

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR: A BAPTIST PREACHER'S LEGACY
Preached January 11, 2009 at FBC, Boulder, CO
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Text: Deuteronomy 34:1-5; Amos 5:24

Introduction: On January 20th, 2009, our nation will install Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States. He will be the first president of African-American descent, and this will be one of those defining moments in our history. In 2009 in Colorado the state legislature will be led by Peter Groff, president of the Senate, and by Terrance Carroll, Speaker of the House of Representatives, who are both African Americans, and who will make our state the very first state to ever have both houses of its Congress to be led by African Americans. The journey to these events was traveled by many, including one Baptist minister whom we honor on this day.

1968 was an extremely difficult year not only for the United States but much of the world. Civil and political unrest expressed itself in riots and protests in France, England, Spain, and of course, the United States. The Vietnam War resulted in protestors demonstrating at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, as TV images of police treatment of those involved burned images in the minds of the viewers that would affect the outcome of the election in November.

Robert Kennedy, brother of President John F. Kennedy who had been assassinated in 1963 during my first semester as a college student, also fell to bullets of an assassin during the presidential primary campaign in California. Chaos seemed to be everywhere.

During this year I was a first-year graduate student in the Department of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. During the evening of April 4th I was working on a research paper in the religion graduate school library in the basement of the Tidwell Bible Building. I took a break and walked about a ½ block to Baylor Drug, an institution for many years near the university. While there I heard the report that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

I was **stunned**, although **not surprised** simply because of all that had gone on in the 1960s. I was **scared**. I did not know what would happen but I anticipated riots, burnings, and violence from a people whose hero and hope had fallen victim of **racism** at the very worst level. And, I was **ashamed** that such a senseless murder had taken place once again in our nation. I found myself asking "What kind of people are we?"

To make matters worse, the very next Sunday I traveled to a weekend pastorate in a small community in central Texas. As I arrived, a few of the church's deacons were in the parking area in front of the church. As I approached them they were making jokes about Martin Luther King, Jr., including one that I remember indicating that he would rise again in three days. I did not know what to do. I was extremely upset and completely uncertain as to how I should respond. The following Sunday I tendered my resignation and did not go back. It was all I could think of doing at the time.

I. The Baptist Legacy of Freedom

Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of the genuine heroes of the Baptist tradition. Baptists from their beginnings have been characterized by their unequivocal commitment to **freedom**. Nowhere has this been more evident than in their **radical claims** in the seventeenth century for **religious liberty and freedom of conscience for all**. The very first Baptists, who arose on the first decade of the 1600s, insisted upon **complete liberty of conscience** in religious matters not only for themselves but also for all kinds of believers and non-believers – heretikes, Turkes, Jewes, or whatsoever, citing Thomas Helwys (1612).

Such radical notions found seed in the soil of the American colonies. **Demands for religious freedom were consistent with the demands for political freedom**, from which arose a new nation called the United States of America. **No religious group** contributed more to the resulting **Constitution and the Bill of Rights** than these lowly Baptists. The names of **Roger Williams, John Leland, and Isaac Backus** continue to ring clearly from the passages of our Baptist heritage in the troubled times of the twenty-first century.

Out of the Baptist heritage of freedom there appeared a movement in the American scene in the 1960s. That was the **civil rights movement**. I make no claims that this movement was a creation of Baptists. In fact, **many Baptists opposed it**, continuing to defend segregation vehemently.

I remember reading a newspaper article on the First Baptist Church of Atlanta, GA. A young man from Africa had been converted through the missionary program of the Southern Baptists, an outstanding program strongly supported by this Atlanta church. He received mission support to come to the United States to receive a college education. He attended services at First Baptist Church, Atlanta. However, when he decided to join this congregation, which had been so helpful to him, he was rejected because of the color of his skin. What a shock this must have been to this young man.

I researched and wrote the centennial history of the First Baptist Church of Shawnee, OK, where Janis and I were members for 22 years. In the church records about the early sixties I came across information that told of a prominent church member, the biggest giver in the congregation, who took the pastor out to lunch and then proposed a plan to have persons at the entrance of the church ready to prevent any blacks from entering the worship service. Proudly, I am glad to report that the pastor, Dr. Lowell Milburn, responded that he could not approve such a thing because it was against what he believed the Bible taught. The man and his \$10,000 annual contributions never returned and he never gave another cent to the church. Milburn reported that "As God would have it, we never missed his money."

