

The Fierce Urgency of Now

Jeremiah 6:10-16

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
January 18, 2009

We are entering a week pregnant with meaning. There is little doubt that Tuesday marks the birth of a new era. Generations have labored to bring this possibility into the world: That these United States would inaugurate the first African-American, the first person of color, as President. It is not the last milestone we have to achieve, but it is an important one. And lest we forget, the color of this President-elect's skin is only one feature of his personhood.

Barack Obama has energized a new generation of Americans, and many other citizens of the world, to believe that a new way of relating to one another is not only desirable, but possible. Indeed, if we are going to release the kind of creative energy necessary to imagine a world we will be proud to pass on to generations ahead of us, if we are going to reverse momentum from apathy to engagement, if we are going to allow the red tide of warring bloodshed to recede into the depths of human history, and if we are going to release a new spring of human co-existence that flows clear and clean, then we will need to trust that a new way of relating to one another is not only possible, but that it is the *only* desirable way forward, for the alternative is death. And we will need to respond to this call: We must be the agents of that sea change.

The meaning of this week is made more poignant by the holiday which we are celebrating this weekend. At this time of year, we remember the person and the witness of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A paragon of peaceful protest, Dr. King has become the people's preacher, postulating in prosaic and poetic forms the right of all God's children to enjoy mutually the fruits of peace and prosperity. As we remember the witness of Dr. King and as we ourselves witness an historic event, I want to take a few moments to add my hope to the clamor of voices that have been rising with expectation.

It is no secret that the challenges facing our nation, and all the nations of the world, are staggering - failing economies, crushing poverty, woefully inadequate healthcare, an environment in peril, and a proliferation of violence affecting disproportionately those with the least power to defend themselves. Many of the hopes for a new world are being placed on the shoulders of this new administration. As each of us finds our voice, even if our particular concerns are not placed at the top of the national or global agenda, at least we will have had the opportunity to voice them, and will have brought about a much needed catharsis after eight years of being told that our criticisms are unpatriotic, that our concerns are unfounded, and that our hopes are

unrealistic. No, now is the time to speak. Now is always time to speak up for justice.

On April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in Manhattan (this was one year to the day before his assassination) at a meeting of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a speech entitled, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence." In it, he evoked the "fierce urgency of now," a phrase picked up by Barack Obama when he announced his candidacy. I echo that same phrase because I wish to remind Mr. Obama, and all of us, of the context in which Dr. King used it.

"Over the past two years," Dr. King began, "as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for the radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my own path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: Why are you speaking about war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say. Aren't you hurting the cause of your people, they ask? And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live."

Dr. King received much criticism following this speech, not only because he called for a swift resolution to the conflict in Vietnam, not only because he spoke out on behalf of the Vietnamese, including those the U.S. regarded as enemies, and not only because he made clear the relationships between peace and civil rights, between war and poverty, between violence and the economy. Not only these, but because he called for an end to war itself as a viable human option. Dr. King called for"

"A true revolution of values [which] will lay hands on the world order and say of war: 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting, poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of people normally humane, of sending men from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

These words drip with prophetic truth, and yet, if Dr. King's dream is still alive, it's being dreamed by a body on life-support. While we celebrate important milestones, let us not be satisfied. We had hoped with the

millennium goals of the United Nations that we were entering a new era of human history, but our preemptive wars that have further victimized the innocent and our deaf ears to the powerless in places like Darfur signify that the new millennium has not yet begun while billions of voices cry out, “What are we waiting for?” In the words of Dr. King 40 years ago:

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The ‘tide in the affairs of men’ does not remain at a flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: ‘too late.’ There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect. ‘The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on...’ We still have a choice today; non-violent coexistence or violent co-annihilation.”

When Barack Obama announced his candidacy, he said in South Carolina, “I am running because of what Dr. King called ‘the fierce urgency of now.’ I am running because I do believe there’s such a thing as being too late.” As we inaugurate our next president, let us remember that the fierce urgency of which Dr. King spoke was an urgent need to choose between non-violence and violence, between coexistence and coannihilation. As Barack Obama begins to work with legislators to locate funding to support many proposed programs, especially on behalf of those who are most vulnerable, it’s helpful to recall the gross disproportion represented by our federal defense budget. We spend on defense as much as the rest of the world combined. We spend at least six times as much as the next country, China. With regard to our federal budget, if we include the base defense budget, the military portion from other departments, the cost to wage our current wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, and funding for the so-called “war on terror,” we spend over half of our tax dollars on defense, an amount that will total almost 1 trillion dollars in 2009.

If Americans have ever heard the oft-repeated biblical plea, “be not afraid,” one would not know if from studying our federal budget. It is time for a massive realignment of our priorities. It is time for the “revolution of values” of which Dr. King spoke. It is time to call for an end, not only to the wars in which we are currently engaged, but for an end to war itself. This will require a sweeping change in how we imagine ourselves. It will require a social and global transformation. It will require leadership, presidential and local, which will set a new, non-violent agenda that redistributes resources so that poverty will start to become of thing of the past, so that the earth can catch her breath

and begin to heal, so that our children will be taught the tools of peace and will be ashamed of the tools of war.

In his victory speech Barack Obama promised, “I will always be honest with you about the challenges we face.” Let us hold him to that promise. Let us, like the prophet Jeremiah, not accept from any of our leaders claims of, “‘Peace, Peace,’ when there is no peace.” Let us not accept for one moment talk of peace while we maintain 30,000¹ nuclear warheads ready to commit global holocaust. Let us not accept for one moment talk of peace while our nuclear arsenal denies the provision of healthcare to all Americans. Let us not accept for one moment talk of peace while our stealth bombers deprive people of a living wage. Let us not accept for one moment talk of peace while our tomahawk missiles prevent us from developing alternate fuel sources and combating global warming.

In the words of Dr. King, “Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter - but beautiful - struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons [and daughters] of God, and our brothers [and sisters] wait eagerly for our response.” Amen.

¹ As a sermon-hearer kindly pointed out, the U.S. does not have this many nuclear weapons. Later in the week, I did some research online. One site estimated the total number of weapons *globally* to number 31,000. Most sites estimated the U.S. had ~4,000 deployed weapons with another 6,000 or so on standby or in stockpile. Did not mean to mislead, but 10,000 is still too many.