

Anti-Racism: From Egypt, to Babylon, to...?

INTRO TO READING

There are those who claimed Martin Luther King was undergoing a fundamental change of political philosophy regarding the use of non-violence, toward the end of his life. But in this reading, a speech to the Southern Christian Leadership conference, he presents a re-affirmation of non-violence.

The speech was delivered just a few months before he was killed and it was written in preparation for the 1968 Poor People's March on Washington.

This was to be a march, like the more famous 1963 civil rights march that would bring people together from all over the country. But this time the focus was on overcoming poverty and war.

From "A Testament of Hope":

I must say to each of you that I have made my decision.

I'm reminded of a story. Centuries ago King Nebuchadnezzar issued an order to all who fell under his domain. That order was that at the sound of the trumpet everyone was to bow before the golden image. The refusal to bow would mean that one would be thrown into the fiery furnace.

There were three young men who heard the order. They knew of the injunction, but something deep within them told them that they had to violate the injunction and

practice civil disobedience. They stood before the king and said: "We know that the God that we worship is able to deliver us . . . but if not, we will not bow.

We know that the power that we have experienced and read about in nature is able to deliver us. We know that the force who has the power to throw up the gigantic mountains, kissing the skies as if to bathe their peaks in the lofty blue, the power to throw out the stars to bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity, also has the power to deliver us; but if not, we will not bow."

They were saying that they had discovered something so dear, so precious and so great that they were going to live with it. They had come to say that they were going to do what conscience told them was right. They discovered that ultimately a great faith is not a bargaining faith. It is never an "if" faith, but it is a "though" faith. It doesn't say, if you do this for me, God, if you do this on that point and that on the other point, then I will serve you; but it goes on to say, "Though he slay me, yet I will trust him." And the great experiences of life are "though" experiences. Marriage is never a bargaining experience, it's a "though" experience.

I've decided that, on this question of non-violence, I'm going to stand by it. I'm going to love because it's just lovely to love. I'm going to be non-violent because I believe it is the answer to mankind's problems. I'm not going to bargain with reality, but I'm going to stand by non-violence in spite of.

And so I say to you that I've taken a vow—I, Martin Luther King, take thee, Non-violence, to be my wedded wife, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer—this

isn't a bargaining experience—for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. I'm going on in the faith and with that determination.

I believe if we maintain faith and then escalate our actions we will be able to go to Washington and we will be able to create vibrant movement throughout the cities of our country. And by the thousands we will move, and many will wonder where we are coming from, and our only answer will be that we are coming up out of great trials and tribulations. Some of us will come from Mississippi, some of us will come from Alabama, some from Chicago, some from Detroit, some from Cleveland, but we will all be coming from the same condition.

We will be seeking a city whose builder and maker is God. And if we will do this, we will be able to turn this nation upside down and right side up, and we may just be able to speed up the day when men everywhere will be able to cry out that we are children of God, made in his image. This will be a glorious day; at that moment the morning stars will sing together, and the souls of God will shout for joy!

SERMON

When I was thirteen, I begged my parents to allow me to go with them on the 1968 Poor People's March on Washington. They gave in, and let me, and one of my little brothers, go. It was the march that marked the launch of Martin Luther King's Poor People's campaign, a campaign to unite the poor across the racial spectrum. The main march was planned for June of 1968, and in April of 1968 Martin Luther King was

assassinated. The march went on anyway. My family traveled to D.C. on Solidarity Day, a day when middle class Americans were invited to come as allies of “the poor.”

I remember that it was strange being in Washington DC that day. I felt a mix of energies, outside of me, and within me. Grief and power. Determination and, maybe I projected this, hopelessness. Everyone must have been in a state of shock. But even though King was not there his vision had brought together hundreds of thousands of poor and middle class Americans, of all races, and religions, to Washington to speak out both on issues of war and peace and poverty and prosperity.

