

The Spirit, the Lament, and the Dream

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Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil....”
(Luke 4:1-2, NRSV)

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit... stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

(Luke 4:14, 17-21, NRSV)

It was August 28, 1963, and the mall in front of the Lincoln Memorial was filled with more than 250,000 people. After a long afternoon of stirring speeches, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson sang two spirituals that caused Roger Mudd of CBS to remark, “All the speeches in the world couldn’t have brought the response that just came from the hymns she sang.” A rabbi spoke, and then Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led into his prepared remarks. The words for this occasion had come slowly to the acknowledged leader of the civil rights movement. Drawing from the deep wellspring of the struggle for black Americans to experience the justice and freedom proclaimed in their homeland, he and his confidantes had worked late into the evening.

This speech was not to be just the words of an eloquent preacher; it was a gift of the centuries-long black struggle. This moment was bringing attention to the blood, sacrifice, and courage of so many who had labored in the long fight for freedom for the African-American community. They knew that they would be speaking to a nationwide audience. And they also knew they would be speaking directly to people who had experienced firsthand beatings, jail, being attacked by dogs and humiliated by neighbors.

Dr. King and his companions had debated which themes to use in what was an allotted five minutes of speaking time. Dr. King himself had spent the night writing in longhand, and by 4 a.m., he had put the finishing touches on a text that was meant to be both sobering and thoughtful, absent of inflammatory rhetoric, but sternly calling the nation to account for the ongoing denial of rights to so many of its citizens. Dr. King’s speech began more scholarly than soaring, and when he stumbled on a line that he didn’t think would work, he began to riff off-script. It was just then that the preacher heard the gospel singer crying out from behind him, “Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream.”

Dr. King’s associate and speechwriter Clarence B. Jones, who was seated nearby,

heard Mahalia Jackson's words and saw Dr. King glance at Jackson and put his notes aside. Jones said to the person sitting next to him, "These people out there, they don't know it, but they are about ready to go to church." Dr. King launched into the words that have now become hallowed in our American history, "I have a dream." Like Jesus in the synagogue so many years before, he drew on the imagery of Isaiah, the vision of the transformed world soaring across the Washington Mall. "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."¹

Dr. King paused and brought that imagery right down to the blood-stained soil of 1960s Alabama and Mississippi and the daunting task ahead of all of them. "This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with."

Because of what God is doing and will certainly finish doing some day, the Preacher King proclaims to those who had come—many of them from the marches, the protests, the hoses, the dogs, and the jails *of the south*—"We can go back to the south." Because of what God's own presence is doing, because God's own glory will someday be revealed to all flesh and all creation will be confronted with the world made right, King declares, we can go back to the hoses and dogs and jails, back to the sneers and threats and beatings, back to the separate lunch counters and segregated buses and hotels, back to the redlined neighborhoods and racial slurs that flow from unjust legal codes and hardened hearts: "With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day." With faith in what the God of justice will accomplish one day, we can go back, this day, to the hard work of transforming despair into hope.

It is this juxtaposition between the future hope and the present heartache that meets the preacher on Pentecost. It is the pouring out of the Spirit that Jesus received right before the wilderness temptations and which Jesus proclaimed as good news for the poor, for captives, for the oppressed:

Jesus, the one who declared that his presence was good news—*especially to those experiencing the most pain in this world*—announced that the same Spirit and his use of the same biblical prophet was itself a proclamation of *God's presence*. In doing so, he reveals an often overlooked part of that celebration: *The Spirit comes into the world to change it*. Pentecost is not "rapture." It's not a taking up, but a pouring out. It's not the Lord lifting us on "eagle's wings" (at least not yet!), but the Spirit baptizing us and the very soil of this fallen world that we inhabit with the very presence of God's own self. God enters into the world to make it free, to release peoples from captivity, to give sight to the blind, to give liberation to the oppressed, and to give back to people their lands and livelihoods, their places, their homes.

This is not just a blessing of those gathered in that Roman-occupied city of Jerusalem nor a sign that is meant to convince people to a purely religious conversion, but it is a demonstration of how the creator God is present, active, entering in—even into the native tongues of all the disparate people—and making them into one new people to live as a sign of the future transformation of the whole creation.

Make no mistake, this is a great and glorious day, this Pentecost. Jesus himself

said that the pouring out of the Spirit on all people was better than his own personal flesh and blood presence...., but it is only a beginning.

The Spirit comes into the brutal and broken places, entering into the injustice, the division, the oppression and strife (yes, the marches, the hoses, the dogs, the jails), and in Jesus, *names* the brokenness. When Dr. King shared the vision of Isaiah's prophecy of a world made right, he also names the brokenness of injustice that had been the long march of over 400 years for those of African descent on American soil.

For pastoral leaders committed to participating in the change that God is bringing to the world, the practice for addressing the uncomfortable and brutal reality of the suffering of our neighbors and the pain of our friends without losing hope means bringing God—with the same brutal honesty—into our experiences. *In biblical language this is called the spiritual practice of lament.* It is the “language of suffering,” theologian Soong-Chan Rah explains as he helps us understand this most honest, and often disturbing, type of prayer:

Laments are prayers of petition arising out of need. But lament is not simply the presentation of a list of complaints, nor merely the expression of sadness over difficult circumstances. Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering that is wholeheartedly named and offered as lament.²

Laments are prayers that face the brutal facts of our world, the pain points of our lives, and the challenges of our callings, and invite God right into the swirl of that disturbing moment as the one who is the primary and responsible actor during each crisis. In this way, Pentecost is a proclamation that is borne in *lament*. It is hope that is being proclaimed in the voices of prophecy and visions of the Scriptures; it is hope that is, in the words of Dr. King, “hewed” out of “a mountain of despair.”

