

8.10.25 Sermon Transcript – Martin Luther King, Jr.

This passage from Amos 5 is one of those passages where I hear it and then we hear “the word of the Lord” and I think, “the word of the Lord? Thanks be to God?” I mean, it's a doom and gloom kind of passage. Amos is not pulling punches here in this passage. And he's not giving any comfort, he's not giving any gentle words. His message is like a lion's roar that he is crying out against the people of faith, crying out against religious hypocrisy. He's crying out against the facade of worship when it is not accompanied by justice. More than two millennia later, we hear those same echoes in the words and in the work of Martin Luther King Jr.

In his letter from a Birmingham Jail, quotes these words from Amos, “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” These words from Amos, they're not a suggestion. It's not a cute, pithy, little slogan that we can hold up and feel good about ourselves when we say it. Rather, it's a command from the mouth of God to God's people. It's a demand. It's a command that Martin Luther King Jr. took very seriously. He called the church to account and to action. And so Amos, in the passage we heard, he begins with these harsh words.

He says, for those who long for the day of the Lord, if you're imagining that it's going to be a day of vindication and victory, then you're in for a rude surprise. He says it will be darkness, not light – because was not impressed by Israel's worship. He was not impressed by their songs, or their rituals, or offerings or feasts. Why? Because God says justice is nowhere to be found! And so Dr. King again echoes this when he critiques the white moderate Christians in the letter from the Birmingham jail, where he says, “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride towards freedom is not the white citizens counselor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice.” Dr. King, much like Amos, calls out a religion that is more interested in order, in maintaining the status quo, than hearing the cry of the needy, of the oppressed, and of the vulnerable.

I wonder how often do we continue to fall into that same trap today, much like the people of faith fell into that trap in the time of Amos? Many people of faith were falling into the same trap during the civil rights movement. Showing up to church, singing the right songs, praying the right prayers, doing all of those right things, but unwilling to rock the boat, unwilling to speak out, unwilling to work for justice. Well, Amos told us this morning in this passage that God is not fooled when we do that.

So Martin Luther King Jr. Is a household name. We all know his name. I remember learning about him in school – my children have learned about him in daycare, even. He was a Baptist minister, a theologian, and obviously one of the most influential leaders of the civil rights movement in our country. He was born in a deeply religious family.

His father was also a minister, and so was very much formed by the black church tradition of preaching, and music, and community activism. But he really came into prominence as a leader when he was serving at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, where he took part in helping to organize the Montgomery bus boycott, which of course was sparked by Rosa Parks and her challenge to the segregation of the bus system there.

Martin Luther King Jr. Was obviously deeply influenced by the teachings of Jesus. He was a minister, a Christian minister. He also took cues from Mahatma Gandhi and his practices of nonviolent resistance, and he championed nonviolent direct action in challenging injustice. He organized campaigns and protests against segregation, but not just segregation, also economic injustice and war. For him, those things were all tied up together.

And of course, he gave his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” in the march in Washington. He also participated in the marches from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights. And then tragically, he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. We've all heard, or most of us have heard his life story before. But for Martin Luther King Jr., justice was not something that was optional.

We heard in Amos today, in verse 15 of chapter 5, hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate. The gate was the place of civic decision making. It symbolized the community. Amos isn't just talking about individual piety here. He's actually talking about how society itself is structured. He's talking about systemic injustice and making things right.

Dr. King wrote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere... we are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny.” Dr. King's calls for justice were not only in private relationships, but also in public policy, in the structure of society itself, in the economic and legal systems as well. It was a big call: to action and accountability.

When he marched in Birmingham, it wasn't just for some vague spiritual ideal, but he was marching for very real things – to end segregation in public spaces, to guarantee fair hiring practices, and to stop police brutality. He took the words of Amos very seriously. In his life, we also hear God's call to establish justice at the gate. Amos says God rejects Israel's solemn assemblies and songs.

Dr. King wrote, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed. For years now, I have heard the word wait. This wait has almost always meant never.” Dr. King insisted that nonviolent direct action isn't meant to create tension for tension's sake, but rather it's meant to create the kind of holy disruption that makes a community so uncomfortable that it is forced to confront, to name its sin and to repent.

I mean, that's what Amos was doing. That's what Dr. King did. Now, this prophetic action for Dr. King was not popular. It landed him in jail multiple times. His house was bombed. He was threatened over and over again. Prophetic action might not be popular, but it is faithful.

