

“Prepare the Way”
A Sermon for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
Matthew 3:1-17
January 15, 2023
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If you went around on the street and asked people who they think of as a modern-day prophet, I bet that most people would say Dr. King. I am pretty sure that most American Baptists would, as we are extremely proud to be “Dr. King kind of Baptists.” I wonder who you would say is a modern-day prophet? Call out some names right now.

- Modern day prophets
 - Rev. William Barber
 - BLM women
 - Greta Thunberg
 - Children among us

Today we get to hear some of the story of John the Baptist, one of my favorite prophets, and not just because it is from John that our branch of the Christian tree claims its name. John is a quintessential prophet, like the prophets of the Hebrew Bible: he’s peculiar—he clothes himself with camel’s hair and leather, and eats from the fruit of the earth: locusts and wild honey. John does strange things: proclaiming things that were making people think, saying “Change your hearts and lives! God is near! Pay attention to what the Holy is doing among you!” People were drawn to him, this kind of odd, against-the-grain man, preaching and teaching in the wilderness and not in the city square. So many people were going out of their way to encounter him, even to be baptized by him, that the religious leaders of the day were interested...and puzzled...and they came to him at the edge of the river so that they, too, could be baptized.

But then John does something that may have surprised the pious folks. He calls them out! The author of the gospel of Matthew writes that the Pharisees and Sadducees, two different groups of Jewish people, were coming to John and John called them out! Now, of course, we must remember that as 21st century Christians reading this text in a modern community across the world and across time from where and when this story was taking place, that we cannot draw nice, clean parallels between groups of people. And we know that far too often, the words “Pharisees” and “Sadducees” are used to hide the word “Jewish,” ...Christians will often interchange these words without thinking, mostly when they are looking down on Judaism (which is Jesus’ religion!) and thus reveal some casual antisemitism. So, we must tread carefully through these passages, and be thoughtful with our words, because people today are impacted by what we say as followers of Jesus and what we do as church-goers.

So as we read that “Pharisees” and “Sadducees” were coming to John, how should we think about them? I choose to say “religious folks” because that gives us just a hint to the position they

held in society in a way that maybe, maybe, we can understand in our time and place today. Are we not “religious folks,” too? And the point of John’s calling these particular people out was that he didn’t want the “religious folks,” people who knew the Bible, who were pious, who would go to worship and pray and give to the offering plate, and so on...John called them out because he didn’t want them to get complacent. He didn’t want them to say “well, I go to church so I’m all set with salvation,” and then rest on their laurels. What did the Pharisees and Sadducees think of this? The bias of the gospel author does not tell us, due to them writing their own understanding of John’s mission, and thus, sadly, using people groups as plot devices. But I invite you to wonder with me at the meaning of John’s call out: “you brood of vipers! Who told you to come receive the good news? Don’t rest on the legacy of people who have gone before you, but you also must be willing to change your hearts and lives!”

Honestly, that call out makes me uncomfortable. Such is the work of a prophet. To comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, some would say.

And John is a quintessential prophet--he made people uncomfortable! When people wanted to put him in a box and say “John is the Messiah!”, John knew his place with humility and said, “Nope, I am not the one you’ve been waiting for. I’ve been sent before the One to till the soil of your hearts so that you are ready to accept his message.” And then, when Jesus came on the scene, we know that Jesus made people uncomfortable: he did odd things, traveled and preached and listened to people on the margins, and healed people with illnesses, which were not exactly normal things to do.

So I wonder, on this day of honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., do we recognize modern day prophets? Or do we dismiss them? Do we hear enough that piques our curiosity and so then we go to the river to check out what they’re doing? What do we think when they call us out, when they tell us not to rest in someone else’s legacy but to do our own work to change our hearts and minds?

So let’s recap: prophets do weird things, usually out-of-sync with what we might deem “polite” culture. Prophets tell uncomfortable truths. Prophets call us out. Prophets point to something greater than themselves, not letting ego get in the way of their mission to serve the cause of justice.

The danger with prophets is that their stories often are cut short, as their speech and work and even their very existence threatens the powers that be. Dr. King knew that, and in the speech the night before he was murdered, given in support of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, listen to the dangerous words he said,

“It’s all right to talk about “long white robes over yonder,” in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s all right to talk about “streets flowing with milk and honey,” but God has commanded us to be

concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preachers must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.”¹

These are dangerous, dangerous words...preaching that the wealthiest country in the world should be able to house people and feed all the children. Preaching that people don't need to be so concerned with the rewards of heaven if they cannot clothe themselves and their families here and now. Radical things, dangerous things to say.

