

# *A Light to the Nations*

**Isaiah 49:1-7    John 1:29-42**

**Preached by Richard Bolin at Hamilton United Methodist Church, Los Angeles**  
*A pulpit exchange in observance of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday*  
**The Rev. Louis Chase preached at Culver-Palms UMC**  
**January 20, 2008**

I drove down Slauson Avenue to get here this morning, from where it dead ends at Ballona Creek in Culver City to Figueroa Blvd, and then turned south a few blocks to arrive here at Hamilton United Methodist Church. I noticed no physical boundary, no border that needed to be crossed, no security checkpoints. But that does not mean there weren't any. I wonder, what boundaries did Louis and I cross when we decided to trade pulpits on this day as we pay tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Let us pray ...

One day, a number of years ago, I went to work with my wife. This was not really a planned excursion. Circumstances had conspired so that we had only one car between us that day. She had to be at Marlton School by 7:30 a.m. and I had a meeting in Gardena at 10. So if I wanted a car to get to my meeting, I needed to take her to work. So we got to Marlton School, which is right near the Crenshaw Mall, and I had nothing to do for a couple of hours before my meeting in Gardena. So I plopped myself down in the reading corner of this pre-school classroom and watched the day begin. Soon the busses arrived with 3, 4 and 5 year-olds coming from all over Los Angeles. Being visually handicapped is what they all had in common. Beyond that these kids had various other special needs: an artificial leg, learning difficulties, limited English, experiences of abuse, living in foster homes – 16 kids with two teachers and three adult aids, and, on this particular morning, one extra adult hanging out in the reading corner. “Who are you?” they wanted to know. “I’m Kay’s husband, Richard.” These kids were not shy. That was all the introduction they needed. I said, “Do you want me to read a book,” and Brittney was in my lap helping me turn the pages. Kay said it was time to get the bikes out of the locked sheds, so Mark and I went hand in hand to help. Perhaps the thought of blind kids riding tricycles on a blacktop playground gives you pause, but some of the kids have more sight than others, and there are enough adults around to prevent major accidents.

My visit to Marlton School was brief, but it didn't take long to connect with the kids. It helped that I didn't have any other agenda but to pay attention to them. It was enough to be willing to sit on the floor and read a book, or to offer a hand and explore the playground.

It is not often that I connect so easily with someone I just met. I would do well to have more times when there was no other agenda other than to pay attention to people around me - to sit with them, to take a walk, to listen.

God wants human beings to connect with one another. God encourages us to move beyond our present circles into broadening areas of relationships. When we would withdraw and seek comfortable barriers, God pushes us to tear down walls.

Isaiah spoke God's word to the people returning from exile. The passage read this morning is one of the great statements of universal vision spoken precisely at a time when the people were tempted to withdraw into a xenophobic ghetto. Isaiah broke out of his cultural confinement and proclaimed a universal message:

*“God says:*

*‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob*

*and to restore the survivors of Israel;*

*I will give you as a light to the nations,*

*that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*

We have a story to tell to the nations, a story that we tell not because we are convinced that we are better than they are, or that they are lucky to receive some of our wisdom. We tell God's story because the story has taught us that all nations are made-up of valued human beings: the children of God. Though we imagine we are crossing some great chasm, the truth is that whenever we cross a boundary of distance or language, the only persons we encounter on the other side are our own brothers and sisters.

It is too light a thing to find a comfortable place where we can enjoy the quiet company of a few good friends. God calls us to connect, to cross boundaries, to share God's light.

We honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on this day, but I have another Martin to tell you about. Martin Marty, emeritus professor at the University of Chicago, is a church historian and an insightful observer of culture and religion. Back in 1984 he and a number of others were asked to describe how they saw the world at that time and what they expected for the future, all of these observations being placed in a time capsule and buried in River City, Illinois. Then in the year 2000, they would open the capsule and find out how much things had changed.

