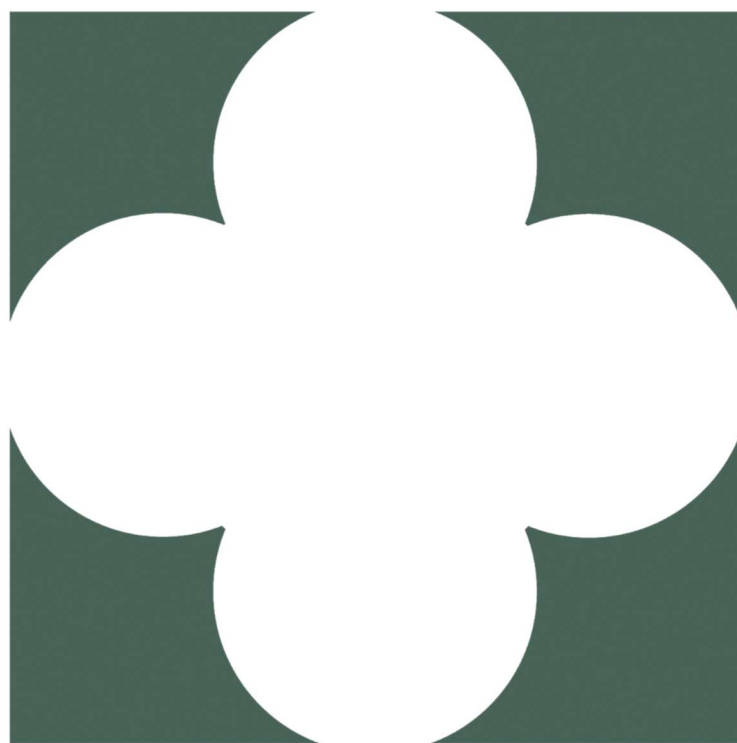


# A Martin Luther King Kind of Baptist

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seattle first baptist

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Epiphany II / Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial

Matthew 3.1-17

*In those days, John the Baptist...*

(Ok, we are already in trouble with this “Baptist” thing. The one identifiable “Baptist” in the Bible – in fact John *The Baptist* – is a radical preacher who dresses funny and has a strange diet. No wonder people have odd notions about what it means to be a Baptist.

But let me be clear: Although we might aspire to be like John in some ways, our denominational family did not get its name from him. Like John, Baptists *did* come from a radical movement within the Reformation. They were radical for their time because they believed that faith should be a matter of choice; that the church was more about community than institutions; and that political rulers should not impose any particular religion on its citizens.

For this, they were hated, hunted, and killed by the hundreds in some very horrifying ways.

Oh, and yes, they did baptize only those who could affirm their own faith.

So, maybe there is more John the Baptist in us than we would like to admit.)

*In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ <sup>3</sup>This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,*

*‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.”’*

*<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

*<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many of the religious leaders coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

*11 'I baptize you with\* water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with\* the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*

*13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' 15 But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then John consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved,\* with whom I am well pleased.'*

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I think it's safe to say that this pandemic is driving me to the edge of my capacity to cope. The feelings of insecurity and loss and the deaths of now more than 5 million of this planet's citizens is overwhelming. And then there's all the political nonsense and the selfish motivations it has exposed.

I'm tired of trying to see any good in it.

But there is one thing. I have only had to get on an airplane twice in the last two years.

Airplanes are difficult for me. If you were at the Martin Luther King memorial at New Beginnings a couple years ago (and I hope you will be there in person or online tomorrow night), you heard me describe why airplanes are a problem.

I settle into my seat with my nose in a book, identifying a "no conversation zone" around me. And, invariably, some cheerful, chatty person sits down next to me and wants to know where I'm from and what I do for a living.

I've tried alternative descriptions of what I do - teacher, counselor, cat-herder, systems analyst - but I do have to preserve some integrity. And when I finally say I am a pastor, you know what comes next.

“What kind?” I’ve tried out, “I hope a good one,” but I know that isn’t what they are asking.

When I say a Baptist, or even an *American* Baptist, the conversation can go one of two ways: either the person shuts up or the person is totally excited because they assume I am *that* kind of Baptist and they can’t wait to share all their amazing religious thoughts - ideas that are usually about as far away as you can get from what I believe. But I’m stuck.

Of late, I have a new answer. I say I am a “Martin Luther King kind of Baptist.” That usually gets some odd looks and perhaps a recognition of a sort. And it gets me some quiet.

Now it isn’t a lie to say I’m a Martin Luther King kind of Baptist. Dr. King went to seminary at an American Baptist seminary. A seminary that is now part of the Colgate Rochester Crozier Divinity School where the Rev. Dr. Patricia Hunter is graduate. Dr. King’s home church Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta is affiliated with the National Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches of the South. Dr. King preached twice at American Baptist Conventions and is the first recipient of our denomination’s Dahlberg Peace Award.

