

Sermon: A Continuing Call
Rev. Mark Bigelow
Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

Scripture Readings: 1 Samuel 3:1-10, John 1:43-51

The two scripture readings you heard this morning describe very dramatic calls by God. These are life changing, I'm-out-of-here, don't-you-dare-go-to-call-waiting, kinds of calls. It's the kind of a call that each of us would like to have. A voice comes from heaven and says, "This is your mission." No doubts, no questions, no hesitation.

Call is an important notion in theology. It is the religious equivalent of finding your place in life with God. It is self-fulfillment combined with an altruistic commitment to God and community. It is sometimes viewed as an event so miraculous that it only happens to a few chosen saints once every couple of decades, or even centuries.

I was relieved to discover that Dr. Martin Luther King's call to ministry wasn't like that at all. Dr. King wrote of his call, "My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something, on the contrary it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity." Even though he was the son of a well-respected pastor and had a deep faith and commitment to the church, Dr. King's call to ministry was a gradual unfolding of his life's purpose. This call to serve humanity probably came to him in quiet moments of prayer and reflection, but it certainly was affirmed by dramatic events.

A famous example of the dramatic human nature of Dr. King's call came following the arrest of Rosa Parks in December 1955, in Montgomery. On December 5 the local clergy came together for a meeting to prepare for the opening of the Montgomery bus boycott. They met at 3:00 that afternoon to form the Montgomery Improvement Association. As soon as they agreed to organize Dr. King was elected as the president of the organization. After the meeting he went home, filled in his wife Coretta on the days events and then went to the quiet of his study at 6:30. The first public meeting to announce the protest was scheduled for 7:00. He had twenty minutes to prepare what he called, "the most important speech of my life." He not only rose to the occasion, but his address caused the overflowing audience to rise to the protest that helped to change the face of America.

I'm am glad to learn that Dr. King saw his call as a call to serve humanity and that it came through a gradual unfolding of subtle and dramatic events. This is the kind of call that many of us hear. It isn't sudden, often it's not very clear, but if we remain open to it God's voice comes through the cacophony of the noise and we have a chance to respond. Today, I would like to consider where Dr. King's call took him. What was the lasting effect of that call to serve humanity, and how did he sustain it? We all know the story of the beginning his public ministry—the Montgomery bus boycott, the marches in southern

cities, the famous march on Washington with his “I Have a Dream” speech. These are the most common images celebrated on the Martin Luther King, Jr. national holiday.

We don’t hear as much about the last few years of Dr. King’s life. In some ways because his later ministry wasn’t quite as dramatic or public, but mostly because it was much more controversial. By 1967 Dr. King was under great pressure from all sides. The right and the radical left were condemning him for his continued work for a non-violent resistance to racism. He was traveling unceasingly. It is reported by many of his close associates that he battled heavy bouts of depression. The weight of call was heavy on his shoulders. It was at this time that Dr. King embarked on two of the most controversial actions of a controversial career. They were his denunciation of the Vietnam war and his deepening conviction of the connection between racism and poverty that caused him to take his message and organizing to Northern cities.

Vincent Harding, one of King’s colleagues wrote, “In 1967, this hero, who was then, in the eyes of many persons, hot hero, but ‘communist dupe,’ ‘trouble-maker,’ ‘traitor,’ or at best ‘naïve’—this very live man stood in Riverside Church, called our country ‘the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today,’ and pleaded with us, because he loved, to stop bombing the people of Vietnam, to take the initiative in the peace-making process, for the sake of the Vietnamese, for the sake of our children, for the sake of God. Beyond Vietnam, he urged us away from our deeply etched racism, militarism, materialism, from our flaccid acceptance of ‘structural unemployment’ in our nation, from our ‘morbid fear of communism.’ All of these, he said had kept us on ‘the wrong side’ of the poor people’s revolutions across the world, and he challenged us, for our good and theirs, to stand with the poor, at home and abroad.”

As King said, “Our only hope...lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit (of America) and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism.” King had come to understand that to have justice anywhere you needed to speak for it everywhere. He had chosen to be on the side of the poor and that meant poor people in Montgomery, or in Detroit, and even Vietnam—regardless of their color. As he said, “The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of...their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means...to lift the load of poverty.”

King’s call to serve humanity had led him to speak for the African-Americans who were denied participation in American society. He realized some significant victories in that battle. But King’s call did not stop there. He wanted complete equality for all God’s children and his analysis of the problem caused him to see deep and systemic problems in the economies and government of the world that kept some people disenfranchised and others in power. He began to plan ever larger and more controversial, but still non-violent means to overcome these deep differences in society. As he said weeks before his death, “The Negro revolt is evolving into more than a quest for desegregation and equality. It is a challenge to a system that has created miracles of production and technology yet

created injustice. If humanity is locked outside the system, Negroes will have revealed its inner core of despotism and a far greater struggle for liberation will unfold.”

And he wrote in his posthumously published, “The Trumpet of Conscience,” “The storm is rising against the privileged minority of the earth, from which there is no shelter in isolation or armament. The storm will not abate until a just distribution of the fruits of the earth enables men everywhere to live in dignity and human decency. The American Negro...may be the vanguard of a prolonged struggle that may change the shape of the world, as billions of deprived shake and transform the earth in the quest for life, freedom and justice.”

King’s later message sounds like it could have been spoken today. For in spite of many gains due to affirmative action and a very gradual desegregation of our society there are still enormous gaps between the haves and have-nots. In fact, the gap has been growing dramatically. In some ways it appears we are witnessing, and participating in, a complete bifurcation of society. That is there is a gulf of not only incomes, but also technology, health care, education, and justice in society. I don’t need a lot of statistics to prove this—a few images will do: just compare Harborfields High School to any neighborhood high school in Harlem, or the Bronx. Look at the racial make-up of any prison. Review the earnings of CEOs with production workers who make their companies possible.

As I say these things I am very aware that there are many theories of why things are the way they are, and that there are very different and, even, contradictory ideas for how to solve these problems. My interest today is not to pragmatically solve all the world’s problems. My interest is to consider Dr. King’s call to serve humanity. So let me finish with a few more popular of his words that illustrate the kind of call he had and how it sustained him and his mission. King knew that he was extreme and was under attack from right and left. In his 1963 “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail,” he wrote to a group of white clergymen, “ Was not Jesus an extremist in love?... Was not Amos an extremist for justice?... Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ?... Was not Martin Luther,...(and) Abraham Lincoln,...(and) Thomas Jefferson extremist(s)?... So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be? Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love?” I believe that King’s mission was strong, and it was lasting because it was grounded in the highest ideals of our religion and our country. It was not based on short-term goals, nor on selfish strategies. He spoke of a dream that has stirred the hearts of all of humanity since Jesus and that was certainly present at the founding of our nation. He called people to be the best they could be. He advocated the loftiest of goals and the most dignified of methods—non-violent action. He met destructive force with creative, sacrificial power. He challenged hatred with unflinching love and good will. If the ministry of The Congregational Church of Huntington can be follow this vision even a fraction we will be the better for it and our community will be more just.

The night before his assassination King delivered his last sermon at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968. The words have been repeated many times, but they are worth hearing again and again. “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."