

COOPERATION WITH GOD

Mark 1:14-20

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
First Congregational Church (UCC) of Colorado Springs
January 15, 2012 - Birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;
repent, and believe in the good news.” - Mark 1:15

I.

On this date in 1929, Michael King Jr. was born in Atlanta Georgia. He grew up and became known as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He died on April 4, 1968 at the age of 39. Want to know what 39 looks like? Look at me.

Martin Luther King Jr. is a household name in America. Most school kids, including the first grader in my own home, learn about him at an early age. This is due, in large part, to the federal holiday we celebrate tomorrow. Last January, I asked my son, then a kindergartener, who Martin Luther King Jr. was. He said “He believed everyone was equal, no matter the color of their skin.”

“Do you believe that?” I asked him.

“Yes, I do,” he said.

“Why do you believe that?”

“Because of Martin Luther King Jr.”

Perhaps egotistically desiring to elevate myself in my son’s eyes, I asked him, “And what did Martin Luther King do for a living?”

“Doctor?” he said.

“Well, yeah,” I said, “but not like a medical doctor. Do you know what ‘Reverend’ means?”

“No,” he said.

“Like me,” I said.

“No, he wasn’t just a minister.”

“True that,” my son, “true that.”

To be honest, I’ve learned more about the life and person and work of Dr. King in the past two years than I had in all my previous years. To some extent, when a person becomes as widely known and well regarded as Dr. King is, folks tend to think they know all there is to know about the person. As part of the preaching program I am currently in the process of completing, I took two courses that explored the preaching

of Dr. King. One was a survey of 20th century preaching; the other was called “Preaching and Transformation.”

One of my professors, Chuck Campbell, liked to point that while most Americans know something about Martin Luther King Jr. and can even name his most famous speech, the “I Have a Dream” speech, the truth is, the man gave other speeches.

In fact, to study the work of Martin Luther King Jr. is to study the three kinds of public addresses that were part of his repertoire:

1. speeches to large gatherings such as he gave on the steps that day at the Lincoln Memorial;
2. talks he would give at the rallies of Civil Rights activists, usually the evening before a major demonstration; and
3. sermons delivered to a local church, many of which were a version of sermons preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, his father’s church, and later the church where he served as “co-pastor” for eight years and three months.

Martin Luther King Jr. was the leader of Civil Rights movement in the 1960’s; he was the recipient of the 1963 Nobel Peace prize; he gave a speech that changed our nation forever; and he has become a cultural icon. But he grew out of the Baptist Church, out of the African-American preaching tradition. He expanded the reach of his message through his Boston theological education and through his formidable intellectual abilities and understanding of world history. He remained a disciple of Jesus, trying to follow his savior, and to do what God required of him; and he became a prophet late in his career, a sort of new Moses or Jeremiah, decrying not only the persistent racism in our culture, but also the prevailing economic system that relies upon a permanent underclass of folks in poverty, as well as the culture of violence that insists upon foreign wars against poor people of color - such as our current war in Afghanistan - to galvanize and to justify our claim as God’s chosen nation.

II.

This morning, I would like to explore a theological idea of Rev. King that he explored as a preacher. On March 3, 1963, he preached a sermon called “Answer to a Perplexing Question.” There he laid out his response to the question of how to bring about social change. I owe many of the following reflections to a book called “The Preacher King” by Richard Lischer. (It is not only a good book about Martin King, it is one of the better written books I’ve read about anything.) According to Lischer, in keeping with his Baptist tradition, King believed that “the message of Jesus Christ demands a response of the hearer’s whole life” (228).

Just as in today's gospel reading from Mark, when Christ calls, you leave your nets and you follow him. The call from Jesus makes a difference. That which formerly occupied the center of your identity - your nets - must be left behind in order for you to follow. "Although Ebenezer was a verbally responsive congregation... [King Jr.] did not measure the effectiveness of the message by the emotions it aroused on Sunday morning. Churches that were satisfied with getting 'happy' in worship but had no social mission [King] frequently called 'entertainment centers.'" What he was after in his preaching and in the life of the church was "spiritual and behavioral change." This change, according to King's theology, began with *repentance*.

That language is the language Jesus uses in the gospel of Mark as he inaugurates his public ministry. Jesus came, proclaiming the good news that the time is fulfilled. In other words, in the arrival of Jesus, the time of waiting is over. The promise of God's presence is fulfilled in the embodied ministry of Jesus. The kingdom of God has come near. The new reign of God, once thought to be a distant reality, has now come close. In Jesus, God is intimately concerned with the plight of people on earth.

Time fulfilled. *Kingdom* come near. God has travelled through time and space to deliver the good news that God is back in play, ready to bring about a realm of justice and peace.

But God's not going to do it *for* us. As King once said, "Man cannot do it himself. And God is not going to do it by himself." We make a big mistake, King claimed, relying on our own activism. He said that was as big an error as "supine resignation" (229). Activism that does not begin with repentance is doomed to failure, for we have all fallen short of the glory of God, we are all prone to thinking that we are above the fray of the world, that if other people would just behave the way I do, the world would be a better place. While that may in some cases be true, we are tempted to judge in the world what is most true in our own life. As King put it, many who are working to end racial discrimination are guilty of similar offenses in their own homes. Despite the fact that many inside and outside of the movement set him up as a model of moral perfection, aspects of his life give a testimony to otherwise. King himself was not immune to temptation and was keenly aware of his own need to repent

"Repent, and believe in the good news," Jesus said on his first day in the Galilean pulpit. Repent and believe. This is how a movement starts.
Not with a business plan, but with repent and believe.
Not with a charismatic leader, but with repent and believe.
Not with access to media, but with repent and believe.

