

“A Knock at Midnight”

Isaiah 49:1-7, I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 2, January 19, 2020, dedicated to Harrison Lee Hillyard on his baptismal day, to the memory of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as we remember his birthday January 15, 1929, to Congressman John Lewis as he battles pancreatic cancer and always to the glory of God!

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In the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s book, *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963, pp. 42-50) you can find the printed version of a sermon he gave on June 11, 1967 at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Cincinnati. The sermon is entitled: "A Knock at Midnight." I first heard this in a recording produced by Creed Records many years ago. This sermon inspired both my title and some reflections on the midnight hour we face here and now.

Audio source: (Creed Records, Nashboro Record Company, 1970, 1980).

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.
Amen.*

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You discover who you really are and whose you really are at midnight. It is that hour in our lives when sleep could have and should have settled in on us, but it hasn't. A new day is breaking but the old day is still holding us in its grip. Some of us are asleep before midnight and midnight is the time we awaken from our sleep – sitting up with night terrors or distress. It is like there is a knock at midnight. When the knock comes, we discover who we really are.

Each autumn in our BREAD house meetings, we ask, *“what wakes you up in the middle of the night?”* For David and Brittany, it may be Harrison. For the people in the circle of sharing with BREAD I have heard so many things. I have heard, *“the climate crisis, the political malaise of our time, my daughter is homeless, my son is mentally ill, my wife is battling cancer, my husband is suffering from dementia, we can't pay our bills, the opioid crisis has touched our family, there are gunshots in my neighborhood and wondering if another young person has died.”* I have heard all these stories and more. We can't sleep. We shake in fear. We go down on our knees in prayer. We sit in the dark and wonder *“Why my son? Why my daughter? Why my loved one? Why me? Why now? Why Lord? Why?”*

A knock at midnight awakes our soul, our heart, our mind, our memories, our fears, our longings.

What knock at midnight has awakened you? In the sermon he gave in Cincinnati only ten months before he was assassinated, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led with a reading from Luke 11:5-6, RSV:

Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"?

From this text, Dr. King begins his sermon, *"It is midnight in the parable; it is also midnight in our world, and the darkness is so deep that we can hardly see which way to turn."* Dr. King goes on to say it's midnight in our social order, midnight in our internal individual lives, and midnight in the moral order. Brilliantly, he paints a picture of the struggles in our culture and society, each of our individual lives and in the moral disorder of our times. It is his particular description of the moral order which parallels 2020 so clearly (after 53 years) it is haunting. It is also why I believe he is the finest preacher in American history, maybe the finest preacher ever. He says:

It is also midnight within the moral order. At midnight colors lose their distinctiveness and become a sullen shade of grey. Moral principles have lost their distinctiveness. For modern man, absolute right and wrong are a matter of what the majority is doing. Right and wrong are relative to likes and dislikes and the customs of a particular community. We have unconsciously applied Einstein's theory of relativity, which properly described the physical universe, to the moral and ethical realm.

Midnight is the hour when men desperately seek to obey the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not get caught." According to the ethic of midnight, the cardinal sin is to be caught and the cardinal virtue is to get by. It is all right to lie, but one must lie with real finesse. It is all right to steal, if one is so dignified that, if caught, the charge becomes embezzlement, not robbery. It is permissible even to hate, if one so dresses his hating in the garments of love that hating appears to be loving. The Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest has been substituted by a philosophy of the survival of the slickest. This mentality has brought a tragic breakdown of moral standards, and the midnight of moral degeneration deepens.

It is exactly at the point of devolution into such degradation that the knock at midnight comes. And it comes on the doors of our churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, our houses of prayer and our homes. It comes on the door of our hearts, too.

In the parable in Luke, the traveler asks for three loaves of bread. Dr. King speaks of the three loaves of bread as faith, hope and love.

The traveler needs the bread of faith. People have lost faith – faith in God, faith in humanity, and faith in a future. They are knocking at our doors with a need to believe again – or maybe for the first time in their lives.

