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A Vision of Freedom: MLK Jr. Day
Habakkuk 2:1-3 & Luke 4:14-21

Do you wonder sometimes...Have we really made any progress on racial justice, on understanding white privilege, in understanding race?

I say this as a white person who listens to but does not experience the challenges my brothers and sisters of color live out day to day. The uncalled for arrests on suspicious behavior, being trailed in retail stores, getting left off the hiring list despite excellent qualifications.

The last couple years it sometimes seems like the veneer of tolerance has been peeled back to expose the ugliness of racism underneath.

Then there was an experiment a few years back done by ABC news with actors portraying Hispanic day workers struggling to order a sandwich in broken English at a neighborhood deli with the clerk, also an actor, shouting racial slurs at them. The experiment found that sixty percent of the other customers who came upon the scene just left, even when those posing as workers asked for assistance. Ten percent joined the clerk in yelling slurs at the workers, with the remaining 30% tried to help, telling the clerk they would boycott the store or yelling back.

Thirty percent...Sigh...

Pastor William R. Long writes, "The anguish of historical living, or living in time, is that each one of us is endowed with a sense of justice and fairness but often we must live with and face so much injustice that seems unchangeable or beyond our ability to change."

And so here we are, celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. day, again, taking a hard look at what this nation, this community, we ourselves, have accomplished and looking again at how much further we have to go.

Will we ever arrive at true freedom, "free at last, free at last?"

Today's text from Habakkuk is from the African American Lectionary a project launched in December 2007 launched by The African American Pulpit Journal and the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University and "designed to create new national conversations concerning the use of Scripture in worship and preaching."

Habakkuk's words speak to communities in waiting, communities that live amidst the struggle and pain of oppression and long awaited justice. In Habakkuk's time the Israelites were staring their own destruction in the face. The Babylonians were a world power, crushing nations on every side. It was just a matter of time before they came. One could stand at the watchtower and wait, but disaster was coming. When the armies did come, they destroyed Israel, laid waste to the Temple, carted the educated off into exile, and left a broken population.

Freedom seemed an impossible goal, an impossible wait. And God seemed absent. The book of Habakkuk, only three chapters long, truly a minor prophet, is in great part Habakkuk's complaint against God: where have you been?! The people suffer and you do not care.

In response God says, "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."

So what is our vision for racial justice and true freedom in this country, here at Pilgrim church? Can you name it or frame it? Can we as a congregation?

Imagine for a moment we are granted a billboard, one with great visibility here in the Boston Metro area, and we get to decide what it says, our vision of racial justice. You are able, as Habakkuk says, to write the vision, make it plain so a runner, (or a commuter,) can read it. What does it say?.... (silence)

If I were writing with my son in mind, my son who is not white, and will one day soon know the social penalty for not being white in this nation, I might write... "brown is beautiful and so much more."

As a community of faith here in Lexington with its rapid demographic shift over the past 10 years, where I hear comments out a Rancatore's that "the library has been taken over by them in their study groups," or out to a quiet dinner by myself at restaurant on the main drag before a church meeting when a loud man at the bar says, "yeah, they'll want to take down the minuteman and put up Mao one of these days."

Where is the vision? Where is the promise of true freedom, an end to racism?

In our gospel reading "Jesus marches into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

"And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"

If not careful, we might think, ok, Jesus has shown up and all that stuff will be done. Great. We're really getting it done now. But that is not what Jesus says. He says I am here, I've shown up to speak the good news, now let's get working on this stuff. Jesus lifts up the vision—the good news-- in a dramatic way and says, ok, are you with me? If so, let's go.

Jesus speaks of what he is called to do and says it is fulfilled in your hearing.

Has this vision been accomplished? No, it hasn't. We this morning hear it. Will it be fulfilled in our hearing?

Poverty still exists, captives still await freedom, there is oppression. Racial injustice is still a huge problem.

But Jesus wasn't saying that the tasks had been fulfilled but instead that God was moving in world, that the vision of a leader had been fulfilled. That's a big difference. Are we with Jesus on this? If so, let's go.

Martin Luther King Jr. started preaching and teaching in the 50's. He talked about freedom. He protested injustice. He asked people to join him in the struggle for equality. And they did. And the civil rights movement strengthened. And change happened. And then he was murdered.

Had King's vision been accomplished? No, it hadn't.
Has King's vision been accomplished? No, it hasn't.

