

“Courage in Uncertain Times”
January 17, 2021

Jeremiah 8:4-9
Matthew 26:47-56

As you probably know, we record this worship service on Saturday morning.

And this weekend opens with threats of danger and violence not only in our nation’s capital, but in capital cities of states throughout the nation.

I don’t know what will happen—or what *has happened* by the time you watch this.

Like you, I have seen the recent headlines:

“Far right groups prepare for assaults before and after inauguration day.”

“Online extremists are ignoring Trump’s call for calm: Many are taking their cues from the fact that the president still has not conceded.”

And on Friday the United Church of Christ posted a notice saying: “There are reports that ‘liberal’ churches will become targets of possible attacks in the coming week, with the dates of Jan. 17 and Jan. 20 featured more prominently. “

Like you, I don’t know the future.

What I do know, what I’m struck by this morning is the great difference between the January 6 violent assault on the Capitol by domestic terrorists along with the current threats and the peaceful March on Washington led by Martin Luther King, Jr., nearly sixty years ago.

King’s understanding of nonviolent resistance to evil was central to all that he did. It was both a difficult and disciplined approach. It required training and commitment. The way of nonviolence meant that people had to rely on one another to keep themselves on that path when brutal opposition would push them toward retaliation.

It was the very opposite of the rampage at the Capitol.

During King’s life and after his death—and especially in recent years—there have been those who have disagreed with his approach. But it was King’s Christian faith and experience that led him to the path of nonviolence, and he continues to challenge those of us who call ourselves “Christian” to actually live as followers of Jesus Christ who, even as he faced arrest and his own death, told his followers “All who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that shortly after Jesus called his followers away from the violence so common in this world, “all the disciples deserted him and fled.”

The way of nonviolence was troubling for the early followers of Jesus. King’s life and actions and words still have a power to trouble our individual souls and the soul of our nation.

We know that:

Equality is not without struggle.

Peace does not come without confrontation.

Justice brings its own requirements for our lives and our world.

And love is the most powerful—and most dangerous—of all those words.

We have lived with King's legacy long enough now to know that his life and ministry was about more than "having a dream." He revealed the depths of racism in the North as well as the South. He exposed the degradation that poverty brought to people of all races. And near the end of his life his unwavering commitment to nonviolence led to his public opposition to the war in Vietnam. King's message was that this nation must undergo a "radical revolution of values," putting people before things so that what he called the "giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism" might be conquered.

We mark King's birthday this year with disturbed spirits and heavy hearts, aware of the many ways in which the flames of "racism, materialism, and militarism" have been fanned in recent years so that they erupted into the conflagration of January 6 that has not been extinguished. We are well aware this weekend of the strained political climate of our times. And we are aware, too, of the violence that is still loose in our nation and in the rest of the world. We confess as well that over ninety years after King's birth and over fifty years after his death, we still grapple with "racism, materialism, and militarism."

The prophet Jeremiah speaks in astonished anguish about our basic human tendency to keep doing the same destructive things over and over:

When people fall, do they not get up again?
If they go astray, do they not turn back?
Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding?
They have held fast to deceit,
they have refused to return.
...no one repents of wickedness,
saying "What have I done!"

Daily we witness the leaders of our country holding fast to deceit. Daily we watch as they take the wounds of this nation carelessly as they cry "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. Events of the past year have only made painfully obvious the militarism, racism, and economic injustice that has continued afoot in our nation over the last fifty years.

War, racism, and economic injustice place all of us and all of our arguments under the judgment of God. King told us that violence begets only violence, dragging us further into a brutal and vicious spiral of death and destruction. Hatred only begets hatred. Inequality only fuels further inequality.

But King would not give into despair.

Nor should we.

When God seems remote, when our souls are troubled by blatant violence, hatred, and injustice, when our hearts are weary we remember King's affirmation that: "God is able to conquer the evils of history. If at times we despair because of the relatively slow progress being made . . . let us gain new heart in the fact that God is able. . . . With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy."

Out of that hope we can continue to act in the world. We must treat the wounds of the people with care and work for the healing not only of our own souls but the soul of this nation.

This weekend then, we need to recognize our fear and what it does to us. The twentieth century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr prayed—in words that have since been adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous—"God give us...the courage to change the things that can be changed." Where do we find the power, even in the face of obstacles and opposition to change what can be changed; the power to act when we are tempted toward passivity?

In the face of very real threats and dangers how can we make courage a part of our lives?

Let's be honest. There is much in this world that can and does frighten us. There is much that *should* frighten us. It's been said that "Education consists in being afraid at the right time." So we might be learning a great deal in these days.

Are you afraid as you watch the news?

King knew enough danger and enough fear to be somewhat of an expert. He said that we *can't* and *shouldn't* try to eliminate fear. It is the elemental alarm system of the human organism. Fear warns of approaching dangers and without it we would not have survived in either the primitive or contemporary worlds. "The fear of darkness," King reminds us, "led to the discovery of the secret of electricity. The fear of pain led to the marvelous advances of medical science. The fear of ignorance was one reason that we built great institutions of learning."¹

Fear is normal, necessary, and creative. We can accept the fact that we are going to be afraid many times in life. Out of that fear can come new solutions, creative responses, and personal growth.

Having courage doesn't mean we won't experience fear, but that fear won't control us. Courage enables us to encounter threats, hatred, disapproval, and contempt without leaving what's right.

Faith invites us to look closely at our fears—to look at those that are imaginary as well as those that are well founded. In faith, we take our fear into ourselves and find that both ourselves and our fear are transformed. The outward result we call "courage"—and it springs from an inward struggle.

From that struggle we gain the wisdom that knows the difference between real and imaginary danger. Courage recognizes real danger.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once spoke of the great hymn that we will use to conclude our worship this morning, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," saying that it "gives us the courage to face the uncertainties of the future," reminding us that "there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil."

In disquieting times, especially in times such as these, may God give us the courage to respond to all that we fear and to change the things that can be changed.

¹¹ MLKing, “The Strength to Love,” in *A Testament of Hope*, pg. 510-511.