Martin Marty wrote: In the 1980's "the strongest spiritual (or anti-spiritual) force internationally was tribalism. Tribalism calls me to link 'my' gods-people-place-culture over against 'their' gods-people-place-culture in an endless cycle of defensive and aggressive acts." Though Marty didn't like this tendency towards tribalism as he penned his thoughts in 1984, he expected that it would remain on the increase in many parts of the world, at least through the year 2000. Tribalism is that tendency to say that my understanding of the truth, my political or economic system, my lifestyle is the only one that counts; and to perceive everything different as being a threat. This is a destructive force in our world.

"Nowhere in the world during these years of 'the short pull,' wrote Marty, "will major or mass groups that promote empathy, tolerance, and responsiveness between people and groups prosper as will introverted and aggressive groups." - (Martin E Marty, River City Time Capsule, 1984)

Martin Marty's observations were astute in 1984, they were still accurate when they dug up that time capsule in 2000, and they ring sadly true in 2008. Because we have not taken to heart what Martin King preached in 1967:

“I am convinced,” preached Doctor King, “that ... we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values... This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, clan, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all [humanity]. We can no longer afford to worship

the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate...

“A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, ‘This way of settling differences is not just.’ ... America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities over the pursuit of war.” (*Silence Is Betrayal*, 1967)

Our memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. is of one who shared with us a bit of the larger vision that God has for our world. His vision was not universally embraced in his lifetime, and we are still balking at it. He called our tribalism into question, and if we are serious about honoring him, we will allow his message to challenge us again today. Dr. King’s message is Isaiah’s message and it is Jesus’ message. The message is not limited to Montgomery or Selma or the Civil Rights movement. It is not confined to the United States or the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Dr. King proclaimed the ancient message that we have come to view as ahead of its time, only because we resist what has always been true. Martin Luther King, Jr. was not ahead of his time. No! It is we who are behind God’s time!

We have been hesitant to cross the boundaries. The boundaries were clear in Montgomery, Alabama, 53 years ago. The boundaries were clear about where you went to church and the boundaries were clear about where you sat on the bus. The people in control sat in the front of the bus and the people with no power were put in the back of the bus. But one day Rosa Parks got so tired of the status quo, so tired of getting up to give a white man her seat, so tired after a day of hard work, that she found the power to stay in her seat, which had suddenly become a seat on the wrong side of the boundary. Rosa Parks wouldn’t move, and suddenly it felt like the world was being turned upside-down. There was a fairly new young preacher at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery. He was 26 years old. He had just finished his Ph.D at the Methodist Seminary in Boston, where his mentors had urged him to study Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent strategy for social change. He stood in the crowded sanctuary of another Black church in town and courageously told the people that they were not wrong in crossing the boundaries and seeking justice.

“And we are not wrong ... in what we are doing,” said the young Dr. King. “If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to Earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie, love has no meaning. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” [*Martin Luther King, Jr., Mass meeting at Holt Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, December 5, 1955.*]

Thank God the young preacher, fresh out of seminary, did not confine himself within the boundaries of proper convention!

"Behold, the Lamb of God," John the Baptist said, pointing to Jesus. And here indeed was the evidence that the greatest boundary of all had been crossed. God walked in our shoes. For ages humanity sought to close the gap between heaven and earth by making some sacrificial offering: the first fruits, a dove, a sacrificial lamb. But the gap

was finally closed when God came as the lamb who laid down his life for the sake of the world.

God took on human form. Our petty human boundaries lose significance in light of God's action in Jesus Christ.

Dr. King's "ahead-of-his-time" message was the ancient message that is the universal message.

The universal message is that God has made every human being sacred by crossing the human-divine boundary in Jesus Christ.

The universal message is that the initiative of grace, approaching others with unconditional love, elicits the free-will response of reconciliation.

The universal message is that God intends for us life in beloved community, rejoicing in the goodness of creation.

Dr. King's message is Isaiah's message and Jesus' message, the ancient message that is not ahead of its time, but whose time it has always been. It is we who are behind God's time and it is time now for that universal gospel message to take root in our particular lives and for us to live in the light that shines in the darkness, which the darkness did not, has not, and will not overcome. O Lord, help us! Amen!