

“Why We Can’t Wait”

Epiphany 2

I Samuel 3:1-10; I Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

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January 14, 2018

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 14, 2018, Epiphany 2, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday weekend, dedicated to Dr. King and all the men, women and children who sacrificed their lives for the cause of racial and economic justice in the USA and always to the glory of God!

“Why We Can’t Wait”

I Samuel 3:1-10; I Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

The call stories in Samuel and John are powerful scriptural reminders of God’s claim on each of our lives as prophets and disciples. God is calling each of us to stand up, speak out, and wait no longer to love and serve God in these times and this place. Hold these stories and live into them. But, today, I invite you to hear the voice of another prophet, in another time closer to ours calling us deeper into our own calling to be faithful prophets and disciples in this land, in this nation at this time.

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

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Fifty-five years ago, as the Introduction to Why We Can't Wait,* a 35-year-old clergyman penned these words.

It is the beginning of the year of the Lord 1963.

I see a young (Black) boy. He is sitting on a stoop in front of a vermin-infested apartment house in Harlem. The stench of garbage is in the halls. The drunks, the jobless, the junkies are shadow figures of his everyday world. The boy goes to school attended mostly by (Black) students with a scattering of Puerto Ricans. His father is one of the jobless. His mother is a sleep-in domestic working for a family on Long Island.

I see a young (Black) girl. She is sitting on the stoop of a rickety wooden one-family house in Birmingham. It needs paint badly and the patched-up roof appears in danger of caving in. Half a dozen small children in various stages of undress, are scampering about the house. The girl is forced to play the role of their mother. She can no longer attend the all-(Black) school in her neighborhood because her mother died only recently after a car

accident. Neighbors say if the ambulance hadn't come so late to take her to the all-(Black) hospital the mother might still be alive. The girl's father is a porter in a downtown department store. He will always be a porter, for there are no promotions for a (Black person) in this store, where every counter serves him except the one that sells hot dogs and orange juice.

This boy and this girl, separated by stretching miles, are wondering: Why does misery constantly haunt (Black people)? In some distant past, had their forebears done some tragic injury to the nation, and was the curse of punishment upon the black race? Had they shirked in their duties as patriots, betrayed their country, denied their national birthright? Had they refused to defend their land against a foreign foe? (Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait, Signet Books, NY., NY, 1964, p. ix).

You know this young author as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King goes on to say that what this young black boy and this young black girl know, though they won't find it in white history books, is that first American to lose his life in the fight for freedom was black seaman named Crispus Attucks shot dead in the Boston Commons. Black soldiers suffered with white soldiers through the winter 1777 encamped with George Washington at Valley Forge. One of the men on the team who designed the Capitol in Washington DC was a black man named Benjamin Banneker. For over 200 years without

wages, black people brought to this land on slave ships and in chains had (literally) drained the swamps, built the homes, and helped build the White House, and universities and schools which they could not enter and in which they could not matriculate. They made cotton king, and helped, on whip-lashed backs, to raise this nation from colonial obscurity to commanding influence in domestic commerce and world trade (Ibid, p. x).

Dr. King goes on to say wherever there was hard work, dirty work, dangerous work – in mines, on docks, in blistering foundries, on battlefields of war – black people in America had done more than their share to strengthen and lift America.

In January 1863, President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation declaring all Black People Free. But one hundred years later, in the winter of 1963, this young boy and this young girl knew that the great-great-grandson on Crispus Attucks would not be served in a southern restaurant, his Marine uniform notwithstanding.

This young boy and young girl knew freedom's bell had a dull ring and mocking emptiness. But, they also knew buses had stopped rolling in Montgomery, Alabama, sit-inners were jailed and beaten, freedom riders were brutalized and

murdered, and police dogs' fangs and firemen's hoses had been turned on children and adults in Birmingham. (Ibid, p. x-xi).

And the boy in Harlem stood up. The girl in Birmingham stood up. Separated by stretching miles, each of them squared their shoulders and lifted their eyes to heaven. Across the miles they joined hands and took a firm forward step. It was a step that rocked the richest, most powerful nation to its foundations. This is the story of *Why We Can't Wait* (Ibid).

So, here we are. 55 years have passed since Dr. King wrote this book – a book which described in detail the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement of 1963. Almost 50 years have passed since Dr. King was murdered in Memphis on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel by a sniper's bullet.

So much good has happened since that time. So many strides forward. So much has been overcome. And yet, we know, in our heart of hearts, that so much more good has yet to be done. So much more has yet to overcome. When I preached in the 16th Street Baptist Church in October 2011 at the home going of the Rev. Dr. Fred Shuttlesworth (the man Dr. King called “the greatest Civil Rights Leader of his time”) and as I sat next to Eric Holder, our first African American Attorney General that evening, in the church where four little girls had been blown up in church on Sunday morning in September

1963 only 15 feet from where we were sitting, I couldn't help but think we had overcome our past. I felt peace in eulogizing my friend, Rev. Dr. Fred Shuttlesworth and dreaming that our past was behind us.

