

We are Still Called
Luke 4:14-21
January 20, 2019 – Second Sunday after Epiphany

So, last week we heard about the baptism of Jesus and what we might call God's call, God's seal on his life, as Jesus heard those heavenly words, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." Immediately after the baptism, the Gospel tells us of the temptation of Jesus, as Jesus retreats into the wilderness to "struggle" with his call to ministry. The story of the temptation in the traditional scripture for the first Sunday of Lent; and we'll consider it at that time. So we'll skip ahead to today's scripture as Jesus publicly announces the start of his earthly ministry.

Jesus went to Nazareth, his home town, and on the Sabbath we went to the synagogue as was his custom. Indeed, Luke is intentional in telling us that Jesus went to synagogue on a regular basis. Jesus was a spiritual person. Jesus was a religious person. The Son of God was not above the regular, intentional worship of the Father. And so, Jesus was handed the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, the prescribed reading of the day. He unrolled the scroll to the sixty-first chapter and began to read. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to cure the blind." And then comes the proclamation: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Wow. . . Can't you imagine the reaction of the congregation? This is a hometown boy. This is Joseph's son. What's he saying? Is he claiming that the Lord anointed *him*? Is he claiming that *he* is the messiah of whom Isaiah speaks? How dare he? Friends, the proclamation of Jesus was met with disbelief, with anger, and with hostility. And indeed, throughout Jesus' earthly ministry there would be those who would believe, those to whom the peace, the love, and the faith which they heard from Jesus would resonate; and there would be those for whom it would not.

And why? Why would so many from the hometown of Nazareth not believe that Jesus was the fulfillment? Because it's too simple. Those who would not accept Jesus as messiah were looking for a major spectacle. They expected that, when the messiah came, the heavens would open, the trumpets would sound, and the heavenly army would appear leading the messiah on a huge white horse. They expected the messiah to strike down all the evil-doers with bolts of lightning from his terrible swift sword. But a carpenter's son from the hometown preaching that the Good News of God is born in a life of love and peace – that's simply no messiah. And sadly, there are still those today who are waiting for one coming on the great white horse; and, in the waiting, they totally miss the message of love and peace and joy that comes from faith in the one from Nazareth.

Friends, in addition to this being the Second Sunday after Epiphany, it's also officially Human Relations Sunday; and tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of the

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Now, don't get me wrong. I am not trying to parallel Martin Luther King with Jesus Christ. Martin Luther King was very human. Martin Luther King had his faults. Martin Luther King was not a stranger to sin. That being said, Martin Luther King was a hometown citizen who received a call – a call to love and a call to peace; and Martin Luther King had the courage to accept that call despite the risks, despite the temptations; and that call eventually did cost him his life.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was the son of an American Baptist Preacher from Atlanta. He was educated first at Morehouse College, then at Crozer Theological Seminary. He eventually earned a PhD from Boston University before returning back to the Jim Crow South to accept a call as the minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Nine months later, on December 1, 1955 a young Rosa Parks was arrested from refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery City Bus. This incident sparked a meeting among the African American clergy of Montgomery. It was decided that the African American citizens of that city would begin a city-wide boycott of the Montgomery Bus System; and then that group of clergy turned to the young Martin Luther King and said, "Dr. King, you are the man. You are the man to lead this boycott." And with that, the American Civil Rights Movement was born. Important point here: King did not volunteer to lead the movement – he was "called." But equally important, King did not say no, despite being fully aware of the risks to himself and his family.

Now, as much as I might like to, I don't have time to give a history of the entire Civil Rights Movement. So, let's fast forward to 1963 and the March on Washington. King stood on the step of the Lincoln Memorial, addressing a crowd of thousands. He had prepared a wonderful speech, and he finished his speech:

"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 the northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can, and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair."

And the speech was finished, and there was silence. And then, the late Mahalia Jackson, leaned forward and whispered, "Martin. . . Martin. . . Tell them about your dream Martin." And so, Dr. King continued:

So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even in the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with words of interposition and nullification, that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

Indeed, that was Dr. Martin Luther King's dream in 1963.

Fifteen years later in 1978, the Civil Rights Act had long been signed; and I had the privilege of traveling though the country with a touring orchestra. We happened to have one African American trumpet player in the group. When we arrived in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, we had a free afternoon and were invited to go to the community pool. Upon arrived, we were all allowed to enter except our trumpet player who was told that he was welcome to pick up the trash around the outside of the pool while he waited for his friends. The dream was still only a dream.

A few weeks later we were in Morgan City, Louisiana. A small group, including the trumpet player, entered a bar and ordered a beer. We told that we would all be served, but the trumpet player would need to take his beer to-go. He was not welcome to sit and enjoy it in the cool of the establishment. Indeed, the dream was still only a dream.

Friends, it's now almost 56 years since Martin Luther King shared his dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial; and I wish I could tell you that his dream has become a reality. I recognize that, in some ways we have made significant progress. But, I also recognize that, in recent years white supremacist groups have been emboldened to come out of the woodwork. Indeed, I am deeply troubled by

the racism, the sexism, the homophobia, and all the other “isms” that divide the one and only family of God.

Did you hear that statement? There is only one family of God – that’s the human family; and every person on this planet is a brother or sister in that family. So where do we go with all this?

Jesus, the very Son of God, had a calling – “to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind.” Martin Luther King, Jr. followed the example of Christ. It was not easy. He seriously struggled with the danger that he was placing his family in; and he well knew the personal risk he was taking. But he followed his call.

And friends, I’ve said it a hundred times before, and I’ll continue to say it until the day I die. I believe that every Christian has a call. We are all called by virtue of our Christian baptism. We are called to eliminate the poverty, to eliminate the racism and all the bigotry. Now, once again, I know that I’m preaching to the choir. You are among the most loving, accepting, caring people I know. I also know that each of us, you and I can all do more, speak out more, take an active role in speaking against government policies that would preference one group of people above another, policies that would disadvantage the poor. Each of us, you and I can do more to support the underprivileged, the marginalized, the lost and the forgotten.

Yes, by virtue of our Christian Baptism, I truly believe that each of us is called to help make the dream a reality. May the Spirit of the Risen Christ lead us and guide us, as we as individuals, as a church, as a denomination, as a community, and as a nation, seek ways to end the hatred, to end the division, and truly embrace all people as members of the one family of God..

Let us pray. . .

Lead us Lord,
Lead us in your righteousness,
And help us accept each other
as brothers and sisters in your family.
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church