

Celebrating a Prophet of Nonviolence

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, January 15, 2023.

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Luke 6:27-38

In this morning's reading from the Hebrew scriptures, we hear the story of how a young boy named Samuel became "a trustworthy prophet of the Lord." It was his mother's wish that he grow up to serve the Lord, and so she placed Samuel under the care and instruction of Eli, the chief priest of Shiloh. One night, God called out to Samuel by name. Samuel assumed that it was Eli who was calling him. So he got up and went to Eli to see what he wanted, but Eli told him to go back to bed, that he had not called him. This happened three times. Finally, Eli realized that Samuel must be hearing the voice of God. He told Samuel to go and lie down again, and if he heard the voice calling to him again, he should say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

God did call Samuel again, and God told Samuel of God's plans to punish Eli and his family, because of the wicked behavior of Eli's two sons. Eli's sons had earned a pretty bad reputation for themselves. They demanded from worshipers the prime cuts of meat from the animal sacrifices being made to the Lord. And they committed adultery with the women who served at the sanctuary entrance. Their father, Eli, was aware of their behavior and he rebuked them for it, but his scolding was not enough to stop them. God was not pleased!

Having received this disturbing word from God, Samuel lay awake all night, unable to sleep. He didn't want to tell Eli what God had said to him. But Eli insisted. So, Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. It was Samuel's first time serving as a prophet, a messenger of God.

Like young Samuel, Martin Luther King's formation as a prophet also began at an early age. Martin King grew up as part of the black middle class in Atlanta. His family did not live in poverty. Consequently, he was sheltered from the worst of racial segregation in the South. Still, he could not help but become aware of it.

One formative incident occurred in 1943, when he was 14 years old. King and his high school teacher, Miss Sarah Bradley, were riding a bus from southern Georgia back to Atlanta following a public speaking contest. They were forced to give up their bus seats to white passengers and to stand for several hours until they reached Atlanta. Twenty years later, King would remark, "It was the angriest I have ever been in my life." That experience ingrained in him a deep sense of righteous indignation against racial injustice.

King's identity as a prophet was also formed by the black church. He was a "P.K.," a preacher's kid, the son of a prominent black Baptist minister, Martin Luther King, Sr., who was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Week after week young Martin attended Sunday School, sang at church functions, and listened to the rhythmic cadences of black preaching. The black church was in his very bones. It was therefore no surprise that he chose to become a minister.

Reflecting on his call to ministry, King wrote: "I guess the influence of my father had a great deal to do with my going into the ministry. This is not to say that he ever spoke to me in terms of being a minister but that my admiration for him was the great moving factor. He set forth a noble example that I didn't mind following. I still feel the effects of the noble moral and ethical ideals that I grew up under. They have been real and precious to me, and even in moments of theological doubt I could never turn away from them."

King was licensed to preach and became assistant to his father in 1947 at the age of 18. At 19, he was ordained to the Baptist

ministry and graduated from Morehouse College. His subsequent academic training for the ministry, first at Crozer Theological Seminary and then at Boston University, exposed him to the “social gospel” theology of Walter Rauschenbusch and to the “Christian realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr. The writings of these and other Christian theologians pushed King to wrestle with how to effectively challenge social injustice and bring about social change.

It was also in seminary that King was first introduced to the life and thought of Mohandas Gandhi – the third major influence in King’s life. In 1950, he heard Howard University President Mordecai Johnson, who had just returned from a trip to India, speak about Gandhi and his use of *satyagraha* (truth-force) against the British. King was so fascinated with what he heard that he immediately bought several books about Gandhi and read them that fall.

In his essay entitled “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” King writes: “I had almost despaired of the power of love in solving social problems. The ‘turn the other cheek’ philosophy and the ‘love your enemies’ philosophy are only valid, I felt, when individuals are in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations are in conflict a more realistic approach is necessary. Then I came upon the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. As I read his works I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. The whole Gandhian concept of *satyagraha* (*satya* is truth which equals love, and *graha* is force; *satyagraha* thus means truth-force or love-force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.”

Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance was the tool for social change that King had been looking for, though he would not fully realize this

until five years later when the Montgomery bus boycott began. As president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, King helped guide the bus boycott, which focused national attention on racial segregation in the South and catapulted King into the national spotlight. He became the nation's leading spokesperson for nonviolent social change at the young age of twenty-six!

Like Samuel, Martin Luther King, Jr., became "a trustworthy prophet of the Lord." Not only did his eloquent preaching and charismatic leadership inspire a movement for civil rights that brought an end to legal segregation and secured voting rights for millions of previously disenfranchised Americans. His powerful words would be heard all around the world, calling for an end to racial and economic injustice, an end to global poverty, an end to the Vietnam War, and an end to militarism.

"I am convinced," he said, "that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. . . . America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war."

By 1967, it became apparent that gains in civil rights were not leading to improvements in the material living conditions of most African Americans. So Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference shifted their focus from civil rights to economic and social rights. They began organizing a Poor People's Campaign to demand economic justice for poor Americans of diverse backgrounds. It was a multiracial effort – including African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans – aimed at alleviating poverty

regardless of race. But just before it was to begin in 1968, King was assassinated, one year to the day that he came out against the war in Vietnam in a speech at The Riverside Church. The Poor People's Campaign went forward without him, under the leadership of King's lieutenant, Ralph Abernathy. Participants from all across the country erected a 3,000-person protest encampment on the Washington Mall, which was known as Resurrection City. They stayed there for six weeks during the spring of 1968 to press their demands upon Congress.

The words of Dr. King remind us that: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

So, we are all in this together. We all have a responsibility to work for a more just society – each one of us, in our own way. In a world where the poor only get poorer while the rich get richer, we need to be about economic justice. In a world still deeply divided by racism, where people of color are disproportionately unemployed, imprisoned, and put on death row far more than white people, we need to be about racial justice. In a world where women still do not receive equal pay for equal work, where women are victims of an epidemic of sexual assault and harassment, and where women's reproductive rights are being curtailed, we need to be about justice for women. In a world ravaged by environmental destruction, by climate change, by pollution and resource depletion, we need to be about ecological justice. In a world where gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons still do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as heterosexuals, we need to be about justice for all, not just for some.

The examples of Samuel and Martin Luther King, Jr., call us to stand up for what is right, to speak out for what we believe in, to have courage in the face of opposition, to persevere in spite of the risks, to keep on keeping on. The church needs to remain a

prophetic voice in society, challenging the status quo. We need to put our faith into action out in the world again and again.

So, “now,” in the words of King, “let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter – but beautiful – struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons [and daughters] of God, and our brothers [and sisters] wait eagerly for our response.”

May it be so. Amen.