But, dreams can be shattered. We awake to new realities. Sometimes we are awakened by nightmares which cause us to sit up and take notice.

6 ½ years later, when entering this Martin Luther King, Jr Weekend, our current president refers to ALL African nations in horrifically derogatory terms and goes on to say we have too many Haitians immigrants in our nation and I wonder how much more we have to overcome? Imagine that! To write off all of Africa with hate and horrid distain! Then, on the anniversary of an earthquake which claimed 300,000 lives in Haiti, to speak with more distain and hatred about one of the oldest democratic nations in our hemisphere! I wonder how far we have come from the dream and the dreamer as we live in a time and under leadership that feels like an American nightmare?

First, we need to wake up! We need to name the nightmare for what it is – racist, narcissistic, and concerned only for lining the pockets of the rich not raising up the poor, working-class and middle-class Americans who need a chance to make it in

an America where wages are frozen and benefits are being stripped away each day. We need to wake-up and pay attention to rising interest rates on student loans which sink our next generation of American leaders. So many other issues have become nightmares for us in these times. We need to wake up.

Second, lifting up 12 of the 20 lessons learned from Timothy Snyder in his little (but powerful!) book On Tyranny, we need to: defend our institutions, take responsibility for the face of the world, remember our professional ethics, stand up and stand out, be kind in our language, believe in truth, investigate, make eye contact and small talk with others, listen for dangerous words, be calm when the unthinkable arrives, be a patriot, be as courageous as you can. These are only the chapter headings. I encourage you to get the pocket-sized book – only 126 pages. It will give you a language to positively respond to the times in which we are living.

Third, we can take another page from the amazing vision, speeches and writings of Dr. King. On October 26, 1967, less than six months before his assassination, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr. King took time to speak to a group of students at Barrett Jr. High in Philadelphia, PA. The title of his speech was, “What is Your Life’s Blueprint?” This speech was recorded and later transcribed (which might not have happened if he had lived... I am glad it was transcribed).

He pointed out that whenever a building is designed there is a blueprint that serves as the pattern, the guide, the model for those who build the building. And no building is constructed without a good, sound, solid blueprint.

He lifted up three lessons for the teens about the blueprint of their lives. First, each person needs a deep belief in their own dignity, self-worth, and their own somebodiness. Never allow anybody to make you feel like you are nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth. Always feel that your life has ultimate significance. Never be ashamed of your color. You are somebody. Always believe that.

Second, everyone needs, in the blueprint of our lives, a principle of determination to achieve excellence in your various field of endeavors. What will you do with your life? What will your life's purpose be? How will you use the gifts God has given you to make a difference in this world? Be the best in the world. Whatever you do, wherever you go, be the best – the best doctor, the best lawyer, the best schoolteacher, the preacher the best barber or beautician, the best laborer. If you sweep streets, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. “If you can't be the pine on top of the hill, be the scrub in the valley – but be the best scrub on the side of the hill. Be a bush if you can't be a tree – but be the

best bush. If you can't be the sun, be a star. And shine, shine, shine!

Finally, in your life's blueprint, be always committed to the principles of beauty, love and justice. Don't allow anybody to pull you so low as to make you hate them. Don't allow anybody to cause to you to lose your self-respect to the point you do not struggle for justice. Make this nation better. No matter how young you are, be involved in the struggle for freedom and justice. And be nonviolent in your life's work. So, our slogan can never be "burn, baby, burn." It must always be "build, baby, build." Or "organize, baby organize." Or "Learn, baby, learn." (Cornel West, editor, The Radical King, "What is Your Life's Blueprint?" Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2015, pp.65-70).

We can't wait for justice and righteousness to break forth. We need to go and shape our future. It will mean more letters, more calls, more marches, more demonstrations, more resistance. It also will mean more kindness over cruelty and more lifting up the stranger over self. It certainly means making a life blueprint – no matter what stage of life we are in, or what age of life we have reached. We cannot wait. There is still a young black boy in Harlem and a young black girl in Birmingham who need us to stand up, speak out and wait no

longer. They need us to take their hand and walk forward into the future – and bring the dream back to life. Amen.

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*I have changed all the “Negroes” in the opening to “Why We Can’t Wait” into “Blacks.” I did this for the purpose of preaching in this day and time. I have placed all the “Black” references in parentheses. This is to indicate they are not original to the text. Dr. King used “Black” once in the opening. That is not in parentheses.

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