

Sermon – MLK, Jr.: Break down the Walls – January 18, 2009
Scripture: I Samuel 3: 1-20, John 1: 43-51

Every year, I have sought to explore the impact of the witness of Martin Luther King, Jr. on my life, the life of the nation, and the life of the church. For me, he, no less than Samuel, or Isaiah, or Paul is a prophet for the 20th and 21st Centuries. Like those men and us, he surely had feet of clay, but when he heard the call in the night, he responded. His life, albeit, much too short, exemplifies for all of us, a radically courageous step into the abyss of racial segregation – it was David taking on Goliath – and with a unique commitment to non-violence he led a movement that crumbled the foundations of the structures of institutionalized racism. Forty years after his death, we stand on the brink of inaugurating the first person of color to be the President of the United States. Truly, this is a great day!

For the last 33 years, Bishop Woodie White, has written a letter to Martin on the occasion of his birthday. I need to share at some of what he has said this year:

Jan. 13, 2009

Dear Martin:

I began writing you on the anniversary of your birth in 1976! But until now, I have not written a letter when I've been as consumed with joy as I am today. Joy beyond description!

On the evening of April 4, 1968, when your tragic death was announced, I was at a point of total devastation. Millions joined in a community of grief. It was as though time itself had ended. Hope disappeared, and utter bewilderment took its place.

On the evening of Nov. 4, 2008, just four decades later, when it was announced that Barack Obama had been elected the 44th President of the United States — the first black American to be so elected — there was utter joy! Thousands cheered in Grant Park in Chicago, as did millions more across America. We wept unashamedly, men and women, people of all ethnicities and creeds.

Martin, it was an unforgettable moment! Even as I write, it is difficult to contain the joy or hold back the tears. You would understand.

As I watch President-elect Obama, a senator from Illinois, giving press conferences, announcing members of his Cabinet or speaking to an urgent matter facing the nation, it still seems like a dream. But it is real. America has elected a black man to what is considered by many the most influential political office in the world!

It seems only yesterday that black people were battling for the opportunity to vote. Many died seeking that right. State by state, it eventually changed. But scarcely anyone glimpsed a future when a black man would be elected president of the nation.

Those days of marches and protests were aimed at simple but important goals: to eat at a lunch counter, to try on a garment before you purchased it, to attend a school in the neighborhood where you lived, to be hired for a job for which you were qualified, and yes, to exercise the most fundamental right of citizenship, to vote.

We sought to be accepted, and to be treated as a person and a full citizen in our own nation.

If you could see him, Martin, you would recognize that Mr. Obama is a man of unusual gifts, grace and character. He announced his intentions to seek his party's nomination on a cold January morning, in front of the state capitol in Springfield, Ill., the state he represented in the Senate.

Springfield, you will recall, was the site of two days of rioting in 1908. White mobs had burned the homes and businesses of black residents, causing thousands to flee the city. Eight people — black and white — were, tragically, killed.

That event prompted leaders to convene a meeting in New York City and resolve that a new organization was needed to address the nation's racial ills. The result was the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The organization will observe the 100th anniversary of its founding in the same year the nation witnesses its first black president take office!

The election of Mr. Obama is much more significant than the transfer of power from one party to another. Its significance goes beyond the current economic crisis, in which Americans are looking to government for direction and leadership.

American racism is grounded in an often unspoken declaration of innate inferiority and superiority. It is based on the claim that one's race is the determinative factor in ability and achievement.

But today, Americans can no longer assert that "they" are unable to hold this position or perform that role. The reality has always been that while a specific individual may or may not be able to achieve some goal, a blanket assessment on a group of persons is blatantly unfair and totally inaccurate.

Neither can it be held that the white community is monolithic in its race attitudes. The truth is, it has never been that way, even when it appeared to be so.

President-elect Obama's election is the result of the votes and support of persons of broad racial and ethnic diversity. He won votes in geographic areas where his political party has traditionally been defeated.

It can no longer be said that "they" won't vote, support or accept a person because of race or color. Some will or will not; but "they" is no longer descriptive or normative.

That said, it would be naïve to conclude that racism and bigotry in America are dead. They are very much alive. Racism dies hard. But its grip in the minds and hearts of Americans, Martin, is not as deep or as broad as you experienced.

We need to still challenge every expression of injustice, bigotry and racism in individuals and institutions. Mr. Obama's election should encourage us to continue rather than end these efforts!

Though this letter is far longer than I expected, I have not said all that is on my heart. But I am mindful that this moment of joy and celebration was made possible by what you and so many others did and said.

In so many ways, Martin, we are a better nation, a better people than you left. Not perfect, but better. And in some ways, the nation is moving beyond The Dream!

Thank you and happy birthday, Martin.

We are overcoming!

Woodie

In every generation God has raised up unlikely trustworthy prophets whose words do not fall to the ground, that is to say their words and their actions make a saving difference in the lives of people around them.

Martin Luther King Jr. was one of those prophets in our own time. Like Samuel he received an unexpected call to be a prophet in an unexpected way: Sitting at his kitchen table in Montgomery, Alabama – 27 years old and receiving death threats – he was ready to run and began to pray: He heard a voice that said:

"Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you even unto the end of the world." King heard the voice of Jesus telling him to keep up the struggle. He then sang a hymn rooted in black piety:

Martin said: 'He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.' In that moment, King was to say later, he felt God's presence like never before. His fears left him all of a

sudden, his uncertainty vanished., and he was ready to face anything. He made his decision, he did not quit, and he did not take the easier route of going along. He realized that suffering taken up voluntarily has a transforming power.

(Martin Luther King Jr., A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Today, we say thank you Martin – what began as a dream, a vision, and courageous commitment has taken a new leap over the chasm:

As we prepare to celebrate what would have been his 79th birthday tomorrow --- and as we prepare for the inauguration of the first Black President of The United States of America on Tuesday. It will be a watershed moment in our history.

A black man whose father was from Kenya in Africa, will be moving into the White House, a house that was constructed by black African slaves.

It will be an event that transcends partisan politics somewhat similar to that moment in 1987 when President Ronald Reagan stood at the Berlin Wall and said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." It didn't matter whether you were republican or democrat, whether you loved Ronald Reagan or hated him, all freedom loving people recognized that in that moment the world changed, an irrevocable transformation had begun.

On Tuesday, almost all Americans, those who supported Senator John McCain and his vision for America, and those who voted for Senator Barak Obama, will rejoice in a world changing moment.

In his last news conference on Wednesday, President Bush congratulated the country for electing its first African-American president, with these words:

"I was affected by the TV after the elections -- when I saw people saying, I never thought I would see the day that a black person would be elected President, and a lot of the people had tears streaming down their cheeks when they said it. And so I am -- I am - - consider myself fortunate to have a front-row seat on what is going to be an historic moment for the country. President-Elect Obama's election does speak volumes about how far this country has come when it comes to racial relations. But there's still work to do. There's always going to be work to do to deal with people's hearts. And so I'm looking forward to it, really am. I think it's going to be -- it's going to be an amazing -- amazing moment."

Tears streaming down the faces of Jesse Jackson, and Woodie White.

Joseph Lowery, 87, a well-known civil rights leader who was a friend of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., will deliver a two-minute prayer during Obama's inauguration.

“We used to say, ‘Someday an African American will be president,’ but we never thought it would happen in our lifetimes.”

He added he never imagined he would be taking part in the inauguration.

Obama’s election is the first step to seeing King’s dream fulfilled, he said.

“They tell me I will be able to look out and see the Lincoln Memorial where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. I am going to pray with my eyes open because I know I will see Martin smiling at us,” he said.