

“THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW”

Faith Congregational Church, Hartford, CT ~ January 16, 2017

Thank you. I am deeply honored by the opportunity to address you this afternoon. I've been attending the Martin Luther King Day gatherings here at Faith Church for several years now and have always come away moved and inspired. Inspired by the people gathered here from across the community, by the music, by the determination of the crowd to lift up the ideals of Dr. King and his struggle for justice, equity, and peace. And I have always sat back, admiring in awe the preachers who are chosen to speak, many of them having fought for many years on the front lines of the struggle for racial equality, and against hatred and prejudice.

What I did not anticipate was being asked join that august group and to deliver today's sermon. So, here's how it happened...

Faith Church's Senior Pastor, Rev. Steven Camp, and I are part of a group of clergy called Interfaith Partners for Peace, and at the beginning of November, we embarked on a ten-day journey through Israel and Palestine. On the second day of our trip, Steve approached me, looking very serious.

“I need to speak to you about something and I don't want to put it off,” he told me. (My immediate thought was: “Oh no, what have I done now?”)

He continued “I want you to preach at this year's Martin Luther King Day program at Faith Church.”

I was at a complete loss for words. Literally, my mouth dropped open. Finally, I responded to him. “Um, I don't know what to say.”

And here was Pastor Steve's response. “Well,” he said with a trace of a smile, “I hope you'll say ‘yes’ *because I prayed on it.*”

Pastor Steve had me cornered. What could I possibly say in response? How could I turn him down? He had, after all, “prayed on it”!

Now I need to explain something. Jews don't generally use this expression. Certainly, we might pray. And we might use all kinds of arguments to convince people to do what we ask (we Jews are *very* good at arguments!) But we seldom utter the phrase “I prayed on it.” I'm thinking about starting to use it from now on, though. Because, as you can see, it worked. And it's been echoing in my head ever since.

“I prayed on it.” Our group returned to the States on Election Day. Following an endless election season filled with lies, hateful rhetoric, and fear-mongering, we came home to a country bitterly divided. We joked that the Middle East seemed peaceful and loving by contrast. But we were not laughing.

If the days leading up to the election had unleashed and emboldened white supremacists and other extremist hate groups, the aftermath of the election brought them front and center. That first week, there was so much fear and anxiety. Congregants and students came to me for emotional and spiritual support and I struggled to comfort them; like them, I felt hollow inside and deeply apprehensive.

It was not simply a matter of the particularly unfit candidate who had won (it was, of course, partly that); it was also a matter of what our country had become. It seemed as if the social progress of many decades – and especially the last eight years - might well be rolled back and that the burden of these changes would, as usual, affect the most vulnerable among us: people of color, immigrants, LGBT folks, disabled people, the poor, particularly poor women. Meanwhile, many of those who claimed victory for their side gleefully took to social media, tweeting invective, making threats, and then making good on those threats by destroying property and assaulting innocent victims. The Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League both pointed to the huge uptick in harassment, intimidation and hate crimes across the country following the election. Jews, Muslims, those with Hispanic surnames or the wrong shade of skin have were targeted. And neither the fear nor the hateful rhetoric has abated since then.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memory we honor today, was fond of invoking a teaching by the 19th century Unitarian minister and abolitionist, Theodore Parker. Paraphrasing Rev. Parker, Dr. King declared: “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

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I’m sure many of you are familiar with this line. President Obama has used it to great effect. I have a copy of this quote sitting next to my computer at work. And there is even a Jewish social-justice organization called “Bend the Arc,” which takes its inspiration from these words.

“The moral arc of the universe is long,” of that I am certain. Not just long, but *really* long. We have only to read the speeches of the ancient Israelite prophets to see that the struggle for a more just and caring society has been going on for millennia.

Twenty-eight hundred years ago, in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, a simple shepherd and farmer named Amos observed the relatively wealthy and self-centered society around him. He saw that the people were giving lip service to God, but allowing inequity and oppression to flourish in their midst. Amos called out the cruel disparities between rich and poor; he declared that what God demands of us is not empty sacrifices, but rather, justice and righteousness.

Amos spoke truth to power and he did so at great risk to himself. He could have left things as they were. There was no reason for Amos to speak out, to name the truth as he saw it, to take such an unpopular and anti-authoritarian stance. It certainly didn't win him any friends. But, like any prophet, he felt compelled to do so. Because he heard God's call. Because he saw evil and couldn't be indifferent. Some might have called Amos and those like him, "maladjusted."

