

God's Dream: Larger than the "American Dream"

Isaiah 49:1-7

Preached by Louis Chase at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church
A pulpit exchange in observance of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday
The Rev. Richard Bolin preached at Hamilton UMC, Los Angeles
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"The LORD called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me. ²He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me;; *He formed me in the womb to be his servant.... He says:.. I will also make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth."* Isaiah 49:1b, 5a, 6b.

It is indeed a delight to engage in a pulpit exchange with your Pastor, my colleague and friend, the Rev. Richard Bolin. His gifts of preaching, story telling and standing in solidarity with the poor and disenfranchised on your behalf, I greatly admire. I have seen him marching with striking hotel workers, standing for the homeless and strangers among us.

On Thursday evening last, I was channel surfing and accidentally encountered Dr. Phil. On the program was a handsome, young man maybe in his 30's, who loved his toys, a Hummer, exotic cars, purchasing expensive jewelry and other trinkets that in his words was the life. He was as Dr. Phil commented, "\$200,000 in debt, living the American Dream." His retort was, "I work hard and I am having fun. I can afford it." The theme of my sermon is "Larger Than the American Dream."

James Truslow Adams, a distinguished writer and historian coined the phrase "the American Dream." He defined it in this fashion: "*It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."* *The Epic of America, 1931.*"

And at its best, the American Dream is noble and worthwhile. Who can argue with freedom, liberty, justice and opportunity? But when this dream is suffocated and twisted to a wreck of materialism and national hubris, we are in trouble.

When we rely on our military might, our technological innovations and 401Ks and our sense of virtue and entitlement, we betray the essence of the American dream.

On this day we celebrate the birthday and vision of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But this is not for me a day of remembrance. It is so easy to see Martin in the context of a dream. There is the obsession with the beautiful oratory of the Martin Luther King of the March on Washington, "I have a dream" speech.

For me, this is a day to take seriously the realization of the dream. That means tackling the complex issues of social and foreign policy and the religious sensibility that turns ideals such as compassion and justice into spent sound bites and buzz words. We are called by God to live and to die meaningfully; to face fear with courage and faith, to be the light in the darkness, to be the shelter in the storm. To know that, with us, on our own, we are not able, but with God, all things are possible.

Perhaps part of us on the inside would prefer to live with the comfort of King's oratory rather than with the harsh realities of his time. We rather remember the dream of which he spoke and not the nightmare that many Americans endured. Or maybe even now, his words, give us a kumbaya moment that anesthetizes us to the torturous nature of our times.

On this day, we celebrate King's birthday and dream, but not as a meaningless gesture. If we want to keep the slain dreamer's dream alive, we must plant this vision into our lives and human culture and make this dream our dream, meaningfully ours.

What roots this dream in my soul as a Christian, is that this dream is woven from the loom of God's dream. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. No more first world and third world, no more have and have nots, no more war, no more lies, but life everlasting, a new order, a Beloved community, a life where we walk down the boulevards of peace, and drive down the highways of justice and righteousness.

There is a dream. There is a grand and eloquent dream. A dream that is larger than, and deeper and greater than the "American dream." I am persuaded that it is God's dream.

But my friends, there are times when the American Dream runs into a collision course with God's dream. And when the interests of state and

privilege crash into the demand of righteousness and decency we must take a stand. And some would rise and slay the dreamer to see what comes of his dream. At times we have mounted the dreamer on a cross and other times in a museum.

After the assassination of Malcolm X, Carl Wendell Hines penned this poem

*Now that he is safely dead
Let us praise him
build monuments to his glory
sing Hosannas to his name.
Dead men make
such convenient heroes: They
cannot rise
to challenge the images
we would fashion from their lives.
And besides,
it is easier to build monuments
than to make a better world.*

But we are here to celebrate King and the way he connects us as a tired and weary humanity with God's dream. We are on the cusp of one of the most significant moments in the history of this nation.

Dare I say, this nation is at war, at home and abroad! The war on terror, the war on drugs, torture, renditions, the usurpation of civil liberties, the absence of transparency, lethal injection, the Iraq war, the economic crisis, absence of health care, homelessness, and broken homes, and I could go on. These, among others constitute the sins, not of our fathers, but our systemic sins.

As long as there is the nuclear arms build up by the world powers, not only will humanity be ultimately extinguished, but millions of people will be grounded into extinction tortuously through unemployment, lack of education and basic necessities.

Listen to King, from the bowels of the Birmingham jail, "*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.... We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*" And how easily we forget. How unimportant King's message is as we pursue our interests and national security. How callous we are!

More important than King the dreamer is King the prophet, the one that proclaims the Dream of God, a vision of what is possible for humanity. I am reminded of our text, where Isaiah speaks of the one known by God from the womb, whose mouth was made like a sharp sword. As Isaiah puts it *"I will also make you a light to the nations, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."*

Ten days before King was assassinated Rabbi Abraham Heschel who had walked with King; Abraham Heschel who taught us to pray on our feet, in introducing Martin to a group of Rabbis said, *"Martin Luther King, Jr. is a voice, a vision, and a way. I call on every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow his way. The whole future of America depends on the impact and influence of Dr. King."*

Is it not King the prophet whose message transcended all sectarian interests? Was it not King the prophet with the universal appeal? Is he not the one who personified all humanity, transcending all creeds and colors? He was the incarnation of justice. He is a threat to those who want to maintain a world of violence and injustice, and those who want to keep the oppressed and marginalized people apart by telling them that they have a different color skin and are of different nationalities, and that we can't "study war no more."

Is it not King, prophet and peacemaker whose voice echoes through time. In his Nobel speech, he said: *"So man's proneness to engage in wars is still a fact. But wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. Somehow we must transform the dynamics of the world power struggle from the nuclear arms race, which no one can win, to a positive contest to harness man's creative genius for the purpose of making peace and prosperity a reality for all the nations of the world. In short, we must shift the arms race into a "peace race."*

Could it be, even though not contextual, that God's dream may illumine; that as Isaiah puts it *"I will also make you a light to the nations, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."* This is the light that shines a path that becomes clear. If we are on the way, our response is the walk and not the talk of faith.

We are inheritors of King's dream, beneficiaries and co-laborers in God's dream. The comfort of our celebrations is no substitute for working for peace and justice. King's vision was clear and resolute.

The triplets of militarism, racism and materialism must be eradicated. Our homes must become reservoirs of peace, our neighborhood gardens of justice, and our world a marketplace of cooperation. We must find ways of being a light to our families, neighbors and nations. We must find ways of expanding the unfolding of God's dream into our human reality.

On this day let us thank God for raising up a prophet in our nation to the nations of the world and a sharpened voice in our modern day wilderness. Let us join in the cosmic harmony and hasten the unfolding of God's dream.

Ernest Cadman Colwell a former President of the School of Theology at Claremont says in a poem, "Dream this Dream."

The lion and the lamb shall lie down together;
The kid and the panther shall play in the sun;
No one shall know the strange word "soldier;"
And war shall be a shameful deed that long ago was done.
And rest for the weary, and food for the hungry,
And peace for the comfortless shall not be far to seek;
And beauty in labor, and beauty in laughter,
And beauty in loving shall come to the meek.
Mountain calls to mountain top –
Sinai unto Calvary;
Whispers rise from ancient fields –
They push up through the sod:

'Tell all the children
To tell their children's children