For the preacher that is also a pastor, speaking to a congregation and leading them to faithfully participate in the mission of God, loving neighbors, making disciples, embodying and extending the Reign of God, Pentecostal lament is a most powerful tool. For leadership expert Jim Collins, leading change does not begin in a vision, but in a disciplined process of “confronting the brutal facts.”³ For Collins, the genesis of change is not our inspired ideas, but the pain, problems, brokenness, and challenges we see in the world and for our organizations. Change leaders don't arise from a great vision; they are raised to meet a great need. And when leaders gather people to address the brutal facts, the first response is not knee-jerk reactions, but deep reflection so that our actions come from a deeper attunement to the greater context and condition of the pain.

For Dr. King, the inspiration for the speech in August of 1963 was not in the first sense about a dream, but instead about a broken promise. He and the other civil rights leaders who gathered on the mall in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, had come to an event called “the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” Dr. King's speech was to make clear the way that African American citizens of the United States had been given promises that even one hundred years after the abolition of slavery had not been kept:

One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.

Laments remind us that our capacity to lead in the world, especially when leading at the place of despair, resistance, and the failures of nerve and heart, is met with the power of the God who is present and is active. The leader is made stronger, like Jacob, through brutally honest wrestling with God in prayer about the brutal facts of our lives. As Old Testament scholar John Goldingay says, "The psalms give a lot of space to describing, protesting, and lamenting...; the psalms are very general in what we ask God to do and very detailed about our need."⁴

Laments are powerful pastoral leadership tools because they reinforce to those leading the change that the way to avoid both accommodating the status quo and falling into cynicism is not to deny the mountain of despair, but to confront it head-on with honesty and *hope*, with courage and *urgency*. The very attributes of a faithful lament.

Dr. King again:

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.... Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

For the pastoral leader who is proclaiming the presence of the Spirit as good news on Pentecost, there is a moment here to reflect, to name, to pray, and to try to see what God is doing before we rush in to do what we might. Pentecost allows us to name the God that is present and empowering us to participation in God's own redeeming, healing, liberating, and transforming work. Pentecostal Lament allows us to tell the truth and trust God's Spirit to meet us in the moment, doing what we couldn't imagine and calling us to what we could otherwise not even see. Lament teaches us to be both more honest and more open to the reality that God is at work, even when we are bewildered and bedeviled by the brutality of pain and opposition.

By acknowledging the brutal facts of a situation and letting them lead us into prayers of lament, we galvanize the energy that brings resilience, reinforces even the smallest movement of momentum, and staves off cynicism. Laments are acts of faith that strengthen the one praying for faithful, persistent, and tenacious action.

Edwin Friedman drew upon that same visionary speech when he was consulting with leaders who were bogged down and disoriented by their own despair as they sought to bring change. He wrote that there was a similarity to their stories where they became mired in moments of discouragement and defensiveness. They became stuck, burned out, or had begun to give in to the most dysfunctional forces in the system. In short, they had forgotten to lead. “I therefore stopped listening to the content of everyone’s complaints and, irrespective of the location of their problem or the nature of their institution, began saying the exact same thing to everyone: You have to get up before your people and give an ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.”⁵⁵

Friedman discovered that whether or not the leaders’ own “I Have a Dream Speech” rallied the community to a shared vision, just articulating the vision energized the leaders. The act of naming the truth about a people’s history for the present moment and casting a vision of change created focus, clarity, and self-definition for the leaders would often renew their calling to be, in Friedman’s words, “the strength in the system.” Preaching lament empowers leaders with vision and courage to carry on.

What we have learned from prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, the prayers of the early church, the preachers and marchers of the black freedom struggle, and those who have faithfully journeyed even when they have not experienced the rest of the promised land is the power of lament to sustain resilience. When Dr. King looked out on the crowd gathered on the Washington Mall, he could see their faces and name the pain of the gathered people, mindful, he said, that some “have come here out of great trial,” that others had come “fresh from narrow jail cells,” and that many, like those who had for decades labored for racial justice, had been “battered by the storms of persecution...and police brutality.” Through the honest words of lament, he offered a charge to tenacious endurance:

You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

Understood in this way, Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech that August day before the Lincoln Memorial, that began with brutal honesty and ended with a soaring dream, was a classic lament. With the vision of Isaiah and the acknowledgement of the painful moment in history, it was Pentecostal. It was a clear-eyed reckoning of the injustice that white America continued to inflict upon its black citizens. But it was not just a protest; it was a proclamation. And as a lament, it did what laments do: it proclaimed the Spirit to energize a movement to carry on.

“With this faith, I go back to the south.” King’s voice sang out. And so he did.

Notes

1 Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” Stanford University, accessed October 7, 2019, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.

2 Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22.

3 Jim Collins discusses his view that real change starts not in a vision but in a deep look at the brutal facts of a situation. Jim Collins, “Keeping the Flywheel in Motion,” *Knowledge Project Podcast*, accessed October 8, 2019, <https://fs.blog/jim-collins>.

4 “The Psalms of Lament,” Fuller Seminary, accessed October 9, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/99780901>.

5 Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), loc. 455-460, Kindle.