In 1961, Martin Luther King spoke about not the importance of "not getting adjusted" to "the evils of segregation and discrimination," to "religious bigotry," to "economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few," to "the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence." Rather, said Dr. King, "Let us be *maladjusted*, as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who, in the midst of the injustices of his day, could cry out in words that echo across the centuries: 'Let justice run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"

Indeed, "the moral arc of the universe is long"; we all know that building a better, a more just and caring world takes time. And the struggle to do so never ends. Some social challenges are perennial; as both Deuteronomy and the Book of Matthew remind us: the poor and needy will always be with us, and we are obligated to generously open our hands to them, to care for them as sisters and brothers.

Some social challenges arise with more urgency in each succeeding generation. How can we forget that, at the time our own country was founded, slavery, with its attendant dehumanizing cruelties - was perfectly legal, and women were considered chattel and could not vote. So there *has* been progress. It's just taken a long time, and a great deal of sacrifice.

Still, especially during the past few years, it sometimes seemed to me that the arc of the moral universe had become somewhat shorter, that issues like LGBT rights, the empowerment of women, access to healthcare, even the scourge of mass incarceration were finally *beginning* to be addressed. Our country was still plagued by too much gun violence; black people, especially young black men, continued to be targeted all too-often by law enforcement and others. None of this was new. But, with the rise of cell phones and social media, the frequency of these incidents had finally come into the public eye. I admit to

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being lulled into a sense of complacency, thinking that our country – that humanity - would continue advancing, moving inexorably forward.

During these last eight years, I've put great stake in the notion that the arc of the moral universe "bends toward justice." I could see it, not only in my mind's eye, but in the headlines. I could easily envision a better life for my children's generation.

But, as Dr. King reminded us: "We must come to see that human progress *never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability*. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God."

"Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability." Martin Luther King first wrote these words from his cell in the Birmingham City Jail in April 1963. Sitting in those bleak surroundings, he acknowledged that there are no guarantees that freedom and righteousness will automatically prevail. In order for the arc of the moral universe to bend toward justice, he knew that we must become co-workers with God. It was the message preached by Amos and Isaiah of old.

And it was a message he had heard articulated a few months earlier by a rabbi who would become one of his closest friends and allies, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In January 1963, both men were in Chicago, where they had been invited to speak at a Conference on Religion and Race.

Heschel was much older than King; he was born in 1907 in Warsaw. As the brilliant and charismatic descendant of two distinguished rabbinic families, young Abraham was expected to become the leader of his community when he reached adulthood. He took another path, however, and pursued secular studies in Vilna and then Berlin. Heschel's academic career was cut short by the rise of the Nazis in Germany. After being arrested by the Gestapo, he managed to make it to the United States, where he taught rabbinical students. He then watched helplessly as the rest of his family was murdered in Europe.

Abraham Joshua Heschel's doctoral thesis, which later became an influential book, was about the legacy of the Hebrew Prophets. In his address to the clergy gathered at the Conference on Religion and Race, Heschel called racism "man's gravest threat to man, the maximum of hatred for the minimum of reason, the maximum of cruelty for a minimum of thinking."

And he invoked the Biblical prophets, whose main activity, he said, "was interference, remonstrating about wrongs inflicted on other people, meddling in affairs which were seemingly neither their concern nor their responsibility."

He went on:

“The prophet is a person who is not tolerant of wrongs done to others, who resents other people’s injuries. He even calls upon others to be champions of the poor. It is to every member of the community...that Isaiah directs his plea: ‘Seek justice, relieve the oppressed; Judge the orphan, plead for the widow.’ [Isaiah 1:17] There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil... [and this] is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous.”

Heschel concluded his speech:

“It is not enough for us to exhort the government. What we must do is set an example...daily we should take account and ask: What have I done today *to alleviate the anguish, to mitigate the evil, to prevent humiliation?*”

And he ended: “Let there be a grain of prophet in every man!”

Their meeting in Chicago marked the beginning of a deep and close friendship between Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King. They were a study in contrasts: the diminutive rabbi, with his long white beard and Yiddish-inflected English and the handsome, young black man with a mellifluous Southern accent. One Jewish, the other Christian. Both animated by the words and actions of the Prophets. Both dedicated to speaking out against prejudice, injustice, war and violence. After Heschel marched side-by-side with Dr. King in Selma (along with another great American hero, the young John Lewis!), reporters asked Rabbi Heschel what it had felt like to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, facing a phalanx of state troopers armed with billy clubs and tear gas. He told them: “I felt as if my legs were praying.”

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Why do I bring up the story of the friendship between these two men today?

Because I claim both of them as my teachers.

Because they read the ancient prophetic message and made it their own.

Because they model for us what it means to turn beautiful words into action.

