book of Exodus, we hear the divine commission extended to Moses by God to lead God's people out of Egypt. In the history of Israel's religious traditions, the two most overwhelmingly formative experiences are first, the Exodus from Egypt and, second, the Revelation at Mount Sinai. God will, over time, call Moses to be the lead character in both of these events. Yes, the very same Moses who *murdered* an Egyptian he caught beating a fellow Hebrew. Heroic, yes. Perfect? Absolutely not.

God invites Moses to take on this work by saying, "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" It's a fair question. Who was he, indeed? Why was he chosen? What assurances did he have?

And, for that matter, who was Martin Luther King, Jr.? Why was he chosen? Who are any of us to do any great thing, really? Well, like Moses, Dr. King found his power—as we have the capacity to find ours—in the God who says, "I will be with you." Our authority, our empowerment, is in the God who says, "I'll be with you when you're scared. I'll be with you when you're in doubt. I'll be with you when your friends and family are frightened for your safety. I'll be with you when you're in genuine danger. You're not alone. Don't be afraid. I'll be there for you. You can count on it."

Peter Dreier argues Martin Luther King, Jr. wasn't so much a saint as he was a radical. Now, I find it interesting that the term "radical" is so often used as a repugnant adjective. I believe "radical," from its mathematical meanings "to go to the root, the foundation of something," has a much more positive connotation. Shouldn't people of faith be seeking to be ever more radical? Shouldn't we always be seeking to go to the fundamentals, the roots, the very foundations of our beliefs?

Dreier writes, "[King] believed that America needed a 'radical redistribution of economic and political power.' He challenged America's class system and its racial caste system. He was a strong ally of the nation's labor union movement. [In fact] he was assassinated in April, 1968 in Memphis, where he had gone to support a sanitation workers' strike. In his critique of American society and his strategy for changing it, King pushed the country toward more democracy and social justice.

"If he were alive today," Dreier argues, "he would certainly be standing with Walmart employees and other workers fighting for a living wage and the right to unionize. He would be in the forefront of the battle for strong gun controls and to thwart the influence of the National Rifle Association. He would be calling for dramatic cuts in the military budget in order to reinvest public dollars in jobs, education, and health care. He would surely be marching with immigrants and their allies in support of the Dream Act and comprehensive [immigration] reform. Like most Americans in his day, King was homophobic, even though one of his closest advisors, Bayard Rustin, was gay. But today King would undoubtedly stand with advocates of LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex marriage."¹

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born into a household which held great expectations for him. It was never going to be an easy row to hoe. The son of a prominent pastor serving a prominent congregation, King, whose father and grandfather and great-grandfather were all preachers, was expected to find work in the family business. Yet "King did not intend to follow the family vocation until Morehouse president Benjamin E. Mays, a noted theologian, convinced him otherwise. [He]

¹ Peter Dreier, *Commonweal*, *Common Dreams: Martin Luther King Was A Radical, Not A Saint*, January 21st, 2013

was such a gifted student that he skipped grades 9 and 12 before enrolling in 1944 at Morehouse College, the alma mater of his father and maternal grandfather.”²

“Despite growing up in a solidly middle-class family, King saw the widespread human suffering caused by the Depression, particularly in the Black community. In 1950, while in graduate school, he wrote an essay describing the “anti-capitalistic feelings” he experienced as a result of seeing unemployed people standing in breadlines.”³

Martin Luther King, Jr. was truly extraordinary and his imperfections are well-documented, right alongside his proven greatness. And, that should give all of us a little nudge when it comes to our own callings, our own vocations, and our own prophetic leanings. We can’t just automatically exempt ourselves from serving God because of our limitations or our failings. What are *you* being called to prophesy? Where are *you and I* being called to speak truth to power?