Among the other dangerous things Dr. King said, words that teetered on the prophetic edge, were these statements:

“All we say to America is: ‘be true to what you said on paper.’”²

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”³

“When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”⁴

“Justice too long delayed is justice denied.”⁵

Dangerous words. Like John, Dr. King was a prophet, speaking those dangerous words, calling out the powers that be and the regular, everyday people who supported those powers. Dr. King was a peace activist, a scholar, a theologian, a pastor, a leader calling for racial justice and economic equality, a husband and father and friend...he was all these things, and through them all, regarded as a dangerous man. Why? Because he was Black, because people listened to him, because he told uncomfortable truths. And so today, almost 55 years after his murder, the same powers and principalities that killed him (I am speaking of whiteness and white wealth and white rage) seek to whitewash him, and remove the teeth from the prophetic words he preached.

¹ <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>

² <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>

³ <https://letterfromjail.com/>

⁴ <https://the-ard.com/2022/01/17/6-speeches-honoring-the-full-legacy-of-dr-martin-luther-king/>

⁵ <https://letterfromjail.com/>

How does this whitewashing look today? Remembering Dr. King's calls to unity while ignoring his calling out injustice and the people who abide by it. Remembering the "I have a dream" speech while conveniently ignoring the fact that people today, in our own church, in our own neighborhood, in our own city, in our own country, do not have access to the benefits of the dream. And even, remembering only Dr. King, who was the figurehead of the Civil Rights movement but who worked closely and collaboratively with dozens to hundreds of other activists, strategists, leaders, preachers, civil disobedience trainers, students and people who fed, watered, sheltered, clothed, funded, drove and witnessed the movement. Whitewashing lifts up the one over the many, raising up individual success over community progress—so let us remember, on this Dr. King Sunday, that one of many legacies we learn from him and from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s is that we are better together, and we go farther together... so together is worth fighting for.

So I wonder today, dear church family, do we recognize the prophets among us? Do we follow them down to the river? How are we supporting the modern day prophets among us, in Seattle and in the world? How is ABC, the denomination of Dr. King, doing at following the legacy of this movement leader? What resources do we have that we can use to support equity Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement worked for—I'm thinking about supporting striking workers; calling for an end to war and a dismantling of the military-industrial complex; supporting human rights for those who are denied basic rights, particularly all the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary plus siblings among us; pursuing voting rights access, especially to Black and Indigenous people in this country who are TODAY being systematically disenfranchised. There are so many ways that we can support modern day prophets, the dreamers bringing about Dr. King's vision of the beloved community.

Can we prepare food for the hungry? Provide medical care for those without health insurance? Advocate for racial justice education to be included in textbooks and curriculum instead of excluded. Tell our lawmakers that we don't want our tax money going to militarization! Proclaim that there is enough food for all the hungry children in this city, and in this country, who are being charged for school lunch fines. Seek solutions other than calling the police for people in crisis who are currently without housing—and create housing for them! Advocate for gun responsibility so that no more children and teachers will be shot up at school. Push for vital changes to police training and accountability, even to the point of abolition, so no more Black people are killed in the street, like Michael Brown, George Floyd, Philando Castile and Keenan Anderson. Not one more.

Organizations like Black Lives Matter, Soulforce, King County Equity Now, Food Not Bombs, Christians Against Christian Nationalism, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, and the Poor People's Campaign and so many more are living out these visions, and we have the opportunity to support them—with our prayer, with our time, with our energy, with our finances. However you are called to participate, I hope you participate in the prophetic work of justice for those pushed to the margins of our society.

The night before Dr. King died, he spoke these last public words at the closure of his speech at the Memphis Masonic Temple, not wrestling but accepting humbly his prophetic posture—preparing the way for the work of the Holy to be done:

“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.”⁶

Beloved church, let us, as members of the denomination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., join with the Holy in being co-conspirators for justice. Co-conspirators for peace that can only be accomplished through the establishment of justice for the flourishing of all people. Let us remember that Dr. King's legacy is more than January 15th, more than a holiday, more than a day of service. Dr. King's legacy should unsettle us, should make us uncomfortable, should move us forward and together so that we can work together with the Holy to make this world glorious with health, wellbeing, dignity and human rights for all.

May it ever be so. Amen.

⁶ <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>