Because they saw injustice and made common cause to defeat it.

Because they were willing to take risks.

Because they recognized that, for all their seeming differences, their destinies were linked.

As Dr. King so eloquently put it in his final Sunday morning sermon in 1968:

“We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”

And there is an additional reason. This year, on the very same day that we celebrate the birthday of Dr. King, we also mark Rabbi Heschel’s *yahrtzeit* - the anniversary of his death, a day when we honor his memory. And so, today, I hear the teachings of both these great men, echoing one another. And I think about the power of their shared legacy for our own time, a time when the very foundations of our democracy are at risk, when lies masquerade as truth, when leaders seek to turn us against one another in order to seize and maintain power.

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King delivered an historic address at Riverside Church in Manhattan. Entitled “A Time to Break Silence,” most of the speech focused on King’s opposition to the war in Vietnam. Rabbi Heschel, who shared Dr. King’s anti-war stance, accompanied his friend to the church and introduced him. In speaking about Vietnam, Dr. King addressed larger issues as well. As he so often did, he preached about love:

“When I speak of love,” he explained “I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life... History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued [the] self-defeating path of hate.”

Dr. King concluded:

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with *the fierce urgency of now*. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late.”

The fierce urgency of now. I have never felt it more keenly than I do at this moment.

And the problem is *not* that we don’t feel the urgency; of course we do!

It’s that we don’t know what to do with it. We are afraid. We feel overwhelmed. And powerless.

Lately, I've been privileged to be part of a group of Hartford metro clergy working together to form a large faith-based organization whose ultimate aim is to wield power for positive change. Now, that's a tall order, and it will take some time. And because we are following the tried-and-true principles of community organizing, we recognize that there's a difference between *mobilizing* - for instance, getting folks to show up for a demonstration, which is necessary and which we do all the time - and *organizing*, which is "built on relationships and telling one another our stories."

And so, the 40 or so of us who are involved thus far having been busy getting to know one another by telling our stories. During our December meeting, we were divided into random groups (you know, counting off 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...) and asked to respond to the following question: "When, during the past two weeks, have you felt empowered?"

"When, during the past two weeks, have I felt *empowered*?"

Personally, I was stunned by the question. During those two weeks following the election, I had felt anything *but* empowered! At first, I had no idea had to respond. Yet, as I listened to the others in my small group and heard their stories, I began to feel differently.

A youth minister told about a triumphant break-through with a young man who'd been in trouble and was now doing better. The minister and the young man felt energized and hopeful.

Following the election, the pastor of two all-white churches finally shared with both her congregations how it feels for her to be the only person of color in the room. Now her churches want to work together around combatting racism.

One woman bravely shared with her congregants that she had been raped two years earlier. People are now coming to her with their own stories.

My colleagues had spoken out, taken a stand, done the good work they needed to do.

What is the work each of *us* needs to do as we face the fierce urgency of now?

Here's the truth. I don't know. I can only answer that question for myself and I'll have to keep figuring out the answer, over and over, for the next few years.

Like my friend, Steve Camp, I'll have to "pray on it." And you will too. Each of us will need to discern how we can best use the gifts we have been blessed with, and that includes our time and our

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money, our talents and our circles of influence. We can't do it all. We'll have to direct our energies where we can be most effective.

And let me be clear; there is no sitting this one out. The fierce urgency of now compels us to act, because, as Dr. King said "there is such a thing as being too late."

And we can't do it alone. We'll surely do better if we make common cause with each other, if we partner together with our community, *across* communities, beyond our zip codes and comfort zones, moving toward the creation of the "beloved community" Dr. King envisioned.

And we will need to remember to care for *ourselves* even as we watch out for one another. We are in it for the long haul and we need to be aware of when it's time to step back and replenish our bodies and spirits.

I have no doubt that there will be much to contend with, to protest and take a principled stand against, in the coming years. We will need to be vigilant and tenacious.

But this time in which we find ourselves presents us with an opportunity as well.

The opportunity to stand up *for* the things we most cherish: freedom, justice, mercy and compassion.

To recognize that what links us as human beings is far more than anything that divides us.

The opportunity to build relationships.

To meet hate with what Dr. King called "a strong, demanding love."

Today, in honor of Dr. King, in memory of Rabbi Heschel, will you reach out and connect with one another in friendship?

Will you join me and allow yourselves to be inspired by the exhortations of prophets of old?

Will you fight the urge to throw up your hands in defeat, and instead, become empowered?

Will you pledge to be on the right side of history, to help bend the long arc of the moral universe toward justice?

I hope you'll say yes. Because, after all, I prayed on it. Thank you.