

Sermon January 23 2022 Brent MLK

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 30:4-5:

<sup>4</sup>Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. <sup>5</sup>For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Galatians 3:28:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Amos 5:24:

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Isaiah 40:4-5:

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

READING FROM OUR TIMES:

Excerpts from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

The "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was written in longhand on April 16, 1963. Confined to his cell for participation in non-violent demonstrations against segregation, Dr. King was responding to a public statement of concern and caution issued by eight white religious leaders of the South. Our excerpts today come from this 8-page letter. We will post a link to the entire letter on our church website for folks to read it in more detail. Rev. King addresses why he was in Birmingham this way:

"I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

"Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

“You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with the effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white power structure left the Negro community with no other alternative.”

King finishes his letter in this way: “If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

“I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman, and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away, and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities. And in some not too distant tomorrow, the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

“Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.”

To find a link to the Letter from a Birmingham Jail, click [here](#).

SERMON: “Strength” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Growing up in Chicago, there was one building that loomed large, that soared high in our collective understanding and imagination. Maybe it was because we were tired in Chicago of being called the second city. Maybe it was because at the time our sports teams were lucky if they even caught a glimpse of second place. But the Sears Tower, with its iconic black glass and double antennas, framing one end of the majestic skyline of the city, soared right past number two to become the number one tallest building in the whole world. For 26 years, it was the tallest building in the world. Its top floor, by the way, is still the highest floor in North America.

But part of what makes the Sears Tower so special is it wasn’t built just to impress. The project started off as a simple way of building headquarters, a 30-story building for the then Sears, Roebuck & Company. But ideas started festering about how to use this building to create something better – better for the company, better for the city, better for the whole world. They picked a plot of land in a part of Chicago that was languishing. But it was a part that was adjacent to the railways that built Chicago, right off those interstates that brought throngs of cars into the city. It was built in a place to offer help to a sagging real estate market that was imploding all around it. Its goal not just to house a single company, but to revitalize a part of the larger city, built to imagine a better future. Those spires on top not just to reach higher, but to house radio and TV broadcasting systems, so that everyone in Chicago would get a good signal.

Why it was built was important, but more so for our story today is *how* it was built. It turns out that the higher you build, the greater the challenge of wind. Makes sense, right? Architects have

gotten around that by developing internal tube systems and external steel skeletons. All you have to do is look at the Hancock Building in Chicago to see that example of those X's on the outside. They both had been long at play, but both had serious internal and external limitations. And so when this idea for something new and revolutionary came, architect Bruce Graham and structural engineer Fazlur Khan didn't abandon those core principles. Instead they turned to them with imaginative minds.

What they discovered is what rings through King's theology and the part of the letter that Jon Geldert just read. By creating nine different tubes in that tower, and bundling them all together, those tubes ended up acting as a single unit, each of them adding strength to the other, all of them helping the building to soar higher and higher. The skeleton moved from outside to inside to allow more light, more flexibility of space, and a vastly different exterior, too. But more than that, by staggering the height of the tubes, the forces of the wind had less to attack, and slid off more easily. Strength, resilience. The Sears Tower (no, as a Chicagoan, I will not call it the Willis Tower) remains a beacon and inspiration of strength in a city long known for broad shoulders. In that building we see learning from the past. We see meeting the needs and calling of the moment and most especially the underserved. And also inspiring generations to come. Strength, perseverance and change.

All of it in the Sears Tower -- the why, the how, and the enduring strength -- to me echo the legacy of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The *why* of King's actions was clear: prejudice, discrimination, violence, lynchings, economic turmoil, and many other betrayals, of both the American Dream as well as God's calling for our lives, were embarrassingly on display everywhere.

King was jailed in Birmingham for peacefully protesting. My son Jake, when I told him this morning that King had been jailed, couldn't believe it. It was an interesting concept to imagine why a good person would end up in jail. One of my mentors, Jim Antal, once commented to me at the close of his ministry: "You know, if there's one thing about my ministry I'd do over again, I would have gotten arrested a whole lot more."

So King was in jail in Birmingham for peacefully protesting. He was protesting repeated broken promises and betrayals. Promises by city leaders to end discriminatory practices in stores. And repeated betrayal of dignity through laws and policies and practices that weren't just designed to discriminate, but to demean. Created not to serve any good, but policies designed to hurt and dehumanize.

In that letter that Jon read, King proclaimed the need for strength, saying: "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed." Later in the letter he also points out the notion of endurance and perseverance, saying: "We have waited for 340 years for our Constitutional and God-given rights." And then, get this: "And yet we still creep forward at horse and buggy pace toward even gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter." And then, though, also throughout the letter is a mantra of King's which we would do well to remember, that change is inevitable, writing: "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever."

So King engaged the headwinds of his time like those architects in Chicago did. Not throwing out truth from ancient times, but rather turning to it and building upon it. You have heard Jon read that King turned to prophets and apostles. In his “I Have a Dream” speech, he turned to scripture of all kinds. He named luminaries ancient and contemporary. He embraced all of it together as one, building a tube system, a network that relied on one another. Not just because of the enormity of the moment, but also because King knew that God’s people have been there before. And King knew of the long arc of justice, not just in his mind by the stories, or by what he’d heard, but from his own experience. King knew that to turn and to wrap all of these tubes -- all of these things -- together, that there was strength there, yes, to inspire the throngs that followed him. Yes, to challenge white supremacists and extremists.

