

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 17, 2021
Stand Up, Speak Up: Justice Can't Wait
Micha 6:6-8



Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, I'm free at last. Thank you Ms. Phyllis Byrdwell and the Mount Zion Praise Team/ New Revelation choir.

Free at Last, famous words from Dr. King's speech at the March on Washington August 28, 1963 (And, in case you didn't know that march was organized by a Black gay man Bayard Rustin). With over 250,000 people on the Washington National Mall that day, freedom and justice seemed just within reach. Mrs. Coretta Scott King commented, and I quote, "At that moment it seemed as if the Kingdom of God appeared. But it only lasted for a moment." End quote. Just 2 ½ weeks after that celestial moment, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL was bombed by a white supremacist terrorist and 4 little black girls in Sunday School were killed.

Oh, how I wish I could say that over the past 58 years since the march on Washington that we as a country have faced our demons of racism, white supremacy, and hatred, and have come out the other side, but I cannot. To be honest, I am not sure how far the needle has moved on the path toward racial justice, voting rights and economic reparation, particularly as we remember the barriers to voting during the last general election and as we review the pictures of last week's insurrection in Washington D.C. Many of us are still processing the horror of it all. And at the root of much of the hatred and violence is racism. At some point this country will have to fully reckon with its history of slavery, genocide, lynchings, bombings, internment, and racially motivated incarcerations of BIPOC. Until there is a full reckoning there will be no unity or peace. Until there is accountability, there will be no unity.

But I believe that even in the most dire circumstances, there is a word from the Lord. So, let me share our text for the day that comes from the prophet Micah 6:6-8

"With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before (God) him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
(The Holy One) He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. My theme for this message is, Stand Up, Speak Up: Justice Can't Wait

My companion text for today is Dr. King's letter from the Birmingham Jail. It was written in April 1963. His open letter was written in response to eight clergy(men) who wrote to Dr. King warning him to cease his nonviolent protests. They warned Dr. King that if he continued his nonviolent protest, it was inevitable that violence would breakout. Now it seems to me that if Dr. King's movement was one of nonviolence, the letter should have been addressed to the ones whom they feared would be violent. I'm just saying.

The white clergy of Birmingham didn't like the demonstrations that were seemingly disrupting their peaceful town. King refuted their claim that life was peaceful. He said if you want to call it peaceful, it is an obnoxious negative peace. For Black and brown people in Birmingham, there was no real peace.

This past spring and summer there were protests all over the country and all over the world calling attention to racial bias in law enforcement. Those who protested stood tall against an obnoxious negative peace, for there is no real peace in black and brown communities where our moms, dad, sisters, brothers, and friends continue to be harassed and indiscriminately murdered.

The clergy in Birmingham also felt the Black citizens of Birmingham were in too big of a hurry for equal rights. The white pastors felt Dr. King should slow things down and endure the insulting social construct of a segregated society a little while longer. But how long must we wait to be treated as humans? It's been over 400 years—and we wait. Yet, we continue to stand up and speak up because justice can't wait.

Dr. King was saddened that the clergy and white power structure didn't have the same sense of outrage over the injustices inflicted upon Black people that compelled the demonstrations. King wanted a real peace—"a substance-filled positive peace".

The clergy told Dr. King to stay home and be a troublemaker in his own state of Georgia and that he was meddling in a state where his call for social justice was unwanted. Dr. King responded,

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

We must stand up and speak up for justice can't wait.

Scripture tells us, we are our sisters' keeper, our brothers' keeper, and our siblings' keeper. What happened in Washington D.C. last week and what will happen at the inauguration on Wednesday impacts us in WA state, and in all the places where our SFBC worshipping friends live. Black and brown people, including myself, are living on edge today because of the racial hatred we saw last week in DC. Black and brown businesses are being targeted with hate crimes.

Homes with BLM signs or Biden/ Harris signs in my neighborhood have been vandalized. Hate is real but cowering in fear is not an option. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We will stand up and speak up for justice cannot wait.

This single garment of destiny envelops all creation. There is no geographic line that says OK, when you cross this line, you no longer have to care about those on the other side--in the next state, or across the ocean. The divine mandate to care, to be kind, to stand up, speak up, and do justice is local and global.

