

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: His Dream Today & A Stone of Hope

Isaiah 40:3-5, Galatians 3:28

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A voice cries out:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

She was there in 1963. Rev. Gail Crouch. Years later she wrote these words as she reflected in a sermon.

The words thundered out over the loudspeakers: “Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain.” Sounds like Isaiah to me, I thought – must be in church. And then the voice again, “...we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Amos, I thought – still feels like church. But I look around me. It sure doesn't look like church.

I am sitting next to the Reflecting Pool at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. My feet are actually IN the water for we have walked quite a ways and it is hot that August day in 1963. I am surrounded by 200,000 folks, mostly African-Americans although there are a lot of people who look like me.

It had been a long day, for most of us got up early and drove, bussed, or rode trains to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. I had left New York City with my father-in-law Archie Crouch, before dawn. Our buses were full of people who worked at 475 Riverside in N.Y.C. the “God Box”, an office building that housed the national offices of several denominations.

We had opened our gathering by singing the National Anthem led by the revered singer, Marion Anderson. Twelve speeches later, even though the words were bracketed by songs

from Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mahalia Jackson and other singers, we were all pretty much done with words. As the 13th speech was about to begin, Archie and I discussed the possibility of gathering up our things and heading back to the buses. We actually were on our feet when this voice came over the loudspeakers calling for justice to roll down like water. We paused, sat down; put our feet back into the water and listened to what has become one of the most famous speeches of all time.

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began to finish his prepared speech he moved into a spontaneous sermon mode and began those words, *"I have a dream....."* which we have heard for over 50 years now, especially at this time of year when we celebrate his birthday. And he finally concluded with these words, *"This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with – with this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."*

The applause seemed to never end and all of us, after a long day of speeches and many words, knew we had just heard something very, very special.

The next day the New York Times said, *"Dr. King touched all the themes of the day, only better than anyone else. He was full of the symbolism of Lincoln and Gandhi and the cadences of the Bible. He was both militant and sad, and he sent the crowd away feeling that the long journey had been worthwhile."* And the Times went on to say that although some had feared violence with the March, the 200,000 souls were really a *"gentle army that occupied the Capital where politeness was the order of the day."* (1)

As beautiful and powerful as the "I Have a Dream" speech is, my favorite writing from King, the words that most move me and have shaped my faith, are the words in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

In the spring of 1963, just before the March on Washington, King was in Birmingham to lead civil rights demonstrations in that city and was jailed because he participated in non-violent acts of civil disobedience. While he was in jail, a number of clergy in the city criticized King for activities that were "unwise and untimely" and they called him an extremist. Now King was routinely criticized and usually did not respond because he felt it took time he needed to give to the movement. But something triggered his need to respond to these clergy. Perhaps it was because they were his brothers in Christ, his colleagues. The church he loved disappointed him. The letter is roughly ten pages long and has some amazing insights. One of the most powerful parts of that letter for me is how he responds to those who called him an extremist.

"...Initially I was disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, but as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you and do good to them that hate you...." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and

righteousness like an every flowing stream.”Was not Martin Luther an extremist: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise so help me God.”....And Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson were extremists, so the questions is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?...Jesus Christ, was an extremists for love, truth and goodness.....Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.” (2)

What does it take for us to be “creative extremists?” I think that King would say that standing up to discrimination and intolerance in any form might need us to be creative extremists. Most of us tend to be moderate, pleasant, accommodating. King would challenge us there are times to be more extreme – to be extremists for love and justice. Do the inner work & outer actions

One of the lines that has been echoing in me this year is that line from the March on Washington, *“With our faith, we will hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.”* King knew he did not receive his power, his sense of mission, or his hope from fame, his Nobel Prize or his relationships with Kings and Presidents from himself. King received his strength and hope from God.

His words and work to inspire the civil rights movement in our country in times of violence and despair have shaped my own spiritual life and ministry. In the past few months, I was amazed to learn some history I did not know. It has to do with a group of people who faced a mountain of despair in the midst of generations of discrimination in another country. They heard his words and watched his actions and were inspired to take action.

