

Sermon: I belong to a group of clergy who meet monthly to talk about what's going on in our lives, and to give support to one another in a confidential setting. One of our members recently lost his 83-year-old brother to cancer, and when we met last week, had just returned from being with his family for the celebration of his brother's life. He shared a bit about what was helpful and what wasn't helpful in that gathering. One of the things that wasn't helpful was the tendency of some to try and comfort him with platitudes, saying things like 'he's in a better place.' Not that our colleague didn't believe his brother was in a better place, but at the moment he needed to know that people were willing to be with him in his sorrow - to sit with him in his grief. Platitudes aren't helpful when one simply wants to remain in a place of sorrow after losing one's dearly beloved brother.

The brief mention of the Christian hope that one's loved one is in a better place, caused us to revisit the idea of hope a bit later in our conversation, as a number of us wondered about how we might speak of hope at this moment in our nation's life. It should come as no surprise to you that all of us in the group have political opinions, and a few of us - though retired - are still preaching, still trying to say something meaningful to the good Christian folk who gather regularly for church each Sunday. Doing so isn't always easy, and for those of us who hope for a society founded upon justice and mercy and good government, this is a challenging moment. Indeed, the confluence of the Inauguration and the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday press us to reflect on our dreams for the American nation and society, and to ask 'where do we see God at work in this moment?' And so we talked, as clergy are wont to do, about hope in the midst of our deep moment of discouragement.

That conversation took place on Monday, just as I was beginning to think about this Sunday's sermon, and reading over the scripture lessons. I was glad for the readings appointed for this Sunday, for each - in their own way, touch on the question of hope. In the Gospel lesson Jesus is at a wedding, and works his first miracle - the turning of water into wine - so that the wedding celebration can go on and spare the families embarrassment. Weddings are always, I believe, a sign of hope that the future still holds possibility. Even more focused on hope in the midst of discouragement is the lesson from Isaiah. Ancient Israel was suffering greatly, having suffered defeat at the hands the Babylonians, and having most of their citizens carried away into exile. Their period of exile was lengthy, and living in a foreign land under the oppressive hand of a foreign ruler had worn them down. Still, they prayed to their God, asking that they be allowed to return to their beloved land. Even as they prayed, these ancient believers complained bitterly about God's indifference to their suffering: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest."* (Psalm 22:1-2). Generations came and went and

still the people received no answer to their prayers. Then, at what seems like the last possible moment, comes a hopeful word from the prophet. God is ready to speak, Isaiah declares, and this is what God has to say: *"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. . . .⁴You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.⁵For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."* In short, God is about to restore you to your homeland. God is about to vindicate your hope and faith, and the nations of the world shall see it. Sure enough, through an edict of King Cyrus of Babylon in 538 BCE, Israel is restored to her land, and slowly the promises of God begin to come true for the ancient people who had suffered for so long. While I'm not sure I could complain to God like these ancients did, I believe their complaints were an expression of faith in God. They dared to believe that God cares; they dared challenge their God to be true to God's promises; and they dared hope that God would answer their prayers for justice and vindication before their enemies. Daring to believe in such a God is a sure sign of hope.

Tomorrow is a holiday honoring the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and his non-violent crusade to bring greater equity and justice for people of color. While we may best remember him for his soaring preaching style, and his inspirational "I Have a Dream" speech, King experienced times of deep discouragement. Racism seemed hopelessly entrenched in both society and the church, and his white colleagues in the mainline churches of the south were not only silent about his mistreatment at the hands of the local authorities, but were critical of his efforts as untimely. Imprisoned in the Birmingham jail, King wrote a letter to these colleagues in which he named his disappointment. He wrote: "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White citizens' "Councilor" or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; . . . who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action," who . . . constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection." Deeply disappointed in his colleagues in the white mainline church, he urges them to join their black colleagues in a united effort to overturn the oppressive racial injustices that abounded in the land. While his letter was widely circulated throughout the church, and is now considered one of the significant documents of the Civil Rights Movement, his plea for their support largely fell on deaf ears.

"Hope"
Isaiah 62:1-5 and John 2:1-11

MLK was faithful in inviting his people to hope, in inviting them to dream of a time when racial equality and justice for all would be achieved. In the famous "I Have a Dream" speech, he said: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today! . . . This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." (repeat for emphasis)

What do we hope for - for our nation, our society, our town, and our church. What does our hope for the most vulnerable of earth's peoples look like? While MLK would also say, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," others have noted that it doesn't do so automatically. People of good will working toward what is right and good and fair for all earth's citizens are a force that is bending that arc toward justice. Such people are a sure sign of hope.

Another influential African-American thinker and writer was the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, Dean of Boston University's Marsh Chapel, and Professor in its School of Theology. Thinking about the meaning of Christmas, Thurman wrote the following poem titled, "The Work of Christmas."

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:*

*To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.*

May that be our dream, our hope, and our work in bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Property of Reverend Richard Slater