I particularly see in memory the procession of people who came by cart and horse from southern Appalachia, a place in which I would later live, and witness the legacy of poverty in the lives of people to whom I taught adult basic education and job readiness skills through a government program. I remember visiting people my Dad knew who were camping out in Resurrection City, an encampment of people in tents, right on the Mall. Until they were forcibly removed. I remember Aretha Franklin singing and the crowd being so thick around her I couldn't get close enough to see her. But I sure could hear that incredible voice.

We had all come to Washington, five years after the more famous 1963 civil rights march (which my parents also attended), to defy not only the Bull Connors of the world, but Babylon itself. I didn't know that then. I don't know if the adults who were there saw it that way then, but that's how I'm seeing it now. Now that I have a theological education.

Let me explain what I mean by Babylon. Babylon was a real place, about 50 miles south of today's Baghdad. And, it was a place of great wealth and grandeur. It was kind of the Madison Avenue, you might say, of the ancient world: A place of much gold and bling. And as the story tells us, at its head was king Nebuchadnezzar. A king who forced his subjects to literally bow down to the gold which symbolized his values, the values of his kingdom.

The three men Abednego, Shadrach and Meshach, who defied Nebuchadnezzar, were not, as I had first assumed hearing the story, of an oppressed group. These three men were wealthy and well educated. They were brought to Babylon because of their status, to serve the King. They had in fact been given power over parts of the kingdom. So they were people who stood to lose their wealth by going against the status quo, indeed even to lose their lives. Yet, resist they did, simply by refusing to bow down to an idol and a king.

Babylon is written about as a symbol of a place that pulls people away from their deepest spiritual values and into a primary relationship with material wealth and power. So when these men resisted, it's possible they were recommitting to their own deepest values. Despite their gifts of wealth and power they seemed, when put to the ultimate test, to be rejecting subservience to wealth and materialism.

Dr. King knew the Bible well. He knew the symbols, he knew the practice of exegesis, which means "to draw forth meaning from the text." So when he used this story he was not only committing to an exegetical method, he was symbolically evoking a new direction. King is often pictured as a Moses who parted the waters and led the people

through. Water in the Bible is often a symbol of the mind. King parted the mindset, he lifted people through the segregationist mindset and over to the other side.

And then in that new movement, in 1968, only five years after the first March on Washington, his plan was to part the mindset again, by leading a resistance to the country's enslavement to both materialism, and militarism.

I don't think most of the middle class adults there that Solidarity Day, in 1968, were resisting Babylon. I think that might be the hardest mindset to part, communally, and individually. I think most people there were fighting against injustice certainly, but most probably had equally strong hopes of getting, or keeping, their piece of the pie. We wanted everyone to have a piece of the pie, but what were we willing to sacrifice?

I don't think Martin Luther King led us there that day so everyone could one day have an equal opportunity to bow down to the gold idol. I've been thinking about what King must have had to give up, through his staying power, and what he was saying in his commitment to non-violence.

There was this quite obvious hint in his speech to the SCLC. Note which marriage vow he emphasized twice.

*"And so I say to you that I've taken a vow—I, Martin Luther King, take thee, non-violence, to be my wedded wife, for better or for worse, **for richer or for poorer—this isn't a bargaining experience—for richer or for poorer**"*

For richer or for poorer was the one he emphasized.

Interesting that he interrupts the sentence in that place and makes his central point: **"This isn't a bargaining experience."**

When I read that section I thought, this man was willing to do what few of us are. He said: This is a “though” faith. An *even though* faith.

Even though it meant he never got to just kick back and simply enjoy “the good life.” Even though his work would not bring him riches. Even though he knew that ultimately his marriage to non-violence might result in violence against himself, he would remain faithful to a deeper calling.

To be married both to non-violence and to make that vow, *for richer or poorer*, means to resist the siren call of materialism on a very deep level. That was so un-American of him. It meant putting the deep spiritual calling *first*.

