

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany—Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
January 15, 2017
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Checking our Spiritual Compass

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears thou who hast brought us thus far on the way,
thou who hast by thy might, led us into the light, keep us forever in the path we pray, Amen.

If you have ever ventured into the world of boating, you may be familiar with ways to navigate, even amidst dark waters. There are signs that direct your path from one waypoint to another. Red and green markers create a safe passage through narrow channels. Numbered buoys track your course. In uncharted waters, the lighthouse is a beacon and warning of land ahead. During a storm, the lighthouse becomes your friend, keeping you off the rocks and away from treacherous shores. A foghorn blaring on a misty voyage alerts you to your limited visibility. It's easy to get off course if you are not paying attention to the signs.

So it is the job of the prophets among us to sound the warning, to awaken us from our inattention when we have lost our bearings and veered off course. Prophets have the unpopular job of checking the compass and sounding the alarm. A dissident voice is meant to disturb the peace, pierce complacency and move us to response. The message of the prophet is rarely tame and will meet resistance. As history portrays, the voice of prophecy is often silenced.

Today in this service, and tomorrow our nation celebrates the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King was a prophet in his time, for a vision of equality and justice for all people. Faith in God's promises led him to work tirelessly for those who did not have a voice. His actions of civil disobedience challenged a dominant and oppressive culture. King wrote in one speech, "I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. 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.' Our lives begin to end, the day we become silent about things that matter."

Martin was profoundly shaped by his upbringing in the Baptist church and the African American community. He learned the art of preaching at his father's side, and used his skills of expression to teach the values of the social gospel. Martin studied with civil rights leader Howard Thurman, and his practice of non-violent resistance was grounded in experiences in India with Gandhi and in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Martin lived by the words of our gospel today. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." He was a voice of reconciliation in the midst of bitter division and offered forgiveness in the face of hatred. Martin believed that the culture of his day had lost its spiritual compass and had turned away from God's vision. Neither the degradation of jail, nor threats to his life shook Martin's commitment to Christ's message of love.

Like Joseph from our Old Testament lesson, Martin was a dreamer sorely misunderstood. When Joseph spoke out, inspired by God's vision, he withstood abandonment and betrayal by his brothers who sold him into slavery. But there in Egypt he was able to fulfill God's plan and save the people from famine. I wonder if Martin saw what God would do with his life and even in his death to change future generations.

In the season of Epiphany the principal themes deal with the manifestations of Christ as the light of the world and divine hope sent to a suffering people. We hear the story of the magi drawn by the light of a star to the manger, the baptism of Jesus where God proclaims him as his beloved son and the stories of Christ's ministry of healing. It is fitting that we would celebrate another manifestation of Christ's light in the world, those who through actions great and small, further God's vision of justice, reconciliation and peace.

Each of us are called to be that light amidst people's storms, to be that dissident voice challenging complicity and silence, to be love in the face of hatred. Keeping suffering at a distance and adopting a survivalist mentality is what our culture prescribes. But God's love shining through us could be the sign that guides someone away from treacherous shores. Let's face it, it is so much easier to love those who love you, but when you reach across lines of division and stand for those who cannot, God's light is made manifest. Breaking the silence of apathy requires courage only God can inspire.

As we reflect on the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and hear the prophetic voices of our faith narratives, we must continuously ask if we need a course correction. Is this church a light and beacon of hope to those who are lost or are we an echo of the loudest voices of our time? Consider who among us needs a word of hope. Who among us is suffering in quiet captivity? Who among us is called to be that prophet? We need the voice of one who will disturb our peace, pierce our complacency, and move us to response. When we're reminded of our limited visibility, we must look for the signs of God's steadfast love that provides us safe passage through rough waters. When we keep our eyes on the light of Christ, we find our direction.

At Holy Cross, we have experienced some rough waters and have spent the last year checking our compass and listening for those prophetic voices. We have made some course corrections and are poised to live into our call to be a place of welcome, peace, and reconciliation in the community. I ask you to pray and consider how God's light will shine through you in this place.

In 1963 Martin Luther King gave a sermon in which he wrote these words: "In a sense every day is judgment day, and we, through our deeds and words, our silence and speech, are constantly writing in the Book of Life. Light has come into the world, and every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?" I pray that this will become our question and that each one of us will answer it with courage and commitment.

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, and half-truths, so that we may live deep within our hearts. May God bless us with anger at injustice and oppression, so that we may work for freedom and peace. May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain or rejection, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them. And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe we can make a difference in this world. Amen.