

A God-Sent Prophet
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It is good and right for us to be here, to remember how Dr. King died; moreover, to remember how he lived. Dr. King's life is the sacred text for my reflections.

In his first speech in Memphis to an audience of striking garbage workers, Dr. King said, "You are reminding not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages." How relevant are these words today. In this same speech, Dr. King affirmed "all labor has dignity." Dr. King's book, *All Labor Has Dignity*, edited by Michael Honey, is a fine example of his commitment to labor rights.

Yes, Dr. King was a strong supporter of union rights. Yes, he spoke out against the Vietnam War. Yes, he was a thoughtful and gifted orator who had more than a signature speech called "I Have a Dream." Fundamentally, Dr. King was a black Baptist preacher. He could engage in social justice causes because he was in substance a God-sent prophet. As such, he stood in the luminous lineage of Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglas, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, and Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom.

Dr. King came onto the scene at a critical period in race relations in America. As Black Americans, we were sinking deep in the sin of segregation and social injustice, far from the majestic words of equality in the Declaration of Independence. Very deeply scarred within and struck down, seemingly stuck to rise no more. But the Maker of heaven and earth heard our despondent cry, and from the sin of social evils lifted us. Love lifted us. Love lifted Dr. King. And love is still making a way out of no way.

God's love for truth, justice, peace, and human dignity, is the burning desire inside the heart of every God-sent prophet. The fire that was shut up in Jeremiah's bones was nothing less than the divine zeal for justice and righteousness. The lightning that leaped from the tongue of Dr. King was nothing less than God's appeal for America to repent and for the Church to be led by the Holy Spirit of Love and Justice. May this lightning's longitude stretch from sea to shining sea.

O how we need more God-sent prophets today. We have more than enough prosperity proclaimers. We have more than enough priests willing to pacify rather than disturb the status quo. We have more than enough chaplains of a cross-less Christ. O how we need more God-sent prophets today.

Thank God that there are some prophets left in the land who have not bowed at the altar of compromise; who have not drunk from the fountain of a drowsy

miseducation. Thank God for seminaries that prepare women and men to be faithful, active voice prophets in the Church and in the Community.

God-sent prophets are full of courage. They are not scared to raise controversial issues in the pulpit. or rally in the public square. God-sent prophets are not intimidated by those who threaten to call the bishop to complain that the preacher is over here preaching justice and righteousness. To use the words of Alan Paton, God-sent prophets are not "afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong, nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a 20th Century, God-sent prophet, who dared to speak God's word to a spiritually sick nation. He loved America enough to expose the gap between the nation's deeds and the nation's creed. He worked tirelessly and courageously to pull up the weeds of racism and hatred in the soul of America. I believe that Dr. King must have known something about a weed or a grass that in East Texas we called Johnson grass. Johnson grass is some bad grass; it is persistent. If you chop it this week, it will be back next week. Johnson grass had to be pulled up from the roots. Dr. King worked hard to pull up the Johnson weeds of racism and hatred in the soul of America.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "People may remain deaf to a prophet's admonitions; they cannot remain callous to a prophet's existence." In Ezekiel, chapter 2, verse 5, are these words: "And whether they hear or refuse to hear...they will know that there has been a prophet among them."

Dr. King's critics included clergy members. When he went to Birmingham to press his suit for justice, he came under fire from eight Alabama clergymen, who advised him that he was moving too fast. These clergymen's names have faded from memory, but the world knows about Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. Dr. King's epistle is worthy of inclusion in any serious Bible study. I could have said that I was taking my text from St. Martin's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. "They will know that there has been a prophet among them."

Whenever there is systemic or institutionalized evil and oppression, and broken moral covenants, God sends prophets to proclaim freedom, justice, hope, and peace.

There is no denying that the times in which we live fit the need for God-sent prophetic speech and action.

1. Attacks on the voting rights of citizens.
2. The systematic increase of black and brown bodies in America's slave pens called "for-profit" prisons.
3. The ridiculous assertion that "poverty is a state of mind."

4. The brazen rise of White nationalism.
6. The under-reported news about the number of black girls who have gone missing.
7. The vulgarities, the insanity, the inhumane ideologies that spew from the highest office in the land.
8. Violence visited upon schools. Thankfully, young people are organizing across this nation in the conviction that a change is gonna come in statehouses and in Congress. Media commentators want to say that these young people have started a conversation. No; they want changes in policies and in politicians.

O how we need politicians and prophets and public intellectuals who love justice more than they fear the NRA, the KKK, or the FBI.

Now, we are okay with prophets as long as they are ranting and railing against the enemy out there, but when the prophet turns to address the enemy within, there is often an outcry against the prophet. Dr. King sought to promote a just society by challenging white churches to open their doors to all races and to be the Church of Jesus Christ; he challenged black churches to transition from being taillights to being headlights, shining the way to freedom and justice for all.

Dr. King's challenge to the church is a contemporary one. To promote a just society includes addressing issues of sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy in the Church. One of the persistent shortcomings of the church is living fully into the principle of the equality of all persons--both under God and inside the Church. We have yet to grow fully into a "whosoever will" Church. This is the church that says:

If you're black bone, yellow bone, or red bone, you are welcome.
If you're gay or straight, you are welcome.
If you are wealthy or too broke to pay attention, you are welcome.
If you are single, separated, divorced, or married, you are welcome.
If you love God or struggling with God, you are welcome.
If you know the Bible or have questions about the Bible, you are welcome.
If you have a head full of hair or bald like me, you are welcome.

To promote a just society, as our theme states, we need a team approach to challenging injustice. Who is on this team?

Dieticians are needed on this team because poor children are underfed in schools and are made to feel less than worthy when their food is thrown in the trash when they come through the lunch line with no money or no lunch voucher. Moral dieticians are needed because we have been overfed a diet of greed, individualism, blind loyalty, and disrespect for "the least of these."

Heart specialists are needed because America's heart is out of rhythm with the divine pulse and sacred impulse for human justice and wholeness.

Mental health consultants are needed because insanity is running rampant in legislative halls and judicial courts under the banner of making America great again, which is nothing more than a code and a summons to take back the gains of the civil rights struggle and undo the good under President Obama.

Oncologists are needed to recommend radical treatments for the cancer of racism and hatred, treatments like: justice therapy, respect therapy, kindness therapy, inclusive therapy, and truth therapy.

Hygienists are needed because the moral hygiene of our nation is odorous. We are suffering from the stench of rotten leadership based on lies, licentiousness, hating poor people, and creating discord. This is a scent that has to be addressed. Febreze won't do; Ban deodorant won't do; Arrid Extra Dry won't do. Our nation needs to bathe in that fountain that never runs dry--the healing waters of Love; where everybody is somebody; where we treat everybody right.

Artists are needed on this team, for in the words of James Baldwin, "The role of the artist is to illuminate the darkness, to make the world a more human dwelling place; to correct the delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to avoid the inner truth about ourselves."

Thank God for the life, labors, and legacy of Dr. King.

When God asked, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" Dr. King answered, "Here am I; send me." A woke church answers:

Here we are; send us.

Send us to help the helpless.

Send us to speak peace to the winds of violence.

Send us to heal the broken-hearted.

Send us to the voting booths to create constructive change.

Yes, send us, but also lead us and guide us and go before us.

Church, if God leads us, we shall overcome.

If God guides us, we shall get home someday.

If God goes before us, no weapon formed against us shall prosper.

If God goes before us, then let us work while it is day. Let us pray for God's kingdom to come. Let us love one another. By doing this, we create a new garden of human possibilities.