If King had lived out a full life perhaps he would have eventually known material wealth from his writings; but if he had stayed with his calling, and I think he would have, and he reaffirmed the decision to do that just before he died, even then, even if he had accumulated some wealth, it would not have been a bowing down to Babylon. It would have been more like an accident, or a gift, not his chief aim.

It is not wealth *per se* that that makes Babylon, Babylon. It is that wealth and profit are so often the driver in our lives. Profit becomes God. Martin Luther King put God first, though...even though... it meant for poorer and not for richer. Even though it often meant for worse, not better.

Even though Martin Luther King never lost sight of the outlines of racism and was cutting in his analysis,

even though he clearly recognized and named the retreat of white liberals after segregation had been overcome,

even though he was clearly discouraged and depressed at times,
even though he was accused of being an Uncle Tom,
even though it was already becoming passé to be nonviolent by 1965,
even though it was becoming passé to work together with whites,,
Even though...and even *through* all of this...he did not retreat from God, from his
faith.

Not only that, with all that was going against him, with everyone saying your time is over, King didn't back down. Not only that, he took his vision a step further. He was making an end run around racial division in 1968 when he planned that March on Washington. At a time when cities were burning, and whites were retreating in vast numbers to the suburbs, Martin Luther King used his people's former slavery, his own bondage as a Black American, his personal experience of rage and oppression, to *widen* his vision, to lead the way out, for all of us, not just his own people. He knew that we *all* occupy the nightmare.

King's dream, like all the most powerful visionary dreams, when you think about it, was nothing new. It's just a hard one to walk. That's the enduring vision: Someone staying with it, recommitting, renewing their vow even though...even though... That's the vision. He was lifting up a way of being, that is as old as those stars God flung up in the sky.

What he did was tell, and live, the vision in a fresh new way. A core truth re-emerged with the life and work and writings of Dr. King, that if we are to change this

world, we have to be married to peace, to non-violence. Any less of a commitment is a bargain with the very powers we say we resist.

At the end of that speech King said: *“We will be seeking a city whose builder and maker is God.”*

A city in Biblical symbolism is often a higher consciousness, usually a higher collective consciousness. We live in Babylon, all of us white, black, Asian, Hispanic, whether we want to or not. We are all inescapably intertwined. Babylon is the materialistic mindset, the profit first mindset. What an opportunity we have to part the waters should we choose to change that mindset, to live by a different mindset. Individually and collectively.

In the story of the fiery furnace there is actually a fourth man King didn't talk about in his speech to the SCLC. King Nebuchadnezzar, after he had thrown the three well educated, wealthy men into the furnace, looked in and saw a fourth figure. He recognized that fourth man as the son of God. And so even Nebuchadnezzar was awed and brought the men out, and they were unscathed.

I wonder if King had that fourth man hovering in his consciousness in his speech. I wonder if that fourth man stands for the vision he was forming, as those mules and wagons were wending their way toward Washington from Appalachia. They represented a vision of enough people living by the spiritual gold standard, enough people refusing to bow down to a false idol, even though it meant sacrifice. In that vision, a new spirit, represented by that fourth man, becomes manifest among us.

Martin Luther King may not have gotten out of the fiery furnace alive, but he had that presence of the fourth man with him, and within him.

We were not in any way ready, as a society, in 1968, to escape from Babylon. Are we now? In a sense, it had/has only been a few years since the sons and daughters of slaves had escaped from Egypt. And it had only been months since the leader of the exodus was assassinated.

We're not out of Babylon now; but *even though* that is true, we can make our own marriage vows for the long haul, the long view, on the way to a wholly, radically different standard. King left us at a cusp of consciousness, pointing the way out.

That call to vision and action, in 1968, was diverted after his death. The middle class people who were called to Washington to resist Babylon were, as I remember it, wandering lost, and in a daze, grieving our lost leader. We were not yet understanding the call, perhaps. And Martin Luther King's call to defy Babylon has not found a full-throated response, not yet.

May we hear the call. Even though ...