

Abundance and Transformation
Sermon for Epiphany 2C, January 17, 2010
Scripture: Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11

This was one of those weeks that I could not get started on my sermon as I had so many different ways to go. I like the scriptures for today, yet my heart was in talking about Martin Luther King, Jr., one of my greatest heroes. And now late in the week, there is the Haiti earthquake to add to the list. How to combine these things has been an extreme challenge. Transformation and abundance seem to be the themes that ring out through both our scriptures and the work of Dr. King. Even with the earthquake, I hope there can be a message of transformation.

In our Isaiah reading it is clear that Jerusalem and her people have been seriously suffering. Isaiah will not allow God to forget God's promise to restore this holy city. What if we substituted Haiti for Zion in this reading? For Haiti's sake I will not keep silent...and I will not rest. God desires justice in this world and liberation of the oppressed and the poor and all those marginalized by systems that favor some through the exploitation of others (Rick Nutt in *Feasting on the Word*). Isaiah acknowledges the need for and the promise of transformation by saying "you shall be called by a new name" — no longer will they be called Forsaken but Delight. What a great change! President Obama has told the Haitian people that America will not forget or forsake them. Oppressed and suffering people need to know that they are valuable to God no

matter what others say or what treatment they receive. Haiti certainly needs to know that not only God but other peoples and nations in the world are concerned about them. The world is not being silent about Haiti but what about other situations. How often we are silent when others are suffering!

Dr. King was tempted to not lead the bus boycott in Montgomery that started the great era in civil rights history. E.D. Nixon, was the head of the NAACP when Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus. He asked the clergy to support the boycott, and they were reluctant. Nixon accused them of cowardice. King, a new minister in town, spoke up, denying he was afraid to support the boycott and ended up becoming the leader. I wonder what we as a church and each of you as individuals may be reluctant to speak about that needs speaking about! Certainly this week focuses on Haiti and all victims of natural disasters. For so many years now war has affected both Americans and those we are in conflict with. What about refugees from Iraq? What about the veterans and their families? What about all the military and civilian lives that are being lost. What can we call out to those suffering today, to those that may feel that God is absent or at least hiding?

Near the end of his life, Martin Luther King focused on bringing peace to the world and spoke against the Vietnam War. He tried to bring the church's and the country's awareness to the example of Jesus as the

Prince of Peace. He realized that the beloved community he was working towards could never be a reality without following Jesus' prophetic voice of peace. Unfortunately, King's idea that only peaceful means can secure peaceful ends has been replaced with the strange and destructive notion that peaceful ends can be achieved via violent means. Can we remain silent on this topic?

Let's now turn to our gospel lesson in John. In Jesus day, weddings were very long affairs, attended by many people. According to one of my sources¹, "The bridegroom would take his bride to the wedding chamber where they would spend seven days. The bridegroom's friend would wait outside the door of the wedding chamber. When the marriage was consummated, the bridegroom would tell his friend through the door, and the friend would announce it to the assembled guests. The guests would celebrate for seven days until the bride and bridegroom emerged from the wedding chamber." So you can imagine these parties would need a great deal of wine.

Apparently at the wedding in Cana, the wine was running out. Mary says to Jesus, "They have no wine." Jesus says to his mother, "Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come." Some theologians call this "the scandal of divine reluctance" (Carol Hess) and site it when discussing theodicy (theories about God allowing evil).

¹ "Weddings of Ancient Israel - A Picture of the Messiah" (an article from Return to God Magazine, Volume 1 Number 2, page 22).

However, Mary is not deterred from her plan. She goes on to tell the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do, and we know that Jesus does in fact perform his first miracle or sign. He has the servants fill the six empty water jars with water. Now each jar held twenty to thirty gallons so that makes a tremendous amount of wine—120 to 180 gallons. Even for seven days of celebrating, that's a lot. I agree with the theologians who see this as a metaphor for extravagant abundance!

However, there may well be other meanings here. Gail O'Day says that this is the fulfillment of Old Testament eschatological hopes, God's promised salvation. She says that extravagant abundance characterizes this miracle both because of the outstanding quality of the wine produced and the astonishing quantity. One of my favorite comments comes from Carol Hess, who was the one who coined the phrase "scandal of divine reluctance." She points out that we believe in one who claims to bring abundant life to all, especially believers, so when we see the suffering in the world we wonder why the hour has not come. No matter what theories some of us use to rationalize divine activity or the lack of it, she says, "We still want to tug at Jesus sleeve and say: they have no wine." So she argues that it is we, the heirs of Jesus' mother that must keep on prodding divine generosity. I wonder if that's what our prayers are all about! In Haiti right now, how many 20 plus gallon jars are being filled to overflowing with ordinary human work and commitment, given as soon as the word was heard. Water upon water of charitable and humanitarian

work poured into the gaping need. Each dollar and each act just a drop in the bucket, to be sure. But added together enough to keep hope alive, enough to give reason for thanks in the midst of an intolerable situation. When we do what Jesus calls us to do and offer what we can in faith, in hope and in love, that's the material miracles are made from. Each drop in the bucket is important, for how else shall the jars be made full - as full as God desires and needs for the kingdom to continue?²

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man that lived and died for the abundance of all. He definitely kept nudging God and our society towards that goal. Let me quote from his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace prize, "I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway...I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality...I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow....I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits."

King felt called to identify with those that were suffering. In 1966 he said, "I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and

² Midrash email from Brian Donst.

desolate corridor with no exit signs. This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. If it means sacrificing, I'm going that way. If it means dying for them, I'm going that way. Because I heard the voice saying: do something for others." Do any of you here this morning hear that same voice? I heard that voice a very long time ago, probably when I was in Jr. High. That path did not lead me to do all the wonderful things that Dr. King did; however, the most important thing is that we each listen to God's call and use the gifts and passions that we have been given. Few of us will be as effective and famous as King; few of us will die for our faith, but as I always say, each of us can do something.

Jonathan Marlowe, a pastor reflecting on all the great things King did, concludes that when he gets to the pearly gates God will not ask him why he wasn't MLK but why he wasn't Jonathan Marlow and I quote:

God will ask: why didn't you do the things I called you to do? Why didn't you do the things that I uniquely equipped you to do?

I may not lead a civil rights movement, but I can help one person find a job. I may not win a Nobel Peace Prize, but I can live peacefully with my neighbor. I won't give a speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, but I can do my best with next week's lectionary. We sometimes focus on the great movers and shakers of history and forget that God usually works through ordinary people like you and me.

I know that faith isn't private—God works through communities and churches and even nations. But Martin Luther King Jr. did not set out to be a great American hero. He set out to be faithful to God one day at a time, and found himself the leader of a nation-wide movement for freedom and equality. We too should begin with the little things—being faithful to our spouses, patient with a friend, gracious with an enemy, merciful with those who need our help, and generous in giving. ...

I won't integrate a school system, but I can be a big brother to a child who needs a kind person to eat lunch with at the school. I need the church to help me be faithful in these ways, so that God won't have to ask me, "Why weren't you Jonathan Marlowe?"

Brothers and sisters, let's help each other be faithful. Let's live our lives filled with compassion and love and work always for that extravagant abundance that Jesus modeled. God's generosity has showered us with gifts of everyday love and care, with gifts of courage enough for each day that we walk and sing together. So let us all stand now and sing, holding the hands or touching the arms of those in your aisle or if you are sitting alone join another aisle and sing We Shall Overcome.