

Isaiah 49:1-7 (NRSV)

The Servant's Mission

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

Called by an Idea

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Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King shook people's foundations. Those who heard him speak left feeling inspired, challenged and awakened to the social inequities of his time. This was by all accounts a man who changed our American history in ways too great to be captured in one sermon or one day of dedication. I began researching his life and work trying to find something that could possibly add to what we already know about this great man. I ran into a problem. When looking in the library, I found shelves upon shelves with tributes to his leadership, vision and his many, many provocative sermons and speeches. These texts all lifted up his achievements and the power of the message he carried to the people...both those who *wanted* to hear it, as well as those who *needed* to hear it. Though, when I took my search to the Internet, I found a book, which sought to debunk his role as a holy figure, claiming to give us the 'truth' behind the man we know and love- questioning his faith, morality and anything else one could dredge up.

So, we are left on the one hand with texts that revere him as a saint, and on the other, with a book that documents anything to the contrary. On which side of this moral divide do you find yourself? We can say that we fall on the side of absolute praise, but there is something *less* than honest about this. We *are* curious and opinionated about our leader's personal lives and morality. Numerous figures come to mind that share this lot with King. Whether its unearthing Eleanor Roosevelt's private life, or identifying the doubt which crept into Mother Theresa's faith, JFK's secret life, or revealing that Barack Obama did drugs, the list goes on and on. As each leader comes under the inevitable puritanical media microscope, we find ourselves disillusioned by what we hear, regardless of the severity of their moral failings. It is so upsetting to think that our heroes colored outside of the lines of our little paint by number we create in their image. So, most of the time we choose to either ignore all of the slander we hear, or join in the slandering ourselves. For some reason, people are not comfortable in the middle ground.

Instead of challenging the slanderers, today let's challenge the very fact that these are our only two options- the perfect leader or the tragic hero. We seem to be missing out on one critical fact...these are *real* people. We are so surprised to find out the truth behind the figure that we end up missing the true power of their lives. These leaders are not perfect, but they did tremendous things 'in spite of' anything the fact-finders can get their hands on. Much like true forgiveness and grace, we receive it 'in spite of' our flaws, not because we deserve it. This is the very starting point of being Christian. It is our m.o. As theologian Paul Tillich says, "forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence". The love we are able to give to others comes out of a place of being affirmed *just as we are*. Only then can we really become better people. As King says in his sermon, "The Three Dimensions of A Complete Life," self-affirmation from forgiveness and acceptance is a step which precedes doing anything for

others or God. If we deny that this forgiveness was imparted to our heroes, then we are putting them at odds with so many of the ordinary people we find in the Bible...disciples, leaders, you name it-ordinary folks called by God to do extraordinary things. If every time God wanted to do miraculous things he had to call upon perfect people, the world would be a pretty hopeless place.

In today's reading, we hear about one such call made by God- a call to be his servant. As one of the four suffering servant passages in the Epiphany period, this one is unique because the servant is not spoken *about*, but speaks. The servant is selected to carry out God's purposes, much like Reverend King's own sense of mission. King described himself as a servant numerous times, saying "he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. I want to be your servant". But, does the servant from Isaiah describe this as an easy or heroic mission? No. He admits to feeling frustrated along the way- "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 God". Any of the good things he has accomplished are felt as God's power working *through* him- "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".

Much like King's own thoughts on his life, this servant felt that he was being worked through, being called upon by a great idea. Though he faltered along the way, as we all do, both the servant and King shared one critical element- they both allowed God to work *through* them. They were the "implements" of an idea which knocked upon their door. They didn't ignore the doorbell- they got up and were eventually transformed into 'lights to the nations', filling others with the spirit and power of the ideas which moved them. If the servant in Isaiah was asked how he became a light for others, he would likely reply that he was by no means the one *paying* that steep electric bill. He was merely the opaque glass casing of the bulb- being there, willing to be lit up by God's electric idea for his life's mission.

So, as we dedicate this day to Reverend King, let's remember him as a real person, as someone who struggled in many of the same ways we do, but overcame his challenges to be the leader of a movement...a movement which awakened the American conscience like few others have...a leader who convinced cynics and skeptics that the time of this idea *had come*. God called him to be the drum major of a radical idea...that people have inherent dignity and are created equal. When we lionize the words and life of King, we miss the fact that accepting this call was by no means easy or immediate. Like many of us, he was reluctant to answer this call from God. "If anybody had asked me a year ago to lead this movement, I tell you very honestly that I would run a mile to get away from it...though...As I became involved, and as people began to derive inspiration from their involvement, I realized that the choice leaves your own hands. The people expect you to give them leadership. You see them growing as they move into action and you know you no longer have a choice, you can't decide whether to stay in it or get out of it, you *must* stay in it."

Today, let's not claim that King was perfect in every way, *or* that he was tragically imperfect. Today, let's honor him for doing the one thing which distinguishes God's servants. In his own words, King "stayed in it". He felt the call to serve God and humanity, and felt that his own gifts led him to answer this call through ministry. Rather than being one of those people who seem to be sure from the start, King said, "God had

placed a responsibility upon my shoulders and the more I tried to escape it the more frustrated I would become”. He simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman”. He felt “carried out of himself by something greater... and to that something, he gave himself”. Can you imagine trying to sell a book about him that admitted of these facts? It certainly would not make it to the best-seller list. Humility and honesty do not seem to match up with sales. When he looked ahead to his own eulogy, King asked for no mention of the Nobel Peace Prize, no talk of his achievements. On that day, he said, I hope the preacher can get up and say...“he was faithful”. That’s all, that’s enough. “Well done my faithful servant. You’ve been concerned about others. That’s where I want to go from this point on the rest of my days”.

As we consider the humble beginnings and end of King’s life...finding out that he had periods of uncertainty and struggle just like us...it is easy to translate this as cutting him down...joining the slanderers. So, let’s suppose someone is thinking that—this message is a real downer. Okay, we could highlight King’s achievements, and present him as wholly other than us. But what happens to his ideas then? Should they be locked up like his human status- forbidden from our view? Is it possible to revere his *as* a human being, taking the whole story?

As he said of his own term limit on life, he was not afraid because he knew that people could carry out the ideas for which we fought. Though, he warned, “human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men and women willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.’ As we stand in our time, here today I wonder how each of us might view our own lives- to what idea do you belong? As a community of Christians, to what ideas do we belong collectively? As we consider this, we can be led by the words of King’s mentor, Howard Thurman- “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive”. King did not ask that people take notes on his every move. Rather, he said we have to figure out our own calling, what we are called to do. And once we discover it, we should set out to do it with all of our strength and all of the power in our systems. And after we’ve discovered what God called us to do, after we’ve discovered our life’s work, we should set out to do that work so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn couldn’t do it any better. Now this does not mean that everybody will do the so-called big, recognized things of life. But it does mean that we will see the dignity of all labor”. As we’re told by Paul in the Letter to the Romans, “we have different gifts...prophecy, in proportion to faith, ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness”

“Each time a person follows God’s call and stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance”. “Generation after generation of God’s servants come and go. They pass. But ideas do not; they abide. On each new life they knock and say, let me use you in your time. The ultimate meaning of our lives, therefore, lies in the ideas which we allow to use us”. As we are reminded in Isaiah today, we don’t always know

what we're called for, we may feel our work is in vain, but we do know that if we should accept the call, we too may have mouths made into "sharp swords, hidden and protected by the shadow of his hand; we may be made as polished arrows", used for purposes we know not. Let us open the door to the call when its time has come. Amen.