

“Are We There Yet?  
Reflections on an Unfinished Prophecy”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
January 14, 2007  
Martin Luther King weekend  
Scripture: Luke 4:14-30

“Jesus was about thirty years old,” Luke says (3:23) “when he began his work.” And then he returned to his hometown. Jesus, the local boy done good, was asked to be the guest speaker at the synagogue. He stood up, opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and began to read.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-21).

He could have stopped there. Bold words, reclaiming a prophetic vision from Isaiah. We conclude our reading with a “word of the Lord, thanks be to God.” Jesus added a twist when he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He could have stopped there.

The people were so happy to hear him and see him. Proud of his abilities, proud of the reports of his healings and teaching. “All spoke well of him,” Luke tells us “and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”” He could have stopped there.

But the thing about prophets is that they aren’t just seeking admiration for fancy words. Jesus could not stop there, because the people did not yet understand how important these words were to him – he meant what he was reading.

Good news to the poor.

Release to the captives.

Recovery of sight.

To let the oppressed go free.

These were not words of trivial importance to him. He meant it. In his life he lived them out. Later, he would go on to be killed for making these words a reality. These are the ways of Jesus, and they are hard ways. In these words from Isaiah, Jesus heard his mission. And these words, for those who claim his mantle as followers continually redefine what our mission is, and keep the church focused on “the least of these.” In these words from Isaiah, Jesus realized there was no separation between us and them, insiders and outsiders. The good news was not just for his kind of people, but for all.

And so he pushed ahead, provoking his audience that day in his home town.

“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town” (Luke 4:23-24).

He insisted that no special privileges exempted them from following these prophetic words. He reminded them of two stories from the Hebrew Bible, times when prophets were received by foreigners, even by enemies, a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, and, at a time when there were plenty of lepers in Israel, the prophet Elisha cleansed only Naaman, a Syrian.

Jesus didn't have to go there, did he? Why didn't he keep things short and sweet - tell them what they wanted to hear? Why did he have to go and rub their faces in the uncomfortable truth that they liked to read about prophetic dreams at worship but didn't do such a good job at living them out? Who was he, Joseph the carpenter's son, to cast so much judgment on them? Why all this rabble-rousing?

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (Luke 4:28-30)

Prophets leave behind contested legacies. We wonder what they would have said about new situations. We explain away some of their more radical edges. We debate (even among friends) about who their true followers are. For a while it was all the fad to wear WWJD bracelets – to get kids to ask the question what would Jesus do? An evangelical environmental group starting asking What would Jesus Drive? Later the deliberately pointed question appeared on bumper stickers, Who Would Jesus Bomb? It is our task to struggle with these questions.

One preacher recently admitted that

When it comes to preaching about the war . . . I have done a lousy job. Only once in a while, and then in all-too-measured words crafted for minimal offense. . . It has been easier, more acceptable, to preach Jesus rather than what Jesus preached.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus leaves behind a contested legacy. It is easier, less controversial, to talk about Jesus than to have to argue about what Jesus said and did and what that means for us. Prophets inspire not only passion, but generate hatred as well. The people in Jesus' hometown tried to throw him off the cliff. He survived that threat, passing through their midst. But there would be other threats on his life. And there are temptations we all face to downplay the gospel challenges.

Martin Luther King, Jr. rose to prominence during the boycott of buses in the city of Montgomery, Alabama. The boycott began when Rosa Parks, a seamstress and a member of the NAACP, refused to give up her seat on the bus designated for black folks. It is interesting to note that when MLK was picked to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott he was not famous. In fact, he was picked for precisely the opposite reason: he was picked to lead because he was new, young, not part of any local leadership rivalries.<sup>2</sup>

It is hard now, fifty years later, to imagine the hatred that bus boycott started. King would be subjected to death threats. His house was bombed. Shotguns were fired into his home. The boycott was working. One preacher told of his effort to give a ride to an old woman, told her that it was okay for her to drop out of the boycott on account of her age. That she could stop there. She disagreed, "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested."<sup>3</sup> The boycott lasted almost a year, and began to change this nation. With a successful negotiation ending the bus boycott, Dr. King could have stopped there. After all, his dream was to teach theology at a seminary.