The traveler is also seeking the bread of hope. We all experience a deep longing for the bread of hope. King talks about worshipping at the shrine of inevitable progress. Every new scientific achievement and discovery lifts us to higher levels of perfection. We soon come to see that, along with progress,

comes the revealed selfishness and corruption of humanity thus illustrating with frightening clarity the truth of Lord Acton's dictum, "*Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*"

Dr. King continues: "*This awful discovery led to one of the most colossal breakdowns of optimism in history. For so many people, young and old, the light of hope went out, and they roamed wearily in the dark chambers of pessimism. Many concluded that life has no meaning. Some agreed with the philosopher Schopenhauer that life is an endless pain with a painful end, and that life is a tragicomedy played over and over again with only slight changes in costume and scenery. Others cried out with Shakespeare's Macbeth that life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*

But even in the inevitable moments when all seems hopeless, men know that without hope they cannot really live, and in agonizing desperation they cry for the bread of hope."

The third loaf the traveler seeks is our deep longing for the bread of love. Everybody wishes to love and be loved. The person who feels that he or she is not loved feels that they do not count for much at all. Much has happened in the modern world to make people feel that they do not belong. Living in a world which has become oppressively impersonal, many of us have come to feel that we are little more than numbers. We cry out not to be simply a number in a system, a cog in a machine. Humanity is desperately searching for the bread of love.

When the traveler in the parable knocked on his friend's door and asked for the three loaves of bread, he received the impatient retort, *"Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything."* How often have men and women experienced a similar disappointment when at midnight they knock on the door of the church – or any door in need? How often have we let them down and leave them outside – hungry and cold?

This kind of behavior causes people to believe the church actively participates in baking the bread of injustice and racial segregation instead of baking the bread of peace and justice. What the traveler needs is the bread of economic justice and equality but the knock at midnight is not welcomed.

Is it any wonder that people, seeing the church this way, stop knocking? When they get turned away and turned off, their hunger unfulfilled, they go elsewhere to find food for the journey. They can give up all together.

However, the man in this parable is unrelenting. He is persistent. He knocks again, and again, and again on his friend's door. Why does he do this? Because he knows that the bread of life is inside – a lot like the ones who knock on our door – they know that Christ is alive on the other side. The traveler knows that despite all the church's failings, we still have the yeast, the dough, the stuff of life, we still have capacity and we follow God who will bring new life, who will bring faith, who will bring hope, who will deliver love. The traveler knows on the other side of the

door he will meet Christ and he believes in the truth of the gospel that Christ will “RISE AGAIN!” The Traveler knows that Christ Rises but he also knows that BREAD RISES, too.

God has the power to bring good out of evil. God has the power to forgive our human failings and help us stand up again and step forward in new and hopeful ways. God answers the knock at midnight, in spite of our stumbling around in the dark, God RISES and God will not abandon us.

At midnight we turn the corner to a dawn that will soon break upon us. And dawn has always been, in Dr. King’s words, “*the growing edge of hope that kept the slaves faithful amid the most barren and tragic circumstances.*” Dawn comes after a night of sleepless searching. This is our hope.

Dr. King concludes “A Knock at Midnight” with these words:

‘Faith in the dawn arises from the faith that God is good and just. When one believes this, he knows that the contradictions of life are neither final nor ultimate. He can walk through the dark night with the radiant conviction that all things work together for good for those that love God. Even the most starless midnight may herald the dawn of some great fulfillment.

The dawn will come. Disappointment, sorrow, and despair are born at midnight, but morning follows. “Weeping may endure for a night,” says the Psalmist, “but joy cometh in the morning.” This faith adjourns the assemblies of hopelessness and brings new light into the dark chambers of pessimism.” With these words, Dr. King closes his sermon.

Whatever we are facing in what appears to be our midnight, dawn is not far off. Whatever we feel is insurmountable, when we knock, the door will ultimately be opened to us.

In the name of God, with our faith in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we shall overcome. This is the promise of the Gospel. We shall overcome. Amen.