And so we come to that final verse of the Amos passage that we heard today. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Dr. King quoted this in nearly every single speech that he gave because he felt that it captured the heart of God. There's that whole image of water. Water is really powerful. It has the power to cut canyons, to move things. We've seen, for instance, the devastation that flooding causes in our state, the way it has the power to do complete upheaval. Water is powerful. It breaks down barriers, it carves through rock. But water also gives life. And so for Dr. King, justice isn't just this idea of a trickle from a faucet. It's this flood that can actually reshape the world. For Dr. King, the vision of that reshaped world is what he called beloved community, and we hear about what that looks like in his "I Have a Dream" speech, of what he imagines the world can look like for his children, for every single person.

So here are some things I think that we can learn from Dr. King today as the church: I think the first thing we can learn is that we are called to have moral clarity over popularity. He didn't seek out consensus or comfort. He sought out the truth and he sought out justice, even when it was unpopular and dangerous for himself personally. You know, we're living in a time where we're seeing Christianity wrapped around patriotism and flags wrapped around crosses, and we are, as the church, called to say "Jesus is Lord," to have that clarity. Jesus is Lord, nothing and no one else. No other power, no other party. Dr. King shows us that the gospel is not about preserving power, but about disrupting unjust power with love and truth and justice.

I think the second thing we can learn from him is that the church does indeed have a prophetic role in our world today. Dr. King believed the church was not called to be not the master of the state, nor the servant of the state, but instead the conscience of the state. Again, he wrote in the Letter from a Birmingham Jail, which, if you have not read it, I commend you to read that piece of writing, he says "There was a time when the church was very powerful, in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed." We're living in a time where there are many who are seeking to make the Church powerful in a worldly sense. Dr. King calls us instead to make the church faithful again. Our job is not to serve the state's ambitions or to build up or support a power or a party, but rather we're called to bear witness to a different kind of kingdom, where the first are last and the poor are the blessed, where enemies are, in fact, loved.

Third, Dr. King teaches us about the importance of nonviolence and how that is rooted in the way of Jesus. Again, so often these days, Christianity is being wedded to force, to coercion, to militarism. So often it baptizes violence in the name of security or in the name of righteousness. But Dr. King, who was grounded fully in the teachings of Jesus, committed himself to nonviolence as a spiritual, and moral, and even a political principle.

He said it was not weakness, but it was strength under discipline. He said, darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that. And so we as a church are called to embody that same ethic for ourselves.

Fourth, he teaches us that the church is indeed called to risk its reputation for the sake of justice. Dr. King names his disappointment not only with those in power, but with the white Christians who remained silent, as I shared in one excerpt earlier in the sermon. But he goes on to say, “I have wept over the laxity of the church, but be assured that my tears have been tears of love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I’m in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and the great grandson of preachers.” He loved the church enough to call it to a higher level of accountability in the world. We can’t, as the church, be lukewarm. We have to risk our comfort and our reputation and our resources to stand with the oppressed, with the powerless, to have the boldness to speak truth to power, even when it is way more tempting to remain comfortable and silent. We’re called to resist any movement that uses Jesus to prop up empire and the powers of the world.

And finally, I think we can learn from him that hope is, in fact, a moral and a spiritual discipline that we are called to cultivate. Dr. King was not naive about the dangers facing him. He faced bombs and betrayals and imprisonment and constant threats. But he never, ever gave up hope – not as some kind of hope that says, “Oh, everything’s going to work out okay in the end,” which is the type of optimism I tend to go towards. That’s not the kind of hope that he’s talking about. Instead, he’s talking about hope as a discipline, this fierce, gospel-rooted belief that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice if we bend with it. And so we are called to be a people of resilience and grounded hope. We are called to work towards justice, to bend with the arc of the moral universe so we can learn to speak truth even when it costs us.

We can be the conscience, not the chaplain of the state. We’re called to practice nonviolence in the face of hatred. We’re called to risk comfort for the sake of justice and to hold fast to hope when the world feels weary. These are things that the passage in Amos calls us to. And these are things that we can learn from the example of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He says, “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.” You see, The church, as Dr. King reminds us, is most powerful not when it clutches at power, but when it kneels in humility, when it stands in solidarity and when it walks in injustice. Dr. King didn’t write letter from the Birmingham jail to his enemies, to his opponents. He wrote it to pastors, he wrote it to churches who were content to be quiet, who were content to remain comfortable, who were not willing to disrupt the status quo, to those who had the platform and the power to speak out, but who chose not to.

And so today, this morning, we have Both Amos and Dr. King who stand before us to challenge us and to invite us. To invite us to take our faith seriously, to make our worship more than words, to seek out the words and the way of Jesus Christ, the one who teaches us what it is to kneel in humility and to stand in solidarity. And so may we live our lives, both

individually and collectively, as a stream bed through which justice and righteousness may flow. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.