But there’s a very sobering note to the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Do you know who he was perhaps most concerned with? In the letter, he didn’t lament too much the Klan or supremacists or extremists, because he knew how to deal with them. He lamented white people who go to church. He said far too often, we seek the serenity of sanctuary. Far too often, we come from our mildly disruptive lives to seek peace and calm. We are a people, King writes, who like a steady, rather than a rocking, boat. But remember, Jesus came to those disciples only when the boat was rocking. People, King wrote, who prefer order to justice, who prefer negative peace or the absence of tension to positive peace or the presence of justice.

And let me just remind you of something for a moment here. This letter is eight pages single spaced. Remember that King wrote this letter in a jail cell where he had nothing but pen and paper. What he wrote didn’t emerge from book or web or research. It emerged from what he knew. But he knew this. He knew that radical strength of tying things together, that by bundling testimony and truth, they support each other, they strengthen each other, they oppose forces of resistance. The Sears Tower still stands, because even if one tube might be weakened, the other eight are there to lift it up.

I lament that today we live in a culture and a media environment where it is so common to challenge an idea or an ideal by simply a “what about” statement. And by that I mean that in the midst of aiming for something big and real and good, somebody says, well, what about this one particular example of where something went wrong? It is designed to get the good people like you and me to just be comfortable with what we have and to oppose doing what the letter Jon read said, which is to get up and get moving. To settle for what we have found works, even if it only kind of works, and even if it only works for us.

If you read through all eight pages of King’s letter, you will hear him articulate his actions and what he’s doing in the traditions of prophets of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. He also lists it in the name of the apostle Paul from the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. He will turn to church fathers like Augustine and Aquinas. He will turn to his own namesake, Martin Luther of the Reformation. He look at Abraham Lincoln in the Civil War. He will point to modern contemporary theologians like Tillich. And of course, do I need to remind you of who else he wrote about in the letter that the people of his time called radical and extremist and wanted nothing to do with – remember that name Jesus, the extremist of love? Oh yeah, King pointed to him, too. He does it painstakingly, to bring them all together, those pillars of strength, those architectural tubes, because together they are stronger. You might argue with any one of them. You might say, well, what about what

Tillich had to say here? Or what about what Paul had to say there? Try doing it with that whole list, and your hot air will blow right off it, like the wind off the Sears Tower.

And then, in his “I Have a Dream” speech, I love how he didn’t settle for a single piece of scripture, or even a certain kind of scripture. But he drew scripture from throughout the Bible. He drew on the beauty of the poetry of the Psalms for endurance: joy will come in the morning, King stated, even though we’re in the middle of a nightmare right now. Where did King get the idea of citing a psalm in the midst of difficulty? Well, it’s been happening for thousands of years, and most notably it’s where Jesus turned on the cross. He too cited a psalm.

And then that beautiful mosaic in Galatians. Not some new concept that wouldn’t we be much better all together, but rather at the root of Paul’s teaching. Not just in Galatians, by the way, but I dare you to try to find one letter of Paul’s that doesn’t talk about it.

He rooted his speech in the call of Amos, which, by the way, that justice rolling down, that was aimed at Israel itself, who had given up their way of treating each other justly for greed.

And then the beautiful piece from Isaiah. Chapter 40 was the time when the people were beginning to have hope of coming home from the Exile. A new dawn was coming. And King wanted to make sure that the people now were aware of it just like they were then.

People knew that any one of those clergy he was writing to could cherry pick another scripture and say “what about?” But you know what, you put the whole spirit of the Bible together, and something clear begins to emerge, doesn’t it?

King used his vast knowledge of faith and history to endure against the headwinds of his time. But through all of his oratory and his writing, he invited us beyond just adopting his answers, to see the strength of his approach to pursuing goodness and justice.

The Sears Tower ceased being the tallest building some time ago. And yet, the principles of its construction are what is credited with the rise in new buildings that defy imagination. The current record holder, which my son Jake could tell you, is the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, designed by the same folks and the same company who dared to dream of the Sears Tower. But beyond building higher, the Sears Tower’s legacy is also for those who might imagine where to build a building and who it could serve to make communities better.

Here’s what I know. King’s legacy is not just in what he did, although what he did is amazing, but in how he can teach us to do it, too. Could you not help but be convicted by what Jon read? So much of what King was writing is a call for action, a call to get moving, a call to not let enough be enough. And what King would tell us is to lean on the strength of those who have gone before, to not just stand with them but to stand on their shoulders for a better view.

What King would show us by his example in the Birmingham jail is to not just have a verse or two of scripture ready to call favorite, but that you can weave it all together in a web so beautiful that it is both full of strength and protection.

And just in case you were hoping to come here this morning to be inspired by what people are called to in other places, I'm sorry to tell you that in his letter from the Birmingham jail, King called on people who have sat in this very church. Oh, by name. In fact, he referenced and quoted Reinhold Niebuhr, who reminded us that when we gather together the ability to remain moral is all the more challenging, and yet we must do it. Niti, I wonder if Reinhold Niebuhr ever sat exactly where you're sitting right now? Because he went to this church for years. Ted, maybe Niebuhr sat where you are. Jane, maybe he was back there. Ed, maybe he was sitting right here. But what King would say is that all of you, no matter your name, have to stand up like Niebuhr did, for justice anywhere. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

The people that King is most concerned about are you and me. I think because he knows of our tendency to seek simplicity. But even more, because I think he knows of your great strength of heart. And he knows that if we get everyone moving together, bundled, there is no wind that can knock us down.

I'm humbled to even try to talk about what King writes about. And yet what I do know, and what I think I can do, is help all of us do what King asked us to do. For the challenges he raised may even be greater today.

Amen.