



**Ashfield First Congregational Church/United Church of Christ
429 Main Street – PO Box 519 – Ashfield MA 01330**

Sermon “Where Do We Go From Here?” Rev. David Jones January 17, 2021

Martin Luther King was still a fresh face on the scene in Montgomery when Rosa Parks was arrested after refusing to surrender her seat--arrested for refusing to surrender her dignity. The young King stumbled into a leadership role as the newcomer, someone who the other, more established clergy would not feel threatened by. Of course, then he opened his mouth and out came the Word of God. When he suddenly found himself the undisputed prophetic leader of a small community association, the 26 year old felt overwhelmed. He became fearful that he was not up to the challenge. He prayed to God and God drew near, reassuring him that the love in his heart, the desire, the yearning to do right, was his unconquerable strength. The young man's fears receded. Days later, his house was bombed. But thank God this young King was not so easily frightened anymore.

Toward the end of his life, in what would be his last major published work, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked the simple and profound question, “Where do we go from here?” He saw two distinct possibilities for America: chaos, or community. Long before he posed this question in print, he posed it with his ministry. As we all are still reeling from recent events and, truthfully, from an entire year of great difficulty--and with so much to worry about in this week ahead--there hardly could be a more apt question for us to take up now.

Where do we go from here--from this day? For starters, I think we need to try to collect ourselves and find our composure. The fact that the world is scary or that there is violence in our people's hearts and in their actions is not new. Today is Martin Luther King Sunday, and certainly it is tempting to idly gaze out at the sun-lit vistas of his shining dream. But this year we are also keenly aware, I think, that that dream has not been fulfilled. That instead of singing in a beloved community, we are boarding up the windows and battening down the hatches of our own estrangement from one another. If trust and peace are the watchwords of justice, we must be living in a very unjust place today, where we do not trust our own neighbors and we are not even at peace in our own friendships and families. This is not the world of a prophet's dreams; this is a world in the aftermath of a prophet's persecution and murder. So we do not have the right to go to the words and deeds of Martin Luther King for solace and comfort; we must go to them with fierce urgency--and with our composure--so that we might begin to correct the misdeeds of our country. We have to go to these magnificent words, to a prophet's vast dream, and figure out, where do we go from here, that we might get to the Promised Land one day.

In his book, King had one concrete answer in particular for this question that he posed. He used this work to advance the idea of a guaranteed annual income for every American. King believed that such a guarantee would leap us forward in the pursuit of his dream, because the civil rights that the movement had begun to win during his ministry now needed funding to actually become real. This was especially true for Black Americans. As King understood it, America had treated Black Americans like a person wrongfully imprisoned, stripped of all rights and possessions. Then one day America overturned its unjust sentence, and opened the prison cell door, but didn't make restitution, didn't provide land or shelter. King saw tremendous progress in the civil rights of Black Americans, but he began to be suspicious that the victory was too insubstantial, that the newly won freedoms didn't reach far enough into the material conditions of his people, and would be vulnerable to being overturned. A guaranteed annual income, something universal, something without prejudice, something that would not judge a person by the color of their skin but by the content of their soul, made in the image of God--something like this could begin to

pay for some of the damage done, and provide a way forward for *all* people languishing on “lonely islands of poverty.”

King had a very big dream for us all. And such dreams make for historic speeches. But King was wide awake in his ministry. He studied the historical legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, he studied the hypocrisy and broken promises of his country. He worked with others to identify the pressing need in a given community, to stand with others out on a picket line or march, and he fought for ideas and policies that could begin to reshape our neighborhoods into siblinghoods. And he wasn't timid. As his ministry grew he became bolder. He told the striking Memphis sanitation workers not to accept anything less than their full demands. I think King was quite moved by the sanitation workers, I think he realized that they by then were leading him and the church, that the baton had passed from the Black clergy to the Black worker, and that that opened all kinds of new possibilities for the cause of freedom in America, a cause that he had been carrying the full weight of without rest. In his short life King was assaulted by racist mobs, arrested by the police, harassed and threatened by the FBI; he never expected to see old age. The dream from God gave him protection and courage, it gave him the strength to remain focused and composed. And with this strength, he would not fight fire with fire. To put out the fires of racism and poverty, the violent creeds and conditions of life for the vast majority of Americans, he would turn to the peaceful waters of social welfare and the nonviolent springs of human rights.

We are confronted today by widespread poverty, by low wages, by unemployment, by lack of labor rights and protections, and consequently we are beset by an epidemic of hunger. 50 million Americans are facing food insecurity this year, almost 20 million of them children. And the historical legacies of slavery and Jim Crow and the war on drugs and mass incarceration continue to haunt us. Black Americans continue to bear the worst of this depression in America. And this inequality, so pronounced as it is, is still undermining the efforts of thoughtful people to find common ground and to build solidarity and to change their working conditions for the better. In warehouses in Jacksonville and hospitals in Springfield, things will not get better for working people and their families if we do not exorcise this demon of racism. We need to identify not with celebrity CEOs or duplicitous politicians but the very working people, black and white, that King once passed the baton to in Memphis.

Where do we go from here? In 1955, Rosa Parks stoked and fired and *anointed* in the soul of a young prophet the dream that still heralds the future of God coming among us. We will one day live and work together in reality; one day the abundance of God will be shared in this life by all God's children. We will overcome, and we will rest our tired feet in the cooling river waters of the beloved community. But that day has not come yet. And we are fearful that day is moving farther and farther away from us. And frankly, I think it has. I think we have been going in the wrong direction for some time now. So today we take this pilgrimage to the tomb of America's great prophet. And with seriousness of purpose, gaining our composure by the same strength that King found in his prayers, let us find that tomb empty. Let us find King living among us. And let us follow in his footsteps, with our own modest stride toward freedom. Because our beloved prophet, this son of God, he began modestly too. He began by reluctantly accepting the mantle of leadership for a small community organization called the Montgomery Improvement Association. What great thing God made of that small beginning. And that is what I propose for us today. Pray to God, let God draw near us; let God remind us that all we need is the desire and the yearning to do right. Let us take up our own mantle of leadership here in Ashfield and the hilltowns, and our own role as partners and disciples of others right here in Western Massachusetts, where all God's children seek freedom and justice and peace as surely as they once did in Montgomery. And let no headwind of adversity blow our hope away.

Alleluia and amen.