It was in Ireland. One of the Irish leaders who worked for change to address violence and discrimination in Ireland in the 1960’s through the peace agreement in 1998 was John Hume. In his official Nobel Prize interview, Hume stated, “Martin Luther King was very much our inspiration.”

I learned that just as it was in the Deep South, the discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland had been around for generations. The discrimination by Protestants against Catholics was known as the policy of a Protestant state for a Protestant people, a motto for Northern Ireland coined by their Prime Minister right after partition in 1922. Pogroms drove hundreds of Catholics out of their homes as police stood by. Catholics were treated as second-class citizens in Northern Ireland. They were treated like peasants and serfs, confined to ghettos and lowlands while the Protestants lorded it over them. Northern Catholics had a position in society equivalent to blacks in the United States. The discrimination was especially blatant in three areas: gerrymandering of constituencies so that there was always a Protestant unionist majority, an incredible voting system that allowed multiple votes for rich Protestant landowners and businessmen –and vicious discrimination in housing. (3)

Brian Dooley, the author of *The Black and Green*, an excellent account of the Irish/Black interaction, was in no doubt about King's importance in the civil rights struggle. King was "an enormously powerful and symbolic figure ... for civil rights struggles in Northern Ireland... ."

When Jeffrey and I were in Ireland in October, one of our guides was telling us about Irish history. As a Catholic, he spoke about the discrimination he experienced growing up. Then he said, "Do you know who I credit for bringing peace to Ireland?" He paused. Then he said, "Martin Luther King and President Bill Clinton." Amazing. Martin Luther King inspired so many, including John Hume in Ireland and Bill Clinton. And with persistent diplomacy and bringing leaders of factions around the table, peace was finally achieved and continues today.

Think of your own memories of Martin Luther King. Or watching documentaries or movies – remember some of the words that struck you and have stayed with you. He was grounded in biblical prophets and the words of Jesus and the biblical image of shalom. What grounds you in your faith and spiritual life that you can find ways to lift up a vision of justice and inclusion? How might we together hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope?

One of my practices is to read voices of current African American writers today to broaden and deepen my understanding of systemic racism and ways we are called to embody our faith. Cole Arthur Riley is one of those voices. She is a creative extremist. She is young African American woman who created black liturgies on Instagram in at the end of June of 2020, a space for black spiritual words of liberation, lament, rage, hope and rest. She eventually wrote a book came out in 2022 which I am reading *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*. She currently serves as spiritual teacher in residence with Cornell University's Office of Spirituality and Meaning Making.

She began posting her writings during the period where a lot more people were reckoning with the murders of Ahmad Arbery and George Floyd. She said in a recent podcast – "I had been in liturgical spaces for a while at that point, maybe five to eight years and have found a lot of comfort in written prayer and contemplative spirituality. But just at that time, I felt like I was in a lot of Christian spaces that weren't really capable of fielding and understanding my sadness, my anger in a way that was helpful to me."

Close with a quote. May the work and words of Martin Luther King and young voices like Cole Arthur Riley continue to help us hewn hope out of mountains of despair.

God of complicated hope, We confess that we have made for ourselves a dainty hope. It is difficult to accept the hope of inspirational quotes, when we see the traumas of this world clear and constant...Protect our hope from toxic positivity, that we could name truth of our deepest longings and face a waiting marked by pain and want. Help us to allow our dreaming to be a deep, guttural groan, a promise we can recline into, a place where we can catch our breath. (4)

- 1) Rev. Gail Crouch as quoted by Rev. Marci Glass – excerpts “A Stone of Hope” 1.21.13
<https://marciglass.com/2013/01/21/guest-post-a-stone-of-hope/>
- 2) Dr. Martin Luther King, “Letter From Birmingham City Jail,” April 16, 1963.
A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches, edited by James M. Washington, (Harper Collins, 1991), pg. 297-98.
- 3) <https://www.irishcentral.com/opinion/niallodowd/how-martin-luther-king-inspired-north-uprising>
- 4) Black Liturgies, 2/7/22 on Instagram and Facebook
Cole Arthur Riley. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*.
Convergent Books, 2022.