You find at Dr. King’s core an extraordinary man who, through his faith, led a nonviolent movement that would transform American society and the wider world. Congressman John Lewis, now of blessed memory, worked with Dr. King when Lewis was a teenager. He said Dr. King was “like a big brother” to him, which included teasing the future congressman. Lewis said in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, “He would say things like, ‘John, do you still preach?’ And I said, ‘Dr. King, when I’m taking a shower.’ And he thought it was so funny. He would just laugh and laugh. And on occasion when we would be traveling in Alabama or someplace in Mississippi, you’d see a little hole-in-the-wall café or restaurant. He would say things like, ‘We should stop and get something to eat. If we get arrested and go to jail, we go on a full stomach.’ And he thought it was so funny. But I didn’t.”⁴ We really don’t understand saints, and we have never understood prophets. We never have and we probably never will.

There’s an old story about a group of farm animals who wanted to express their appreciation for the farmer who cared for them so thoughtfully. “We should do something for the farmer!” said the hen. “Yes,” said the pig, “We should do something for the farmer. But what should we do?” The hen thought for a moment and said, “I’ve got it. I know exactly what we should do. We’ll prepare a sumptuous breakfast for the farmer. We’ll gather fruit from the orchard and oats from the barn, and I will provide the eggs, and you, my dear friend, can provide the bacon!” And the pig said, “Now hold on there just a minute. An egg is a very generous gift. But bacon? Well now, that’s a commitment!”

King made a sacrificial commitment from his own flesh and blood. Talk about radical! Prophets are part and parcel of the Biblical story, and the role of the prophet is never easy. It took Israel a long time to determine what kind of God they were being called to serve, and the prophets struggled to guide Israel through that confusing “discernment process.”

The Israelites were faced with challenges on every side: poor leadership, cruel enemies, hostile terrain, and seductive new religions. And, if you follow their progress over the arc of the entire biblical narrative, you’ll note the Israelites succumb, at one time or another, to just about every

² Christopher Klein, *Ten Things You May Not Know About Martin Luther King, Jr.*, updated January 12, 2021, www.history.com

³ Ibid

⁴ Congressman John Lewis, *The Playful Side of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Oprah.com, Masterclass, Season 6, Episode 608

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*, 2000, Signet Classics, New York

single temptation they face! But through misjudgment, calamity, and faithlessness, the prophets continued to point the Israelites towards something better on the other side.

Jesus stands in the very middle of this prophetic tradition, and in today's lesson, we find him preaching the most radical, prophetic words imaginable. He, too, is trying to point us towards something better on the other side. Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." It's no wonder so many people wanted to kill him. The author of Luke emphasizes a divine and human savior, a Christ whose compassion and tenderness is given to everyone in need throughout his gospel.

Martin Luther King, Jr. in one of his most important writings, addresses his fellow clergy in Birmingham, Alabama. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King beseeches the white moderate clergy to join him and not criticize the pace of his movement towards equality. In his letter, he addresses two Episcopal bishops (among others) and his writing reminds me of those letters which characterize the Early Christian movement. He wrote, "There was a time when the church was very powerful. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on with the conviction that they were 'a colony of heaven,' and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment."⁵

At St. Bart's Church we, too, seek to be a thermostat and not a thermometer. No wonder the early Christian community found such solace in Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians* when the author writes, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Indeed, we are fighting against the cosmic powers of this present darkness. We see those powers in a growing White Supremist and White Nationalist movement—folks who wrap themselves in the symbols of the Christian faith, but whose actions bear absolutely no resemblance to true Christianity. Misogynistic and anti-immigrant views, the incontrovertible conviction that the next president of the United States is not a Christian, broadly held racist and anti-Semitic perspectives: all of this cannot and does not reflect the heart of the Christian faith or the man who stands at the very center of Christianity and pleads, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Fear, not faith, inspires such hatred. Fear, not faith, inspires such deception.

This morning we remember the life and ministry of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We remember his commitment to non-violent change. We remember his prophetic passion for racial equality, and his love for all people. We remember his humanity. We remember his radical faithfulness to his calling.

We, we, are just a little confused about saints and prophets and radicals. May it become our fervent prayer to be as saintly, and as prophetic and as *radical*, as God is calling each one of us to be.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, 2000, Signet Classics, New York

Amen.

Additional Background Resource:

Stewart Burns, *To The Mountaintop; Martin Luther King, Jr's Sacred Mission To Save America, 1955-1968*, c. 2004, HarperSanFrancisco/HarperCollins, New York

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