But Lewis Baldwin, a professor at Vanderbilt writes, "like the prophets, King experienced one failure after another, was often unpopular and castigated, and died before accomplishing his goals, but he was sustained by the conviction that though he was unsuccessful at times, the God of history would not ultimately fail. (Lewis Baldwin, Vanderbilt University, theafricanamericanlectionary.org)

We are not there, but our faith tells us we are not there YET. The day is coming.

Have you seen the new House of Representatives? I'm not talking about Republicans or Democrats or Independents or Socialist. I'm asking have you SEEN them? The New York Times did a photo spread last week on the women of the 116th Congress. If we had a projector in here I would put them up for you. The photos are powerful, intimate, and wildly diverse. I scrolled down and down the page and down some more. So many women. So many women of color.

Deb Haaland, Native woman from New Mexico squarely facing the camera. Yvette Clark, black woman from NY, looking distinguished in a formal pose framed by a gold curtain in a nod to Dwight Eisenhower's formal portrait.. Tammy Duckworth, a wheelchair user with 2 prosthetic legs from her time being shot down as a helicopter pilot, seeming looking into the distance. Ilhan Omar, in a stunning closeup with her hijab both visible and not defining the shot. Federica Wilson, Latina from Florida in a turquoise cowboy hat representing her heritage. Bonnie Watson Coleman, boldly bald. Kim Schier fixing her teenage son's tie. Rosa Delauro, 75 years old sporting purple striped hair. Judy Chu. Jennifer Gonzales-Colon.

I dare you to scroll through and not see change blossoming forth. Change that has come incrementally election by election, protest by protest, year by year. Do women make up 50% of Congress? No. Are all people represented? No. We are not there, what I mean is, we are not there YET.

So what are we to do? I think the tasks for honoring Martin Luther King Jr Day are three fold:

One: We celebrate the coming of prophets and teachers who write the vision plainly, in large letters, so that we can see it. Thank you, Dr. King, for the vision.

Two: We look at how far we have come, the victories, however small, the steps forward.

Three: We take a deep breath and commit to keeping on going, to fix the vision once more upon our minds and follow knowing that we will not see its fulfillment. Knowing as Habakkuk says, "there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."

King said "I may not get there with you," and he didn't. Moses never made it to the promised land either. We may not get there, in fact, we probably won't.

But are you willing to continue walking forward, speaking out, marching, singing, working, praying, fighting, anyway? Are you willing to continue pushing through the wilderness headed for the Promised Land?

The reality is that we are racist people living in a racist society. Some of us benefit from white privilege. All of us know of injustice. Some of us experience the violence of racism head on.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was murdered in El Salvador for standing up for the poor notes: "This is the mission entrusted to the church, and it is a hard mission, to uproot sins for history, to uproot sins from the political order, to uproot sins from the economy, to uproot wherever they are. What a hard task!...No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores twitches when someone has the courage to touch it and say, you have to treat that. You have to get rid of that."

But we have a vision. And we are to write the vision. Make it plain. In large letters. We state it, frame it, write it large.

I heard an interview on NPR with Rev. Samuel "Billie" Kyles who was on the balcony in Memphis with Martin Luther King Jr the day he was shot. Rev. Kyles was saying, "I hear some people say, well, you know it's bad now. It's worse now than it was then. I said the only reason you can say that is you were not here then. It is not worse now than it was then. It is - we've made tremendous progress." The host then asked what Kyles would be preaching on today.

He replied, "I'll be talking about knocking holes in the darkness. It is said that Robert Louis Stevenson was a man who never enjoyed good health. He spent a lot of time in his room even as a child. He was always looking out the window. His nurse asked him one day, Robert, what are you doing? He said, I'm watching that old man knock holes in the darkness. She said, what are you talking about?

"He would climb up the ladder and light the light, come down, move the ladder to the next pole, climb up, come down, move the ladder. And everywhere he would light a light it appeared to him with his little quick mind that a hole was being knocked in the darkness.

"And so I'm suggesting that those of us who have the strength and the ability, we should be knocking holes in the darkness. So, Martin Luther King came to Memphis - it was a dark place to come, but he came and he came knocking holes in the darkness." (Weekend Edition Sunday, January 17, 2010)

so ,my friends, get out there and knock some holes in the darkness. Show up for MLK Day tomorrow. Talk about racism with your friends and your children and your more difficult relatives.

Do not let the stray racist remark float by in the midst of genteel conversation over lunch or book club or the office lunchroom.

Think about what it might mean here, at Pilgrim, to be the place where the vision seen by Habbakkuk, seen by Jesus, seen by King takes root and flowers.

"Write the vision. Make it plain so that a runner can see it. For there is still a vision...it speaks of the end, and does not lie."

Amen.