But he found himself needed to be the voice as well as a strategist to expand the civil rights movement. So King moved on to Birmingham, a city so known for racist violence it was called Bombingham. And then to Selma and Mississippi. The movement was dangerous and generated hateful responses in the south and elsewhere. Protesters were beaten, and leaders killed. Death threats became routine for King. The southern movement perhaps peaked in the nations' conscience with the march on Washington in 1963, climaxing with Dr. King's *I Have a Dream* speech. With his majestic call for America to live out its dream embodied in our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, and in the words of the prophet Isaiah. This speech was a moment when time stood still.

Like Jesus, who read from the prophet Isaiah, King could have stopped there with his *I Have a Dream* speech. And unfortunately, in our collective memory, we have stopped King there. Vincent Harding, says that King is an "inconvenient hero" for us Americans. Carl Wendell Himes, Jr. wrote a poem about our incomplete memories of Dr. King.

Now that he is safely dead  
 Let us praise him  
 Build monuments to his glory  
 Sing hosannas to his name.  
 Dead men make such convenient heroes:  
 They cannot rise to challenge the images we would fashion from their lives  
 And besides,  
 It is easier to build monuments  
 Than to make a better world.<sup>4</sup>

We want our memories of Dr. King to conclude with that sunlit day in August with King delivering his "I Have a Dream" speech and forget that he went on to protest against poverty, northern racism, and the Vietnam War.

Against the wishes of donors and strategists, he took the civil rights movement up north to confront the segregation and racist practices that were more hidden from the nations' conscience. And so he brought the movement to Chicago. His friends told him to just focus on the Civil Rights Movement, but he saw the dangers of the Vietnam War, and preached against it - before it became an unpopular war. It was an extension of his same mission.

On the eve of this Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday and as we recall the story of Jesus teaching in his hometown synagogue, I think again of that poem:

It is easier to build monuments  
 Than to make a better world.

Steps have been taken, of course, in increasing civil rights. And those steps of progress should be celebrated. We here at Central are living proof of progress. It was often said by Dr. King and is still oft-repeated that Sunday mornings at 11 are the most segregated hour in America. We are in the process of creating a community that transcends differences and enjoys diversity. We could not have existed fifty years ago. But before we get all happy about remembering our progress in fulfilling Dr. King's dream, we have work that still needs to be completed if we are to be faithful to Jesus.

Schools are re-segregating in our country. While children were at school or waited at home for their parents Minnesota meatpacking plants were the site of recent immigration raids in which workers were arrested, not to return home. The church too often ignores Jesus' words that his mission is to preach good news to the poor and release to the captives. The church too often forgets his challenge that for these words there are no outsiders, no them – only us.

Are we there yet? Can we say that the words Jesus read in the synagogue have been accomplished? Shall we make monuments to Martin and forget about making a better world? How do we deal with partially realized dreams and persistent disappointments?

One way to deal with partial dreams is to deny that they are only partially realized and pretend that we have already overcome. Another way to deal with partial dreams and deep disappointment is to give up, become cynical, forget. Too many do that, of course. To stop there. There is a better way. There is a better way.

For we have deep memories of words once uttered that can never be withdrawn. We have deep memories of courageous steps taken by Isaiah and Amos, Micah and Martin, Jesus of Nazareth who once read from the prophets and said “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The words from the prophets still call us into a future in which we worship by doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with God. We have a long way to go before justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Are we there yet? Not yet. But we cannot stop. And we will not stop, as long as Martin's dream remains unfinished. We will not stop, as long as the words of Jesus still call us onward. We will not stop, as long as the words of the prophets echo in our ears and touch our hearts. We will not stop, “so that we can make of this old world a new world.”<sup>5</sup>

May it be so. Happy Birthday, Doctor King.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Wood, the pastor of Fremont United Methodist Church in Fremont, Michigan, in “Acceptable Words,” in The Christian Century, 9 January 2007, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor Branch writes of the founding of the bus boycott in Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) 136-138.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>4</sup> The poem by Carl Wendell Himes, Jr., was found in Vincent Harding's Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996) 27. The poem “Now That He Is Safely Dead,” was first published in Drum Major for a Dream (Thompson, CT: InterCulture Associates, 1977), 23. I am deeply indebted to Harding's essays on King as an inconvenient hero who has been celebrated even as his bold message is downplayed.

<sup>5</sup> The concluding words of Martin Luther King's “Drum Major Instinct” a sermon preached in his final month and played at his funeral. James Washington, Ed. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (HarperCollins, 1986) 267.