

“Co-workers with God”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

For fourteen years I taught the history of empire and colonization as it relates to the history of the church at the Lutheran seminary in Tokyo. These past weeks, as I have prepared for this series, something my mother always told her children has dogged me: “Leave the place in better shape than when you found it.” Though she was often talking about cleaning up after ourselves, as I have struggled with scripture and prophetic voices like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Emperor Haile Selassie, I have realized again how precious is the present moment of time. Time is not infinite. Our time as human beings will come to an end and with it our opportunities to, as Haile Selassie said in his address to the United Nations in October 1963, “become bigger than we have ever been: more courageous, greater in spirit, larger in outlook.”

The struggle to end racism and injustice in our world is a struggle about the future for all people. It is a struggle about how we, as fellow human beings of all ethnicities, will leave the world for the next generation. We owe our ultimate allegiance to God, who has given us, and our fellow human beings, the breath of life and the divine image of the Creator. Until we fearlessly look inside our hearts and grapple with our own sinfulness and the systemic sin we have inherited due to the legacy of empire and colonization, and the enslavement and oppression of people of color, this “moment” of possibility may become no more than another in a long stream of such moments.

Part of the problem is that, though we think we know “our” history, we are often unaware of many aspects of a larger historical narrative and voices that have been left out of this narrative. Part of leaving the world “in better shape than when you found it,” is related to allowing history to be written anew so future generations will be able to better understand the world they are inheriting.

In April 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a letter from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. That letter is one of the greatest letters in American history and contains both a soaring vision for the future and sharp rebuke for the silence of the white churches of his day. From his jail cell Dr. King wrote, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” Dr. King was arguing something that is quite biblical. As Moses had demanded the release of Israel from bondage in Egypt, Dr. King demanded release from captivity to injustice for black citizens in the United States. His voice changed the theological landscape of the late 20th century, so that today the themes of liberation and justice are rightly understood as an essential part of Jesus’ proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus came to point to the kingdom that stands over and above all other kingdoms, powers, and leaders in this world.

Time is not infinite, and Dr. King rejected what he called “a tragic misconception of time.” Time, King argued, will not “inevitably cure all ills.” King wrote,

Actually, time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of

good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

The prophetic legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. is that voices of the silenced and oppressed, hidden within the history of the church and the world, have a prophetic witness to make about the sinfulness of humanity and the redeeming love of God. Time is not, however, infinite. As Dr. King argued, time must be used constructively by “people of good will” as “coworkers with God” in the fight against evil systemic sin in this world. Only then will Christianity remain relevant to the struggles of oppressed people, becoming “a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.”

In 1963, Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie I also addressed the history of racism and the global legacy of colonization from the rostrum of the United Nations. Emperor Selassie argued that the goal of equality “is the very antithesis of the exploitation of one people by another, of which the pages of history, in particular those written of the African and Asian continents, speak at such length.” With prophetic voice, Haile Selassie said,

Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, until there are no longer any first-class and second-class citizens of any nation, until the colour of a man’s skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes, until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all, without regard to race – until that day, the dream of lasting peace and world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never attained.

For Selassie, who was an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, the attainment of lasting human peace was to come by looking to God: “We must put our faith in Him, that He will not desert us or permit us to destroy humanity which he created in His image.” The abandonment of systemic racism and a historical legacy of colonization must begin with a reaffirmation the divine image of the Creator God in all humankind.

As Christians we are to denounce all dehumanization, racism, and injustice in any form, because it is contrary to the will of the Creator God. Though God created humankind in God’s own image (Genesis 1:27), human rebellion against God has marred human nature to the degree that we have become unable to view all humanity as the family of God.

The biblical prophetic witness stands against the mistreatment of fellow human beings. The prophet Amos said God was “*setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel*” (7:8) to show that the vertical justice of God always points upward. Isaiah wrote, “*Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people*” (10:1-2). We know the will of God; our daily struggle is to do it.

How we emerge from our current national, and increasingly international debate about an end to systemic racism, will say a lot about how we view our role as “coworkers with God” in the fight against evil in this world. As Dr. King said, “time is neutral,” how we use the time we have been given will also say a lot to future generations about what we value as human beings. The struggle to end racism is about creating a more just world for future generations. We cannot do this work alone - as Haile Selassie said, “we must put our faith in Him, that He will not desert us.” Amen.