Poverty in Brazil that leads to accelerated harvesting of the rain forest impacts climate change all over the world leading to droughts and fires in CA, higher temperatures all down the west coast, increased pollution in Seattle and accelerated thawing of the arctic ice that is killing arctic animals. The intersection of race and poverty impacts us all. Yes, we are tied in a single garment of destiny.

Many of us were outraged at the religious signs, scripture quotes, and the giant wooden cross at the insurrection last week. But what I also find worrisome is the silence of the evangelical church over the past 4 years to call the president to task or hold him accountable for his incessant lying, name calling, bullying, incompetence in managing the COVID pandemic, and for his participation in the Capital riot. My friends would say the evangelical church has been so quiet you could hear crickets—crickets.

Yet, following the way of Jesus, means calling out that which is harming God's people. Following the way of Jesus means being the voice for those who are sick, marginalized, disenfranchised, and those living on the edge. Yet where is the evangelical voice when it comes to the work of justice?

Evangelical Christians claim to be prolife. Yet it saddened me that prolife

- doesn't carry over into housing for all God's people.
- Being prolife frequently stops short of advocating medical care as a right for all
- It would seem to me that prolife means making sure all children are properly educated and have clean lead-free drinking water which by the way the children of Flint still don't have

As maddening as the silence of the religious right has been, it is not new. In the letter from the Birmingham Jail, Dr. King wrote,

The contemporary church is often a weak ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

King continued in his letter,

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.

I would amend that to include the 21st century.

He also wrote,

I am meeting young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.

Recently, I had the privilege of working with a brilliant Black woman seminarian. She kept asking me, Dr. P. make it make sense? She wanted me to explain why the church holds on to so many beliefs and traditions that are irrelevant today. Make it make sense?

Not much has changed in 58 years since the Letter from the Birmingham Jail was written. While the institutional church has many challenges, and many sins to confess, I am encouraged by our young people who believe being a follower of Jesus is to actively be involved in community justice work. Indeed, for them being a follower of the way of Jesus means to stand up, speak up, for justice can't wait. Many could care less about building funds, women's circles, or winning souls for Jesus like notches on a belt. They are interested in feeding the hungry, creating urban gardens where there are food deserts, police accountability, affordable housing, economic and climate justice, and organizing for just causes.

Would we call these modern drum majors for justice extremist? Perhaps, but following the way of Jesus calls us to be seen and heard. Being a lukewarm, some-timey believer is not what the Hebrew prophet Micah championed or what Jesus asked of his followers. The writer of the acts of the Apostles wrote that the followers of the way of Jesus turned the world upside down. That sounds rather extremist to me. Good extremist indeed.

According to Dr. King. "... the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremist of injustice—or will we be extremist for the cause of justice? Will we be extremist for hate or extremist for love." I would add, will we be extremist for complacency or extremists for change and right relationships.

Micah's hearers were confused, if God so cared about them why was life so hard. That faithful remnant wanted to know, what does God want from us? What do we need to do to get a break, so life will be easier? Does God want ritual piety, sacrifices, rivers of oil?

We may say it differently, but we too want to know what we need to do to experience abundant life that Jesus promised? Will having more church members make our lives richer? Will we get a break from hardship, if we place a 10-foot cross in our yards and work to make Christianity a national religion? No, my beloved that is not what the Holy One wants from us. Our God is not impressed with placards, big crosses, religious trinkets, and small-minded religious ideology.

God has told you my friends what is required for faithful living; to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. Violence is not in the prescription. Hatred and bullying are not there either. Prayer works. Finding your voice and using it to uplift works. Being still and waiting for divine direction also works.

My friends there is much for us to do as we give witness to the love of God and as we work toward a common goal of a more just world. We must be willing to take a risk and **stand up** for truth and **stand up** against bullies. We must **speak up** when tempted to be silent and pretend we don't see hurt and harm. We must **speak up** even when we think we are the lone voice of dissent in the room. **Justice can't wait. Justice cannot wait!**

Stay in faith my friends. Stay in community and stay encouraged. Freedom and justice will come to all God's people. And, one day we too will be able to sing, Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, I'm free at last. And all God's people said. Amen.