

Centre Church: January 15, 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7

49:1 Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.

49:2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.

49:3 And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

49:4 But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God."

49:5 And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength-

49:6 he 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."

49:7 Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Sermon. "And Generations Shall Call Me Blessed"

Rev. Dr. Lise M. Sparrow

Today is a day perhaps more than any other in our nation
when we remember our ancestors...and the many saints of today,
Some known and many forgotten, some working in the public eye
and some behind the scenes...

Our children and grandchildren likely know the names of George Floyd, of
Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice,

And, we hope, of Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, and of John Lewis.

I'd expect our grandparents knew the names of Jackie Robinson (1947),
of Rosa Parks (1955) and of Ruby Bridges (1960), and of Addie Mae Collins,
Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, the small girls killed in the
bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on a Sunday Morning in 1963

Some of us remember James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Henry
Schwerner, young civil rights workers, one black and two Jewish --who were
arrested by a deputy sheriff and then released into the hands of Klansmen who
had plotted their murders. They were shot, and their bodies were buried in an S

But few of us know the names of Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian minister, Viola
Gregg Liuzzo, a midwestern housewife or Jonathan Myrick Daniels, an Episcopal

Seminary student –all who were killed in Selma in 1965 after crossing the Edmund Pettis Bridge.

And we may not really have a sense of the numbers of victims of racial terror between 1865 and 1950 though they were a genocide, of course.

6500 were killed without recourse.

And 111 killed, named and unnamed, were martyrs of the Civil Rights movement.

So we remember them today.

Many of us realize how close Martin Luther King Jr was to Joachim Prinz and to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

but do we realize that over 700 Jewish schools closed the day of King Jr's memorial service?

Or remember the Presbyterian minister, Rev. Bruce Klunder who

On April 7, 1964, went with several others went to the construction site where a bulldozer was preparing ground for a segregated school in Cleveland?

Three protesters threw themselves to the ground in front of the bulldozer. Klunder went to the back of the vehicle and laid down on the ground. When the bulldozer operator reversed direction, the machine ran over Klunder, crushing him to death.

Klunder's wife wrote later that her husband's death shook whites and blacks out of a sense of complacency about racial injustice. "I pray that by the time the children grow up, their father's death will have been redeemed, and they will be able to see the effect of what his dying did for the consciences of at least a few people — at least a few," she wrote.

This has an echo in Jewish scripture --of Hanna's rejoicing knowing Samuel would have a place in history despite his doubts and troubles.

Just as Mary knew she would be blessed by generations despite her personal anguish and the crucifixion of her son.

Coretta Scott King wrote "I believe Martin was chosen, I believe I was chosen, and I say to the kids, this family was chosen as well," even as she constantly feared for his life.

Our scripture today sets the scene for these many men, women and martyrs:

Isaiah is called to be a light to the world,
to use his mouth as a weapon to protect the slaves and exiles
He is assured that in the end, though he is deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen (you) him."

Our scripture catches the truth of these prophets and martyrs
who die tragically and yet who call us to do better and be better
To look again and again at the pain of others
And to remember who we are called to be for each other.

So today, as members of faith communities, we remember another great prophet and a martyr for our time, raised within the Christian faith but one who stretched in friendship with Gandhi, a Hindu, to lift up principles of non-violence.

With Thich Nhat Hanh, a Tibetan buddhist, he ached with the people of Viet Nam

With Bayard Rustin, a Quaker, to hold GLBT rights with compassion

And with Andrew Young, a UCC minister, to create a new vision of Christianity that could bridge North and South.

Rabbis walked and spoke with him

and Mahalia Jackson was, he said, “the sound track of his life”¹.

Today I am speaking to you not only as your sister in this community of faiths but as the Chair of Religious Affairs for the Windham NAACP—that is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

You will be familiar with the names of other members, Rev Scott Couper, Rabbi Amita Jarmon, Curtiss Reed Jr, Nader Hashim, Wichie Artu, Steffan Gillom, Julie Cunningham, leaders in the community

And maybe not with others who work every day for equity in our town.