In days such as these the Civil Rights movement arose and developed. The heart and soul of this movement was **symbolized by one person**, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968). He **more than any other person of the time** embodied the **high ideals** represented in both the Constitution and in the Baptist tradition, which were established on the conviction **that "all men (and women) are created equal."**

II. Characteristics and Contributions of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I really **don't feel qualified** to evaluate nor speak on the heritage of Martin Luther King, Jr. I can identify with him as both a Baptist and a minister. And, we share a common heritage of the **Baptist tradition of freedom**. I do share his passion for freedom, even though his and my circumstances and environment are quite different. I can speak of both living and dying for one's commitments, but whether I could go beyond principle into practice of the latter is highly questionable. I have never been discriminated against because of the color of my skin. I have never had to sit at the back of a bus simply based upon my race. I have never been denied the right to live where I chose to because of "closed" housing practices. I have never been denied the opportunity to attend a school because of prejudice, whether at the levels leading up and through high school or at the collegiate level. I don't think the requirements of work in relation to salary, sick day pay, or conditions have ever been different for me than others because of my race. I can understand but I am not sure that I can identify with the challenges of King and his people. Having said that, allow me to try and describe to you those things that appeal to me as I look at King's life and ministry.

A. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man of deep conviction. Christianity was the foundation of his ethics. The New Testament church was the model for his social understanding, in which the barriers that separate, discriminate, and divide people were broken down and discarded by those who accepted the gospel. King

was also an ordained Baptist Minister. He was a dedicated Civil Rights leader. He was a passionate preacher with an eloquence that far surpassed most orators of the 20th century. He preached with power and purpose, and he practiced what he preached.

King reflected the tradition among African Americans, a term not known during his time of which I am aware, which looked to the black ministers and pastors not only for spiritual guidance but also for social and political leadership. The doorways to power in government did not swing open freely - and completely - as they do today. It was the preachers who fought for and proclaimed hope for a disenfranchised people. Dynamic preaching blended religion and politics freely and effectively. Martin Luther King, Jr. represented the pinnacle of such preachers.

B. Martin Luther King, Jr. was certainly a man of courage, while at the same time was one who was a **peacemaker**.

These were not days of peaceful debate, nor of constructive dialogue. They were days filled with violent men who were not ready to see their world change. On June 12, 1963 **Medgar Evers**, civil rights activist and field secretary for the NAACP was shot in the back and murdered while walking to his house. His two small children witnessed his murder. It was not until the mid-1990s that his murderer, Byron De La Beckwith, was convicted and sentenced to prison.

On September 15, 1963, in a bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, four young girls between the ages of 11 to 14 attending Sunday School – **Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins** – were killed when the bomb exploded. The church was a center for civil right's meetings. A few days earlier courts had ordered the desegregation of Birmingham's schools. In 1977 Robert Chamblis, the ringleader, was convicted of one count of murder. It was not until 2001 and 2002 that two of the bombers were finally convicted of murder.

On June 21, 1964, three young civil rights workers – a 21-year-old black Mississippian, **James Chaney**, and two white New Yorkers, **Andrew Goodman** (20) and **Michael Schwerner** (24) were murdered near Philadelphia. They were registering black voters in Mississippi during Freedom Summer and were investigating the burning of a black church. One person, Edgar Ray "preacher" Killen, considered to be the ringleader, was finally convicted in 2005 of three counts of manslaughter. None of the other original 18 persons initially accused were ever convicted.

I say all of this to point out that Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of many courageous persons who risked their lives to gain civil rights for their people. And, also to illustrate the courage that it took for Martin Luther King, Jr. to struggle as openly and boldly as he did. The road to freedom was not easy, nor was it safe. Change could be gained only at great price, a price that he was willing to pay.

He believed in **passive resistance, methods of nonviolence in order to protest injustice**. He did not believe that anger, hatred and violence should be responded to by anger, hatred and violence. He voluntarily broke unjust laws, was willing to pay the penalties of arrest and imprisonment of unjust laws, in order to change unjust laws.

He exposed himself to abuse, assault, and arrest. He was willing to risk his life every time he spoke, or marched, or challenged the system of segregation in the south.

