

The name Irene is a name that normally calls to mind the memory of a lovely lady and a good friend; but not this weekend, for this weekend we have been holding breath, waiting to see what kind of fury the hurricane Irene is going to unleash on our eastern coast. Worse, today Irene is also responsible for interfering with the sermon. I had planned to begin today's sermon by calling attention to the day's celebration in Washington dedicating the recently unveiled Martin Luther King Memorial, a dedication postponed by the storm. The only memorial erected on the Washington Mall to a person who has not served as a President of the United States, the only Mall memorial honoring an African-American, the memorial celebrates both the dream of the man and our long delayed arrival at a moment in our shared history when a memorial to Martin Luther King's dream can be erected in such a place of honor.

Located near the place on the Mall where King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech 48 years ago today, the memorial features a 28-foot statue of King who seems to be rising out of a great mountain of stone. Approach to the statue is marked by two other huge pieces of granite that rise like mountains on either side. All symbolize a line from King's speech that may be remembered less than his soaring lines of hope visualizing children of former slaves and slave owners sitting at table on the red hills of Georgia and his anticipation of the day when his children would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. If we are to truly celebrate the dream, we must also remember the circumstances in which the dream emerged. Far from the frothy, sentimentalism we often associate with dreams, King's speech, King's dream was birthed in the darkness of racism, inequality and deep suffering. Far from an excuse for passivity in the face of the hard reality, King's dream, King's faith in a different sort of future put his feet to the road and his hand to the work of hewing "out of a mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

"Faith," the epistle to the Hebrews says, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1). Better yet, Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch translation puts it: "Faith is the turning of dreams into deeds; it is betting your life on the unseen realities. It was for such faith that men of old were martyred."

Dreams are often born in the midst of darkness. The world's most astounding dreams, dreams that change the world forever, are frequently, and maybe most frequently, birthed in times that intimate anything but an opportunity to dream. Journey back with me again this morning, if you will, to Acts rendition of the life and ministry of Paul. Stopped in his tracks on the road to Damascus, Paul was chosen to bring Christ's name "before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (9:15). Far from those in our day who, William Willimon observes, bear testimony to all of the good things that have happened to them since they "found Jesus," Paul's witness went something more like: "'Well, let's see. First I was struck blind. I got over that but then somebody tried to kill me, and I had to escape in a basket. Then they stoned me and . . . (Acts, 180). And here he is today after having had to face down dissension within the church and harassment from Jewish leaders and gentile mobs, here he is carrying out the final stage of his commission and bearing witness to *kings*, giving testimony before Agrippa II.

It was not the best of times. It was, you might say, the worst. Human lives hang in the balance on the scales of questionable Roman justice. Modeling the demeanor that would later be voiced in the First Epistle of Peter in times that were perhaps even more treacherous, Paul turned himself to "accounting for the hope" that was within him "with gentleness and reverence" (3:15-16). He recounted his experience on the road to Damascus and his commissioning to preach to the Gentiles. "After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). This one who had earlier spoken with the familiar appeal of Hebrew to those he called "brothers and fathers" (Acts 22), spoke now of how although he had "lived as a Pharisee," he was now on trial "on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors" (26:5-6). He could not, he was assuring the king, be left in the hands of his accusers because he was himself a victim in their intramural infighting—an offense certainly undeserving of death.

Dreams can be costly. In hard times, dreams are often costly. Expediency seems to say that in hard times dreams must die. They must be put aside for a more convenient day. If that had been the case, Moses would not have confronted Pharaoh, David would not have gone up against Goliath; Nathan would not have confronted David; Isaiah would not have confronted Ahaz; and the Maccabees would not have opposed Antiochus. If that had been the case, the church would have been still born. If that had been the case, we would have very little Bible, very little of our Jewish and Christian faith left.

Because the heroes of our faith refused to put hope aside in hard times, "women," Hebrews goes on to tell us,

received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a

better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented--of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (11:35-40).

Therefore, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," how dare we conclude that somehow the price is too high now? How dare we give up on the hope of justice and freedom and fullness of life for so many of God's children? How dare we retreat into a safe and supposedly reasonable assumption that only so many can fit into the lifeboat and abandon a future of hope for God's other children? How dare we put in place a glass ceiling beyond which they and our society and world may not go?

Chained, imprisoned, stoned, threatened with exclusion from not just the synagogue, but his own church, Paul says, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." What about you? What about me?

We live by and for our dreams. Forty-eight years later, we need to remember both Martin Luther King's dream and the dismal conditions under which it was born. We find ourselves in a day when pointing the finger of blame seems to be the distance to which many in our society are willing to go in dealing with issues robbing our children of their future and us as a people of our very souls. Have we truly come to a moment in history in which the visions and dreams that brought us together as a people must die? Is this a time for us personally, is this a time for us as a people when our dreams and visions have become irrelevant. Are they merely the froth of better times that must be put aside in order to address the realities pressing in on us on every side?

Some, because of their hostility toward religion, want to distance Martin Luther King from his faith. Others, because they reject the implications for social justice bound up in the Christian faith, want to deny that religious faith had anything to do with the messy struggle for civil rights. Yet, Martin Luther King insisted, although he owed his methodology to Gandhi, he owed his motivation to Jesus Christ. Celebrating Martin Luther King without acknowledging the significance of his faith, Paul Raushenbusch, Religion Editor of the *Huffinton Post*, suggests, "is like admiring the exterior of the car without understanding the fuel and engine that makes it go" (Jan. 18, 2010). King was a Christian minister possessed of the conviction that God cares not only about people's souls, but also for their bodies and the conditions in which they live. Hear it in King's own words:

The gospel at its best deals with the whole man. Not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well being but his material well-being. Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial [quoted by Raushenbush, 1-18-2010].

In 1865, four short months after the end of the civil war, abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher addressed a black church in Charleston, South Carolina. He offered them a word of hope about God's kingdom of justice: What is God doing in this World? By day and by night, in light and in darkness, by good and by evil, by his friends and by his enemies, God is building up a kingdom among Men. . . . This kingdom is building very slowly. It meets with great opposition - so great that sometimes you can not tell whether it is going backward or forward. But God is building this great kingdom, though on account of its magnitude, it is slowly advancing, but it is advancing surely [quoted by Raushenbush].

One hundred years later, Martin Luther King would say: "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

The legacy of King, like the legacies of Moses, Hosea and Paul, is not about the inevitability of progress that progress is inevitable, but that it is possible. The legacy of King, Raushenbush concludes, is that through struggle sustained by faith in a God who loves justice and freedom, we can become a more perfect union, a more perfect world. The legacy of our heroes of the faith is not reassurance that the pathway is easy or that we will know immediate success. The legacy of those who were faithful before us and whose work resides now in our hands for completion is, in the words of Vincent Harding, King's speech writer and friend, is precisely this:

In a period of great spiritual and societal hunger like our own [what] we most need [is] open minds, hearts, and memories to those times when women and men actually dreamed of new possibilities. . . . It is now that we may be able to convey the stunning idea that dreams, imagination, vision, and hope are

actually powerful mechanisms in the creation of new realities”

–Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement

For, you see, we live and die by our dreams. “Faith is the turning of dreams into deeds; it is betting your life on the unseen realities.” On what are you willing to bet your life? Where, on behalf of what purpose will you invest your life?

The great poet Langston Hughes said it well:

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow

Chained, imprisoned, stoned, threatened with exclusion from synagogue and church, Paul says, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.”

What about you? What about me?