It isn’t a lie to say that I’m a Martin Luther King kind of Baptist. But it isn’t necessarily true either. It’s not true unless I make it true - unless I am actively working for the love, justice, and peace he worked for.

And maybe it’s like discovering that, while John the Baptist did not give us our name, we have some John the Baptist in us. Maybe today we need to decide if we have some Martin Luther King Jr in us too.

After all, I think John and Dr. King have a lot in common.

There are the crowds. Both John and Dr. King could draw a crowd. But it wasn’t the kind of crowd we see today of popular prosperity gospel preachers who make a fortune off their followers or crowds drawn together

by a political demagogue. I would remind you that both John and Dr. King have harsh words to say about religious folks.

John and Dr. King drew crowds to bring attention to something other than themselves – to call out injustice and to plead for folks to make things right on behalf of a new kind of world.

Dr. King will forever be remembered for his “I Have a Dream” speech. You see those photos of that sea of people gathered at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial – a crowd lifted on the cadence of freedom – black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants joining hands to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we’re free at last.”

But perhaps that shining ending obscures the beginning. Dr. King says:

*So we’ve come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned.*

The crowd that gathered before Dr. King in 1963 did not get a golden ticket only available to the followers of Dr. King. They didn’t get a dream of a promised land without the recognition that this nation had defaulted on its promissory note to Black, Indigenous, and people of color for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They didn’t get a get-out-of-jail free card. Both Dr. King and John spent a fair amount of time in jail.

What they got was the truth that there could be no dream without doing the uncomfortable work of unmasking the nightmare of racial injustice. There could be no renewal of the promise of a “promised land” without repentance. As John says: “Repent, for the kin-dom of heaven is at hand.”

You may have noticed that calls for repentance don't seem to draw much of a crowd these days. Perhaps some of us are too privileged to think repentance has anything to do with us – we are too convinced of our own unshakable goodness. We are the exceptions to racism. And so, some of us white folks get offended when people want to tell us about how their lives have been impacted by a system that benefits us.

Instead of recognition and commitment to make things right, we say “how dare they?” As if we have some right to be excused from responsibility.

But John and Dr. King both knew that the only path to the dream was through repentance – to recognize and turn away from the actions that have destroyed the promise of any kind of truly promised land.

If John the Baptist and Dr. King are in our ancestry, we should be no strangers to repentance.

And just let me remind you of what Layla Saad says about the work of Anti-Racism: “... this work,” she says, “is not for you to end up living in shame. The purpose is to get you to see the truth so that you can do something about it.” That's repentance.

Have you ever wondered why the Jordan River? It's not very pretty. It's not very clean. And these days it's not very wide. Of all the options John had for baptizing people – the sea of Galilee, the ocean, the Dead Sea (although that might present some other challenges) – why Jordan?

I think the reason John chose to baptize people there was because it reminded them of where the promise of a promised land began – where it was that people had to decide whether to go forward into all that the promise was about ... or not.

It wasn't a done deal that the people of Israel would cross the Jordan into the promise. There were things to fear. There was baggage that came with their journey in the wilderness. The unknown was itself scary enough to make the people cry out to go back to Egypt, to the slavery that at least felt familiar.

John wanted folks to be willing to go back to the place where it all started and commit again to build that land of promise where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

They had to go back in order to decide to go forward.

On the night before he died, Dr. King said to another crowd – a crowd gathered in solidarity with sanitation workers –

*Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days ... 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 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.*

That was it. Dr. King's last words. And they were about rising up with greater readiness – preparing the way – not fearing any one and moving forward toward that dream.

Beloved ones, it's time to move on. Yes, we will be celebrating our 152<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting next week but we look back only to commit ourselves to move forward once again toward love and justice.

There are all kinds of crowds out there that know nothing of repentance and therefore have little hope of ever realizing the dream.

There are all kinds of crowds gathering around this nation to try to go back to some mythological past – to Make America Great Again – with no interest in moving toward the promise of a multi-racial democracy.

There are all kinds of crowds gathered by the shining flame of the prosperity gospel – that you are guaranteed to be blessed if you believe the right things and give generously to the preacher. The crowds gathered to that flame are bound to be burned by it.

And so we have to decide today what kind of crowd we will be, what kind of people we will be – if there is any John the Baptist or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. living in us. And not because we quote them. Not because we can claim them. But because we live them.

Beloved ones, this is where the hope is. John says, “Repent because the kingdom of heaven is near.” Dr. Kind quotes the words of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and says ...

*Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with the low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice ... This is hope for the future, he says, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow with a cosmic past tense, “We have overcome, we have overcome, deep in my heart, I do believe we would overcome.”*

And today, beloved ones, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” in *I Have a Dream*, edited by James. M. Washington (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), see pages 101-106; especially the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph on p.102. Layla F. Saad, *me and white supremacy* (Sourcebooks, 2020), p.25. Martin Luther King Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” *I Have a Dream* edited by James. M. Washington, p.203 and “Where Do We Go From Here,” p.179.