“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Many of you are familiar with these words of Martin Luther King, Jr., a modern day prophet. He spoke these words in Memphis on April 3, 1968, the day before he was shot down on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where he had gone to helps secure the rights of the sanitation workers. For those of you that may not be so familiar with King, let me share a few things about him.

King’s strong concern for the racially and socioeconomically oppressed led him to fight for justice on behalf of blacks and poor folks of any color. The brave actions of Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat on the bus began the movement that he led. It was only after much prayer that he agreed to lead the bus boycott and went on to become President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the major group leading the nonviolent struggle for justice for African Americans in the South. But this was only a beginning. It would take me many sermons to summarize all of the marches, the arrests, the speeches, the
boycotts that King was involved in. In 1964 he was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize. After King received the Peace Prize, his vision and action became even bolder. He now expanded his concerns to all victims of poverty and violence. That’s when the going really got rough. It was 1965 that he first spoke publicly about the Vietnam war saying that it was accomplishing nothing and that the end should be negotiated, not fought. His first anti-war march was in 1967 in Chicago. At this time he reinforced the connection between war abroad and injustice at home, saying: “the bombs in Vietnam explode at home—they destroy the dream and possibility for a decent America”. A little later he addressed a crowd of 3,000 people at Riverside Church in New York City, in a speech entitled “Beyond Vietnam” Pointing out that the war effort was “taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem” (King, “Beyond Vietnam,”’ 143).

All of this upset both the white power establishment as well as the black civil rights movement. He spent his last birthday, 45 years ago last Tuesday, in staff meetings, trying to convince his civil rights partners why they had to include disenfranchised, low-income whites as well as blacks in the March to Washington, D.C.

The African Americans that surrounded me and my first husband in the mid-60’s felt strongly that King’s branching outside fighting just for blacks, but turning to address the Vietnam war and the poverty of all people, caused the power structure to see him as much more dangerous and probably led to his being assassinated. The Poor Peoples’ Campaign culminating in another March on Washington was being planned at the time of King’s death and eventually did go on without him.
In Martin’s leadership of the civil rights movement, prayer and protest went hand in hand. Prayer and faith propelled the movement. I agree with King that to be successful in doing God’s work one needs to be Spirit led. With King there were strong theological roots to all of his sociopolitical activity, so much so that he would go in a different direction than his followers when he heard God speaking, such as in including poor whites and peace efforts for all. In our Isaiah passage today, the prophet say, “I will not keep silent..I will not remain quiet. He promises the exiles that after their long time of suffering, they will be called by a new name and the Lord will take delight in them. King could not remain silent. For me King was an ultimate example of speaking truth to power. If we are committed to following Jesus, I believe we are being called to speak truth to power, to stand up for what our faith tells us is right.

There are many cries today for speaking truth to power and to follow our faith in one of the many movements such as the Arab Spring, the nonviolent Occupy Movement for social and economic rights, attention to the abysmal position of women in the developing countries as well as sexual harassment in our own military. Is there something that is calling you? The first thing we have to do is to listen. Listening was King’s lifeline, a critical part of his prophetic witness. He regularly took a “Day of Silence”, to pray, to listen for God’s will, and to plan.

In doing research for today, I found a very interesting sermon on our gospel reading from Nancy Rockwell, a retired UCC minister here in NH. I would like to share some of her reflection on our Gospel reading comparing Jesus and Mary’s interchange to that of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rev. Rockwell sums up Mary’s concern with justice, her desire that the bride and groom not be disgraced and shamed for running out of wine. (Now I know that
for me and probably you, having enough wine is nothing to compare to the oppression of African Americans that Rosa Parks and King addressed; however, we are not living in the same society or age so let’s try to be open.) In Mary’s compassion she asks Jesus to act. “They have no wine.” These are Mary’s first words in the gospel of John. Judging by Jesus’ response these words were irritating to him. He is annoyed, to say the least. “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” She is holding him responsible. Why? Let’s listen to what Rockwell says:

   Based on her need to stand against humiliation, the interchange between Mary and Jesus resembles the interchange between Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr, on an ordinary day in Montgomery. By refusing to give up her seat on the bus, or give in to one more instance of the humiliation of her people, Parks provoked a moment in history, and she provoked King’s entry into that moment as its vital wine and its transforming agent.

   In their joint action his ministry to the nation (and the world) was opened. She declared that the moment was at hand. And he was not at first sure that this was, in fact, the right moment, but, somewhat reluctantly, he responded to her situation. And that response became the first of King’s unforgettable signs, moments of memorable light in a ministry in which he lived as John’s gospel says Jesus did, offering powerful signs in very ordinary human situations.

   While Martin Luther King, Jr did not change water into wine, he did change words into the new wine of commitment. He did gather thousands to hear him, and they were fed; he did raise those whose lives were decaying in death, the garbage collectors; he did proclaim to the educated Nicodemuses of America that they needed to born again in mind and spirit; he did raise up the dead daughters of Birmingham, speaking of them in an unforgettable letter to the white clergy from the
tomb of his jail cell in that city; he did lift up to us a cup of everlasting life, and we drink from it still.”

I am going to ask you to help me end this sermon by sharing together the litany written for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and found in your bulletin:

Thanks be to God for Martin Luther King, Jr. May we have the faith and courage to not be silent but to speak up for what we believe is right and what God is calling us to do. Amen!

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1 Nancy Rockwell: *Cana an unexpected time*. Posted on her blog, The Bite in the Apple. . . online.