While jailed for leading anti-segregation protests in Birmingham, King wrote a letter from the Birmingham Jail on April 16, arguing that individuals have the moral duty to disobey unjust laws. He was convinced that only through peaceful protest could the victory be won. He wrote:

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

On another occasion he would state the consequences of violence, and in so doing justify nonresistance. He wrote these marvelous words that ring relevant today:

*The ultimate weakness of violence
is that it is a descending spiral,
begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.
Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.
Through violence you may murder the liar,
but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.
Through violence you murder the hater,
but you do not murder hate.
In fact, violence merely increases hate....*

*Returning violence for violence multiplies violence,
adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.
Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

C. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man of hope, promise, and beyond his life fulfilled dreams.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a leader who instilled in others a passion for a better day. No statement that he ever made more clearly illustrated these qualities or stirred the masses of people than those words, which he spoke on **August 28, 1963**. He was addressing a crowd of 250,000 people attending "The March on Washington, D.C." Do you remember what the **central themes** were? **Jobs and freedom!** His speech is one of the most famous in American history. He began with prepared remarks, but then departed from his text, shifting to a theme that he had used on other occasions, the "I have a dream" theme. He followed these remarks with the exhortation "Let freedom ring" across the nation. Here again are those marvelous words that stirred a nation:

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

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This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!

Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

(18 days later the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL would result in the deaths of the four young girls, as previously mentioned).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the **Moses of his people**. As a black Baptist minister he joined a chorus of others in comparing the plight of African Americans with the children of Israel who were in bondage in Egypt. As Moses led the Hebrew children out of Egypt and through the wilderness, so Martin Luther King, Jr. was leading his people out of civil slavery and through the wilderness of segregation and discrimination from which they could cross over into the promised land of freedom, equality, and hope.

CONCLUSION: 1968 was one of the most difficult years of my generation. A deeply unpopular war divided our nation, riots and protests on what seemed a daily basis not only in our country, but also throughout much of the world, and the tragic assassination of two leaders who aspired to make our nation and people so much better scarred the landscape of our nation. Yet, as the year drew to a close an event took place that demonstrated what could come of a battered people when they focus on dreams of a better day and unite in a common effort.

On Christmas Eve, 1968, three men, Frank Borman, James Lovell, and William Anders became the first men to orbit the moon, not once but 10 times. They took this perilous journey in a small capsule on a mission known as Apollo 8. In so doing they lifted the spirits of a dispirited nation who desperately needed some good news and a vision of hope. Among the telegrams of congratulations from persons like Charles Lindberg and Lyndon Johnson came one from **Valerie Pringle**, a person whose name probably means nothing to any of us. Her message was very simple – “You saved 1968.”

There is a lot of truth to what Valerie Pringle said. At the same time, perhaps this one monumental achievement of mankind, this defining moment of a nation committed to a cause, provided a glimmer of greater hope expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr., who on April 3rd, 1968 looked out upon a group of people gathered in Memphis, a man who was committed to improving the lot of black garbage collectors in that city, and one who prophetically spoke of his death, when he said

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it 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.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered the next day. But he had not only looked over into the promised land, he led his people - and that includes all of us here today –where we together could cross over the Jordan in the land of promise and hope and freedom, and into the realization of so many of the dreams of this historic Baptist preacher.

Compared to the wilderness in which Martin Luther King, Jr. lived, and preached, and marched, and protested, and was martyred, we today are in the promised land. Thanks to this Baptist minister, who represents so many men and women of courage and conviction, all of us – and I mean all of us, not just African Americans – have the freedom and the constitutional rights to live where we choose to live, to receive a quality education side by side, to work for equal and fair wages, to vote, to exercise freedom of religion, and speech, and press, and assembly, to draw from our collective talents, experiences, and commitments to make our cities, our country, our world a much better place – a land of promise realized. Martin Luther King, Jr., this fellow Baptist minister, had a dream. And we who are gathered here today are living that dream.

The challenge to us gathered here today is to **remember** this dream, to **affirm** this dream, and to **defend the accomplishment of this dream in this year of 2009!** I once preached a sermon entitled “Dreamers and Doers.” Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday is on January 15th, reminds us to not only dream dreams, but to also do whatever is necessary to make our dreams become reality. When dreamers become doers, then dreams can come true. Martin Luther King, Jr. I am sure would say "Today, my dreams are no longer dreams. My dreams have become reality! Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty we are free at last!"