

Sermon: Being God-Determined People

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9

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Although he grew up within the church, Martin Luther King said that his growing realization of God, of a personal God who both evokes and answers prayer and is involved in our lives came as a result of his stepping into situations where he was no longer safe, protected and comfortable but rather vulnerable and even suffering for the sake of what he knew was right and needed doing. Like Isaiah and like the disciples before him King was called by God, he heard the call, and answered.

I want to share with you some of his essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” especially where he writes about how his trials and struggles led to a new and renewed encounter with God. He wrote:

Due to my involvement in the struggle for the freedom of my people, I have known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been imprisoned in Alabama and Georgia jails 12 times. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near-fatal stabbing.

So in a real sense I have been battered by the storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden, and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appears, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination.

I have learned now that the Master’s burden is light precisely when we take his yoke upon us. P. 153

The call of Jesus is a call to bear a yoke that would have us pulling and driving and laboring for the Kingdom of God and what is the Kingdom of God but living in this world with the love force as primary, seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God and with one

another. We are yoked to God through Jesus' call to us and reminded that our lives are not given unto us, for our own purposes, to do with as we see fit, but rather our lives are given unto us for God's purposes. Our goal as Christ-followers is not to be self-made, self-determined people but rather God-made and God-determined people.

What that means, exactly, to be God-determined people we learn from the example of Jesus himself. We learn that it means forgiving and forgiving again when we've failed to forgive. It means opening ourselves to the other when we most want to shut them out or reject them. Being God-determined people means we pursue justice for others even if it does not benefit ourselves to do so; especially maybe when it doesn't benefit ourselves. It means, as Jesus demonstrated time and time again, crossing boundaries of class, race, religion, politics, to dwell in the realm of God, not heaven in some afterlife but in a new reality in this life. And, like Martin Luther King Jr., so powerfully exemplified, being God-determined people means responding to hate with love, violence with nonviolence, hardness of heart in others with gentleness of spirit toward them.

It's those kind of choices that make us not self-determined but God-determined people. Such things are not tactics, responses, states of heart that necessarily follow because we call ourselves Christians or believers or attend church regularly. They are practices that take practice and prayer, discipline and work and arise out of the relationship with the very present and living God. The people who learn to live in such a way, whether they are Christians or not, are the yeast, the leaven in the bread of society that can raise up all of us to a greater height than we could accomplish ourselves.

But what Martin Luther King discovered was that the true practitioner of Gospel principles necessarily finds themselves in situations where they have to depend more upon God's mercy in their lives and so they become open or vulnerable to encounters with the living loving God. "The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years," Rev. Dr. King explains plainly, "have drawn me closer to God." Listen to how he describes it:

More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years.

In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying "Lo, I will be with you." When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my [own] efforts, I have felt the power of God, transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.

I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness [the hu]man has cosmic companionship. P. 154

It is in the struggle for justice and righteousness; not in the struggle for personal advancement, nor in the struggle for making more money, nor in the struggle to balance our budgets and beautify our buildings, nor in the struggle for separating ourselves from the foreign other, nor in the struggle for political ascendency, but in the struggle for justice and righteousness that the human being has cosmic companionship. This, I find, a beautiful articulation and summation of the Gospel at its heart. But there are implications.

It means that actually Exxon and Chevron Corporations who destroy swaths of earth and poison local waterways in their pursuit of more oil and more wealth and lobby for fewer regulations for themselves do not have

cosmic companionship, but rather the indigenous people fighting nonviolently for the rights and justice of the earth and her people who do.

This means that ICE agents shooting people in our streets and extracting mothers and fathers and young people from our country and dumping them in prisons or elsewhere do not have cosmic companionship in their work, but rather the grieving wife of Renee Good and the immigrants abused and the families torn asunder who do.

This means that it is not those millionaires and billionaires who get richer off the backs of those getting poorer who have cosmic companionship but those who wonder where their next meal is coming from and if their kids are getting enough nutrients for their day... and those working to care for them.

God's Spirit, mercy, tenderness especially and particularly extends to the vulnerable and hurting and suffering of the world and that those working for justice and mercy and love are those who have the winds of the Spirit companioning them along the way. It's what our Bible teaches, over and over again. In the struggle for justice and righteousness, not in the struggle for power and more and ascendancy and control, but in the struggle for justice and righteousness is where our Cosmic Champion shows up in remarkable ways. Where is God in all this, you ask? Get out on the streets, get into the heart of the suffering world and you'll find out.

If we want to know God better as a cosmic companion in the work of our lives then we must be open to risking ourselves even a little, stepping out of our enclaves of comfort and ease, for the struggle for justice and righteousness. It's what Jesus and other prophetic voices call out for the people to do. The prophet Isaiah in our passage this morning speaks of being called in this way. The disciples were called by Jesus in this way,

weren't they, called to acts of love, healing and caring and gathering the lost and the least and the losing. And Martin Luther King Jr much later across the ages rose up in that same prophetic tradition and risked himself to speak and stand and walk for God's vision of how this world is supposed to be, opposing the self-made human vision of the way things are.

The prophets voices are always calling us towards bold and challenging change for the sake of others, that's always their message coming from God through them... and because we tend not to like to change so much - especially when the system kinda works for us - we have tended to respond by killing them for what they are asking of us instead of actually changing, be they Jesus, the Apostles Peter or Paul, Martin Luther King, Ghandi, Oscar Romero, Janani Luwum, The MaryKnoll Sisters in El Salvador, Stephen Biko, to name just a few and the next voice that becomes too loud and too challenging to the way things are.

And yet because the prophetic voice is not their own but the voice of our Cosmic Companion, God, the voice doesn't end in challenge but in hope hope and continues to sound and ring out beyond their deaths. Let me conclude with the conclusion of Rev. Dr King's "Strength to Love" essay. And listen to this especially as I think it offers a word of hope for this very day we find ourselves in:

The past decade has been a most exciting one. In spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period something profoundly meaningful is taking place. Old systems of exploitation and oppression are passing; new systems of justice and equality are being born. In a real sense this is a great time to be alive. Therefore I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted that the easygoing optimism of yesterday is impossible. Granted that we face a world crisis which leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life's restless sea. But every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark, confused world, the Kingdom of God may yet reign in the heart of [humanity].

And so may it reign. And may we be a part of it coming to be.

*All quotes taken from “Strength to Love” by Martin Luther King, Jr. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963.