Week 2 midweek meditation readings:

1) (excerpts) Martin Luther King, Jr., "*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*" (16 April 1963)

History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodyness" -- then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience...

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said, "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but is it possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry? It has taken Christianity almost 2000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take

time to come to earth." All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation...

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause, and with deep moral concern, serve as a channel through which our just grievances would get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed. I have heard numerous religious leaders in the South call on their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the *law*, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice."

2) (excerpts) Haile Selassie I, "*Address to the United Nations General Assembly*" (4 October 1963)

"The goal of the equality of man which we seek is the very antithesis of the exploitation of one people by another, of which the pages of history, in particular those written of the African and Asian continents, speak at such length. Exploitation thus viewed has many faces. But whatever guise it assumes, this evil is to be shunned where it does not exist and crushed where it does. It is the sacred duty of this Organization to ensure that the dream of equality is finally realized for all men to whom it is still denied and to guarantee that exploitation does not reappear in other forms in places whence it has already been banished...

In the United States of America, the administration of President Kennedy is leading a vigorous attack to eradicate the remaining vestiges of racial discrimination from that country. We know that this conflict will be won and that right will triumph. In this time of trial, these efforts should be encouraged and assisted, and we should lend our sympathy and support to the American government today...

On the question of racial discrimination, the Addis Ababa Conference taught, to those who will learn, this further lesson: that until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, until there are no longer any first-class and second-class citizens of any nation, until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes, until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all,

without regard to race – until that day, the dream of lasting peace and world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never attained. And also, that until the ignoble and unhappy régimes that hold our brothers in Angola, in Mozambique and in South Africa in subhuman bondage have been toppled and destroyed, until bigotry and prejudice and malicious and inhuman self-interest have been replaced by understanding, tolerance and goodwill, until all Africans stand and speak as free beings, equal in the eyes of all men as they are in Heaven – until that day, the African continent will not know peace. We Africans will fight, if necessary, and we know that we shall win, as we are confident in the victory of good over evil...

This, then, is the ultimate challenge. Where are we to look for our survival, for answers to questions that have never before been posed? We must first look to Almighty God, Who has raised man above the animals and endowed him with intelligence and reason. We must put our faith in Him, that He will not desert us or permit us to destroy humanity which he created in His image. And we must look to ourselves, into the depths of our own souls. We must become something we have never been and for which our education and experience and environment have ill prepared us. We must become bigger than we have ever been: more courageous, greater in spirit, larger in outlook. We must become members of a new race, overcoming petty prejudice, owing our ultimate allegiance not to nations but to our fellow men within the human community.”

Reading recommendations:

I Have A Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America. Edited by James Echols. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *I Have A Dream: Writings & Speeches that Changed the World.* Edited by James M. Washington. New York: Harper One, 1992.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist minister, social activist, and leader in the civil rights movement from the mid-1950s until his death in 1968. The son of a Baptist minister, he graduated from Morehouse College (B.A., 1948), Crozer Theological Seminary (B.Div., 1951), and Boston University (Ph.D., 1955). He married Coretta Scott in June 1953. Dr. King was the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which promoted nonviolent resistance to achieve civil rights. He delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech on 28 August 1963 during the March on Washington. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on 4 April 1968.

Haile Selassie I (1892-1975)

Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia (1930-1974), is the only world leader to have spoken at both the League of Nations and the United Nations. On 30 June 1936, at the League of Nations, Selassie denounced Italy for its use of chemical weapons and the world for standing by and doing nothing. His speech ended with the words, “It is us today. It will be you tomorrow.” Selassie appears on the cover of *Time* magazine (3 November 1930), and was made *Time* magazine’s “Person of the Year” in 1935. Selassie worked to retain the independence of his nation, to modernize, and introduced Ethiopia’s first written constitution in July 1931. He spent 1936-41 in exile in England while Ethiopia was occupied by Italy. Under his leadership Ethiopia was a founding member of the United Nations. Selassie was a proponent for the decolonization of Africa. He was a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.