Repent and believe. Repent and name the ways in which we as individuals and communities have fallen short. Repent from the ways we habitually assume privilege and entitlement and seek to maintain the status quo.

Repent and *believe*.

Believe that the time is ripe. Believe that the kingdom is not something far off. The kingdom has come near, is even now here among you. There's nothing left to do, nothing you could have done in the first place, to bring it about. That is God's doing, and now Jesus is calling you, calling us. Calling us to do what?

In his earlier years, as he was trying to build a movement, Martin King tended to warn against human sufficiency. That's what he meant when he said, "Man cannot do it himself." But in his later years, King "became increasingly infuriated with those who used God's all-sufficiency as an excuse not to march or commit themselves to the struggle." That's what he meant when he said, "And God is not going to do it by himself."

In his sermon, "Answer to a Perplexing Question," the question of how to bring about social change, his answer becomes, "People can't do it by themselves. And God will not do it all by Godself." Then King says, "But let us cooperate with God." Astonishing. The man whom we credit, almost single-handedly, for the successes of the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960's, and for the continued dreams of what is possible for our society - among them the election of the first African-American president - the work of that man was based on the notion of "cooperation with God."

III.

It seems that many people in these days are frustrated with and frightened by our social, political and ecological realities. In such a time and place, we tend to become disillusioned with our understanding of God's presence among us and purpose for our lives. And I say, "disillusionment is a good thing," for God is trying to lead us away from illusions, even our most cherished ones, and is trying to lead us toward the truth. And the truth is that God never said, "I'll fix it all for you. Just kick back and let me do my thing." God never said, "I require nothing of you. I got this one." God never said, "Sorry I've been sleeping on the job. I'm awake now and don't you worry about a thing." No, Jesus didn't arrive in Galilee, proclaim the good news, and then proceed to enact it all on his own.

What did he do after proclaiming that the long-awaited time is fulfilled, that the longed-for kingdom is near? He gave us something to do: Repent and believe in the good news. But lest we think that's all it takes, let us remember that was just the

beginning. Next thing he did was look around for some people. He saw some fisherman (some teachers, some therapists, some unemployed folk, a retired general, a few teenagers), and he started calling them to leave their nets (their classrooms, their offices, their unemployment line, their golf course, their iPhones) and to “follow me.”

He was calling them to join a *movement*. To be a part of the kingdom movement, for our God is a God on the move. But God is not one who likes to journey alone. God would rather do it with us. Apparently, it’s a part of God’s own nature to want to cooperate with us. God prefers cooperation to domination. God prefers to call people such as we. As King put it, “God specializes in hopeless cases and failed projects.”

And the good news, the really good news, is that you don’t have to figure it out; in fact, you can’t. Just accept it. God calls you to be a part of the movement. Playing off the well-known phrase by theologian Paul Tillich, King told his congregation, “God accepts you as you are.” Now, have faith, which means, “accept your acceptance.”

IV.

I was once told by Rev. Peter Gomes never to end a sermon with a question. But I have to admit that all I have are questions at this point in my sermon. How are we as a congregation responding to Jesus’ words “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people”?

What is the movement of which we called to be a part?

What does it mean for us as a church to repent of the ways in which we have fallen short or falsely thought too highly of ourselves?

How can we take Jesus’ call to the streets, to City Hall, to this wider culture, not to fulfill a social program but to respond to Christ’s claim upon our lives?

How do we translate our worship into action and our action back into worship?

How do we as a church partner with other folks, some of whom may be quite different from us, as we seek to cooperate with God in the work that God is about in the world?

There is much in this world that needs healing; let us cooperate with God to heal.

There is much in this world that needs understanding; let us cooperate with God to increase understanding.

There is much in this world that needs loving; let us cooperate with God to love what is hard to love.

There is much in this world that needs reframing; let us cooperate with God to reframe how we see.

As we do this work of cooperating with God, what will it mean to march today as Dr. King and all who participated in the Civil Rights movement marched then.

Will you march? What will you march for? Will we march together? Are we willing to be seen together outside these walls? Can we accept that Jesus is calling us to get up, to repent and to believe that peace is possible, that civility is possible, that economic sustainability is possible, that racial equality is possible, that healing our addictions is possible, that improving education and access to education is possible, that preventing domestic violence and child abuse is possible, that marriage equality is possible, that reversing our abuse of the planet is possible, that a world without nukes is possible, And that all of this is possible not because we will have figured it out alone, nor because God will come “breaking in to crash the wicked schemes of humans,” but because God has come seeking cooperation, because humans can’t do it alone, and God, who is God from everlasting to everlasting, will not do it alone.

Let us not despair, but let us be encouraged by the words of the 39 year old Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who said, on the eve of his death, to a gathering of civil rights workers preparing to demonstrate on behalf of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee:

“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!”

Amen.