¹ https://www.yahoo.com/now/7-women-influenced-martin-luther-110639887.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=A_QAAAGYDQFry0pzxpHqj9-_JXOBBLVQH3BULwB7zSbUMux7ZMLXJn2vpughmgS8RQgSMw7dUXwTEAIrREQwAbSNZLX8gcl34lz2TyXDgGFfLT9Tz88rv2nL0XkLR7z1pK09Oite6lHyFb2NNjjK575Q86RB4eC Cz5ug_ez1MJtkzKzK

Scott, Amita and I along with others on our committee each have a call to live out the faith we espouse and to mirror the light of the prophets and to keep building the beloved community our ancestors dreamt for us.

This building /this Church embodies that Beloved Community...

children every day on every floor and in worship,

The hungry and homeless, the refugee, recovered and recovering all served by people of every faith in the kitchen below.

Alcoholics anonymous and artistry meetings, side by side.

Your pastor who has lived everywhere and you who have lived here for generations, young ones and old ones... and this is a beautiful thing...

Especially if that light pours forth from these walls into the streets seeking justice

And emanating love

Love that casts out fear

Love that passeth all understanding

Love that is curious and generous

Love that is comforting and courageous

And love that makes others think

Love that encourages others to act

Love that invites others to be the best of who they are

And to put that into action

In policies and practices

And in daily interactions

Love that responds to inaction with action
And to violence with justice.

Because that Light also needs to highlight FACTS

Facts ²we sometimes don't want to face ...

That more than twice as many black infants die at birth as white infants

More than 2 ½ times as many mothers die in child birth as white women

Three times as many black children as white live in poverty

That the median income of black people is half as high as that of whites

And unemployment is double

And perhaps most disturbingly, median annual income of and average white family is ten times that of the average black family.

And this is an improvement from when King was alive.

So how do we do this, how do we have hope and face fear?

How do we do our part?

King would find himself hopeless and call Mahalia Jackson to have her sing to him

And so we too must sing and listen together to the echoes of past voices

Singing in the slave fields, and streets of Selma, in the halls of Washington and the churches in Vermont.

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/22/what-numbers-say-whites-blacks-live-two-different-americas/>

And there is King's story of the night --just days before his assassination --when Martin sat at a kitchen table alone in the dark fearing he would be killed and prayed for guidance³,

"It seemed he could hear an inner voice saying, "Martin Luther King, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world."

He heard a voice telling him to fight on, promising never to leave him alone. He said, "Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared."

This year 2023 we can say we have come far in this wilderness of racial disparities but also have miles to go.

In our own community the NAACP Religious Affairs committee responds rapidly and supportively when there are acts of overt racism and antisemitism..

But we also work with towns and faith communities to prevent these events from happening.

The truth of Martin Luther King Jr is that his soul work began with his connection to Moses,

a slave and a noble man both,

and over the years he stumbled and doubted himself

but over the years he expanded his heart and grew in faith

and, like Moses, in his relationship to God.

He ultimately saw beyond his own troubles and the troubles of his race

³ <https://secure.wesleyan.org/1508/the-prayer-that-lifted-martin-luther-king-jr>

to the poor and the war-torn nations of the earth.

He walked with kings and princes and mingled with the poorest of the poor

And in the end in he served African Americans but also served us all.

Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord...

We thank you for your beloved community, founded upon your Word, that challenges us to do more than sing and pray, but go out and work as though the very answer to our prayers depended on us and not upon you.

Help us to realize that humanity was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity.

Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace.

Help us to walk together,

pray together,

sing together,

and live together

until that day when all God's children

- Black, White, Red, Brown and Yellow -

will rejoice in one common band of humanity

in the reign of our Lord and of our God, we pray.

Amen.

- *The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.*