

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

January 15, 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 60:1-6

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 2:9-12

Legacy of Faith

“I come to the end - I am still with you” These are the words of David from our Psalm, but they could express the emotion and commitment of Martin Luther King Jr. as well. The “end” nearly came sooner than later.

The year is 1968. The place: Memphis, Tennessee. Elvis Presley is living at Graceland with his wife Priscilla and newborn daughter Lisa Marie, and is enjoying the Grammy he has just won for his second gospel album, “How Great Thou Art.” In the minds of many, he is “The King.”

But in March of that year, another King comes to town.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. travels to Memphis to lead a march in support of city sanitation workers. These 1,300 workers, most of whom are black, have been on strike for safer working conditions, higher wages and equal treatment. Unfortunately, several militant groups turn the march violent, and King announces over a bullhorn to the crowd, “I will never lead a violent march, so please, call it off.” He promises to come back to Memphis in early April to lead a march that is nonviolent.

King returns to Memphis on April 3, 1968. Several death threats have been directed at King, and tension is high, but he feels that it is important to press ahead and speak at a rally on behalf of the sanitation workers. In the course of this address, which turns out to be the last speech he will ever give, he tells the story of an earlier attempt on his life, one that brought him perilously close to death. According to Ralph Abernathy, his friend and successor, Martin Luther King stood up that night and just “preached out” his fear.

[NOTE: Here the reader/actor offers a dramatic reading of this section of the speech.]

You know, several years ago, I was in New York City autographing the first book that I had written. And while sitting there autographing books, a demented black woman came up. The only question I heard from her was, “Are you Martin Luther King?” And I was looking down writing, and I said yes. And the next

minute I felt something beating on my chest. Before I knew it I had been stabbed by this demented woman. I was rushed to Harlem Hospital. It was a dark Saturday afternoon. And that blade had gone through, and the X-rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. And once that's punctured, you drown in your own blood, that's the end of you.

It came out in The New York Times the next morning, that if I had sneezed, I would have died. [Some time] after the operation, after my chest had been opened and the blade taken out, they allowed me to move around ... and to read the mail that had come in from all over the states and the world. Kind letters had come in. I read a few, but one I will never forget. I had received telegrams from the president and vice president, but I have forgotten what those messages said. I received a visit and a letter from the governor of New York, but I forgot what was said.

But there was another letter, that came from a ... young girl at the White Plains High School. And I looked at that letter, and I will never forget it. It said simply, "Dear Dr. King: I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School." She said, "While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I am a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing to you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze."

And I want to say tonight, I want to say that I [too] am happy that I didn't sneeze.

Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American Dream . If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance later that [same] year to tell America about a dream that I had had.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis [tonight] to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering.

I am so happy that I didn't sneeze.
[End first portion of dramatic reading.]

“I am so happy that I didn’t sneeze,” proclaimed Martin Luther King. If he had not remained very still, very calm and very peaceful during that attempt on his life, he would not have been part of one of the greatest movements for justice and equality that our nation has ever known. Not that King took personal credit for his survival. He gave all the glory to God. After this attempt on his life King said, “If I demonstrated unusual calm during the attempt on my life, it was certainly not due to any extraordinary powers that I possess. Rather, it was due to the power of God working through me. Throughout this struggle for racial justice I have constantly asked God to remove all bitterness from my heart and to give me the strength and courage to face any disaster that came my way. This constant prayer life and feeling of dependence on God have given me the feeling that I have divine companionship in the struggle. I know no other way to explain it. It is the fact that in the midst of external tension, God can give an inner peace.”

In the course of his life, Martin Luther King walked through many dangers, toils and snares, but because of his deep prayer life he knew that God was walking with him. He knew that the God who in the words of the Psalmist formed his inward parts, knit him together, and declared that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made walked him every step of his life. He had the very same faith as the writer of Psalm 139, who proclaimed, “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it”

In other words - life may be fragile and full of struggle and hurts and griefs, but we draw comfort from the knowledge that God is with us, in all that we do. In the midst of external tension, God can give an inner peace. This peace gives us courage and confidence, inspiration and insight, serenity and strength.

Most of all, this peace frees us to live out God’s mission and love in our world.

This is important, because peace doesn’t necessarily protect us from pain and suffering - This peace gives us the strength to face any fear, comfort to journey through the valley of the shadow of death, and faith to take bold stands for justice.

And so the peace we feel is not to paralyze us or make us feel complacent but to move us forward and outward with greater urgency to live out our faith. For this is what Jesus proclaimed in his hometown synagogue when he read from the scroll of Isaiah - "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 bring recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord."

We are called as individuals and the body of Christ to go deep into our prayer and faith life so that on this foundation of faith we are strengthened and emboldened to live out these words as we proclaim the good news, heal the broken-hearted, bring freedom, and announce a new vision of hope and new life.

We are take a stand and show that in the midst of our brokenness, our hurts, our struggles there is hope and a peace that passes all understanding. In the midst of our violent warring world that contains to much oppression, to much intolerance, to much inequality and poverty, there is hope.

For families and individuals who are struggling with addiction and mental illnesses, there is hope. For those who lose a loved one. For no one can lose a mother or father, sister, brother, a child, without yearning for hope.

And Sunday after Sunday, week after week, we come together in the presence of our risen Savior striving, yearning for a word the good news of hope. And we need to know and proclaim that God isn't done yet. That failure is a fact of life. But God isn't done yet. That grief is a fact of life. But God isn't done yet. That hurt is a fact of life. But God isn't done yet.

For Martin Luther King showed us that when people of faith, communities of faith stand up and stand together that is when justice will roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. That's when hearts and minds are touched and transformed by the grace and hope and peace of Christ.

So, let us not fear to stand up from our stronghold of peace given to us by our God as we stand with those in need of justice. Reach out for peace. Shout out for righteousness. So, let us be a light-bearer for all our children who need to have moral guidance and stability in their lives. A grace-bearer for people we so often overlook because they are poor. A hope-bearer for people who are discriminated because of race, or excluded because of income, or bullied and beaten. A peace-bearer to a world broken and divided by the need people have to be right more than the need to show justice and grace, reconciliation and forgiveness. Let us carry these things to our world, and all of the other shallow things of life will not matter. When we leave this world we won't take any money or any of fine and luxurious

things with us. All we will leave behind is the character of our committed faithful life. Because it is the quality, not the longevity, of one's life that's important

[NOTE: Here the reader/actor offers a concluding section of King's speech.]

It really doesn't matter what happens now. I got into Memphis this morning, and [people] began to talk about the threats that were out on me ... about what might happen to me from some of our sick white brothers.

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

[End second portion of dramatic reading.]

The next day an assassin's bullet ended Rev King's life but I know that he faced that moment with peace in his heart because he knew God was right by his side. Being a disciple of Christ does not free us from all troubles and toils, struggles and snares, stumbles and sneezes. On the road of life we're bound to hit some potholes but what good news that we are not alone – and through the foundation of our prayer and faith life we have access to the presence and power and peace of our loving God to hold us up and move us forward on our path. Like Martin Luther King, we're never going to be free from adversity. But we are always free to serve God in every time and place and situation. Amen.