

Thomas R. Cook

Sermon #491 – Trinity Episcopal Church – Swarthmore, PA

8:00 and 11:00 a.m. Services of Holy Eucharist

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany - January 18, 2009

“More Than a Dream”

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10; 2 Epiphany B

Note: A sermon offered on the Sunday before the Martin Luther King holiday and the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

Now that he is safely dead

Let us praise him;

Build monuments to his glory;

sing hosannas to his name.

Dead men make

such convenient heroes:

They cannot rise

to challenge the images

we would fashion for their lives.

And besides,

it is easier to build monuments

than to make a better world.

---Carl Wendell Himes, Jr.

(A man in his twenties when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated)

I know where I was on the day Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his now famous oration we have come to know as the “*I Have a Dream*” speech. Not that I cared much

at the time. See, I was rather pre-occupied with my own concerns. I was suspended upside down in a dark world where all the pressure, all the forces of my tiny environment had inexplicably focused their energies upon one ultimate and terrifying goal: to press me out of the security of my mother's womb and leave me stranded in a new and unknown world where I was hungry and cold and needy and vulnerable, and other creatures like me, big people, were pushing in and looking and touching and pricking and poking. And little did I know that on the day before I was born, Martin Luther King, Jr. was giving birth as well, pushing a new being out into the world, forcing it out in the face of great adversity, a vision of a different way for people to be with one another, a society in which all humankind shared an interest in the well-being of others, and world in which those who had power worked for the good of the powerless, empowering them, in fact, to be full participants in a great society, a just society, imperfect perhaps, but founded on principles of fairness, equality, meaningful work, nonviolent confrontation, economic opportunity, compassion... even love.

Imagine that: my mother and Martin Luther King in labor on the same day. With all due respect: I think my mother had the easier labor.

The nation has not always so readily embraced Dr. King or his vision in the way we appear to do so in this day: holidays, and school programs and service projects. I remember nothing of the man or the vision of the world he was trying to birth from my own time as a child growing up in the rural South. I suppose it wasn't until I was a young man studying for a degree at the University of Florida that I was required to

expose myself to a certain letter written by one Dr. King, a letter he had written, I was told, while imprisoned in a jail cell in a city “far to the north...” in Birmingham, Alabama. And as I read that *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, a letter critical of moderate white Christian men and women who stood by and cautiously observed the painful birthing of a new world of justice, Christian men and women watching the labor of so many other fellow human beings, mostly black human beings, while doing little or nothing to help, even sometimes working against them, I think I felt something of the old birth pangs the nation must have been feeling on that day after Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his dream into the world. Against my own will, I felt pressed out again into a cold, harsh world where people could be suspicious, bigoted, unfriendly, privileged by their race. And with the critical mind of a young man, I was able to revisit the history of my childhood, to recognize the nearly entire division I experienced as a boy between me and the non-white peoples who were part of the community in which I grew up. I seem to remember that, as a boy in the late 1960's, there remained in the old closed down train station of my hometown a sign you could still read through the broken windows, a sign left hanging over a door or a water fountain that read “For Whites Only,” left there, I think I was told, as a “powerless” token of days gone by, days before Martin King, days before we were thrust from the comfortable womb of apparent peace and prosperity after World War II into a turbulent world of war in Indochina and unrest at home, social upheaval, and a renewed quest for rights and respect by those oppressed for the color of their skin, even in these United States of America.

And you know, since reading that *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* over twenty years

ago, those birth pangs pressing on me, pushing me out into this difficult world, have never quite ceased. We continue to live in a time when, for some, the American Dream of equality and prosperity remains illusive. We live in a time when many continue to believe that peace comes from forced security rather than from justice, that peace is something we can use weapons to create, rather than peace itself being the very means by which we build an entire world at peace.

Yet today we stand on the cusp of two momentous occasions in this American life. On Monday we pause for the annual remembrance of the life and work of Martin Luther King, and on Tuesday, we celebrate the inauguration to the presidency of Barack Obama, an African-American citizen of this nation. Yet I want to share with you a real concern I have. See, I don't want a Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday or a Barack Obama inaugural celebration. Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying we need to undo an act of Congress and remove a holiday from the national calendar, and I don't want to be a party pooper and cancel all of Tuesday's festivities. I think I'm trying to say something more than that. Having come up in a world of racial and social divide, having heard through my fellow citizens who have known military service the treachery of war, having finally come to a place as an adult to absorb the depth of meaning in the dreams of Dr. King and see them coming to fruition in Barack Obama's election, having joined the Episcopal Church that embraces the possibility of peace and justice in a diverse and loving community, I don't want *only* a Martin Luther King, Jr. "day" or a Barack Obama Inaugural "event." I pray that our nation will live and work every day in the spirit exemplified in these brief occasions. It's too easy to co-opt the dead hero for our own

sentimental purposes or become dependent upon a savior to do our hard work of reconciliation and justice for us. How easy it is, as Carl Wendell Himes, Jr. puts it, "...to build monuments instead of a better world." We know how that works very well; Christians have been doing it to Jesus for centuries.

But God has been at work in this world far longer than us. Our Scriptures testify to the word and spirit of God perceived over the generations to and through those people called for God's purposes, and we, the Church, have been called to raise our voices and live our lives in order to continue to press toward those purposes of goodness, justice, and reconciliation with God and one another. Not that we understand everything all at once; not that we always perceive the so-called "voice of God" when we hear it; not that we always do the right thing right away. Even the boy Samuel, literally awakened from sleep time and again by his calling, could not perceive the presence of God until he was guided by Eli to practice that all-important work of faith: be still and listen. We still have to listen and to learn. It has been said that "...there are few human beings who receive the truth, complete and staggering, by instant illumination. Most of them acquire it fragment by fragment, on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a laborious mosaic" (*Anais Nin, quoted in Synthesis for 2 Epiphany B 2009*). And Dr. King often quoted Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist, who said: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Perhaps tomorrow and Tuesday, our nation continues that "bend toward justice." Perhaps these are good days upon which we might spend a little extra time in prayer for

our world and listen for the voice of God calling us to *our* place and *our* ministry in a moral universe. Perhaps as we observe these momentous occasions, we might observe them with the eyes and ears of faith. Perhaps God is rattling us, once again, from sleep. Well, then: “*Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.*”