

“Fired Up and Ready to Go!”

Epiphany 2

Isaiah 4:1-7; Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

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From the Pulpit

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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 15, 2017 dedicated to Ansel Buzzell and Charlie Brown on their baptismal day, to Donna James as she leads the Center for Healthy Families, Bill and Randy Cohen and Paisha and Aaron Thomas who are dedicated to the songs of struggle and also the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was born “Michael King” Jr. 88 years ago today and always to the glory of God!

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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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88 years ago today, God saw that it was time to deliver a prophet to this world. So, God gave Mike and Alberta Williams King, a firstborn son at noon on a Tuesday born in their home in the Sweet Auburn section of Atlanta, Georgia – a few blocks from Pastor King’s Church, Ebenezer Baptist

Church. Mike Alberta named their second child and firstborn son, Michael King, Jr. Nine years later, when “Pop King” felt called by God to change his name to Martin Luther, son Michael, was renamed after the great Protestant Reformer – Martin Luther. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In today’s passage from Isaiah 49 we hear how God calls a prophet. From his mother’s womb, Isaiah was named and claimed to “bring God’s light to the nations and God’s salvation to the ends of the earth.” Such a prophet of God is purposefully set on this planet, in a given time, in a given space to make a difference as God’s anointed messenger.

Martin was such a prophet of God. He suffered mightily to bring God’s word and witness to us. Just this week, in an article published as the cover story in The Columbus African American New Journal (one sent to you all via email on Thursday), I wrote this...

Friend of Dr. King and great Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote these words about the prophets of old:

“The prophet is a person who sees the world with the eyes of God, who holds God and humanity in one thought, at one time, in all times.” Rabbi Heschel continues: *“The passion of God is speaking when the prophet speaks. . . . He feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul and he is bowed and stunned by humanity’s fierce greed. . . . Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned*

riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words . . . the prophet seldom tells a story, but casts events. . . . He lives in sympathy with the divine pathos." (Found in Abraham Heschel's *The Prophets*, Harper and Row, NY, NY, 1962, pp. 3-6).

I continued in my article this week: In Martin Luther King, Jr., God sent America and the world a prophet for our times. Like Isaiah and the Biblical prophets of old, King was not chiseled out of rock. He was not created in a vacuum. He was not dropped from high in the heavens.

Martin was born and raised in the church. More specifically, he was raised in the black church, in the Deep South, in the heart of America's racial segregation and racial hate. He became King because of the influences of black men and women – intellectuals like Dr. Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College; activists like the middle-aged Pullman porter named E.D. Nixon; trained non-violent resisters like Rosa Parks; a young English professor and activist named JoAnne Robinson; and pastoral colleagues like Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, Sr., pastor of First Baptist Church in Montgomery. He became King because he followed the pastorate of the great preacher and radical visionary Dr. Vernon Johns who was ousted from the pulpit of Dexter Avenue by his Deacons because he wore overalls and sold collard greens on the campus of Alabama State College

(according to the Deacons, behavior unbecoming of Dexter Avenue's pastor). Martin became King because of his wife Coretta – who was much more of an activist than he was when they met - gave him books to read, brought him to lectures she felt he needed to hear, and took him to rallies when he would rather have been home reading.

He stood on the shoulders of the men and women before him and saw a glorious vision of the Kingdom of God coming to Earth – and he shared that vision with us through his preaching, his organizing and his writing. He laid down his life for Garbage Collectors in Memphis, TN so they could have fair wages, fair working conditions and fair working hours. He was in the middle of the Poor People's Campaign – a campaign for all the poor of this nation, white, black, brown and yellow; men, women and children; Jew, Christian and Muslim. He was marching, advocating and fighting non-violently for coal miners in West Virginia, Sharecroppers in Mississippi; and garbage collectors in Memphis when a bullet to his head ended his life on April 4, 1968.

But prophets may speak as one voice, but a true prophet of God has followers and in Martin's case an army of nonviolent, civil disobedient sisters and brothers who are trained and dedicated to change the world. Just as Jesus called disciples in John's gospel lesson, movements have leaders and followers. In times such as ours, it is the women of our nation

who have stepped up mightily to lead – once again! It is time us to follow them and march beside them.

Here we are today. At 1:30 p.m, 1,000 or more women from around Ohio will be marching for justice across the Broad St. Bridge and east to the statehouse. On Saturday, hundreds of thousands of women and men will be marching in Washington DC in a march announced 90 days ago. Of course, women are leading us! Of course, they are calling us out of our sad self-pity to take the future into our own hands. That is what women do. Women move us out of despair and into hope. That is what I see happening in our day and time.

I always think of Ma Joad from John Steinbeck's novel, The Grapes of Wrath. Ma Joad is speaking with her husband, Pa Joad. She says near the end of the novel, *“Well, Pa, a woman can change better'n a man. A man lives sorta - well, in jerks. Baby's born or somebody dies, and that's a jerk. He gets a farm or loses it, and that's a jerk. With a woman, it's all in one flow, like a stream - little eddies and waterfalls - but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it thata way.”*

There it is. We need to be like a woman, to change, to move like a river that keeps on flowing. While many of us find ourselves wondering what to do in the face of the rising spirit of exclusion, racial hatred and a growing gap between rich and poor, black, white and brown - across our land, many are also beginning to rise, speak out, march, and say what we believe

the future should hold. Get on board! This train is leaving the station. We cannot sit idly by, we cannot sleep through these days and these years ahead. The time is now to wake up, speak up and act. (Story of the ACA and Congressman Tiberi).

This week, we bid farewell to President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. It is fitting on the 88th birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. to pay tribute, give thanks for 8 years doing his best to serve our nation - our first African American President. It hasn't been an easy eight years. But, he is still standing! Thanks be to God!

One of my favorite stories from Senator Obama's historic 2008 run for the White House was a story that he told at many rallies. It was the story of Edith S. Childs of Greenwood, South Carolina. Senator Obama often ended his rallies speaking of Edith.

At a Democratic Dinner Party in Columbia, South Carolina he had agreed to go and speak in Greenwood. What he didn't know was that Greenwood, SC (in his words) "is an hour and half from anywhere." So, at 6am, on a cold rainy February morning, he dragged himself out of bed and headed to Greenwood. He was not in the best of spirits. When they arrived in Greenwood in the pouring rain after an hour and half drive, there were about 20 people in a town hall. Soaking wet, less than happy, bone tired and wondering why he said "yes" to coming to Greenwood, Senator Obama stepped into

the room with his aides and campaign staff members. It was still early. Then, a tiny woman in a church hat, (maybe 5' 2") started a chant from the behind the Senator. Made up in jump. J

She said, "Fired Up" and the other 19 responded, "Fired Up!" She said, "Ready to Go!" And they chanted "ready to Go!" Apparently, Edith was famous in Greenwood for her chant. She kept going for about 5 minutes. About 2 minutes in Obama started smiling. He started responding. From what was feeling like a low point on his campaign, he found his voice in this one woman's voice in one small town - an hour and half from anywhere. As he says, *"One voice can change a room, and that room can change a city, and that city can change a state, and that state can change a nation."* I want you to be that voice. I want this to be that room. I want us to be that city. I want Ohio to be that state. I want America to show the world again, that we are the land of opportunity, the place of extravagant welcome, peacemakers in this world, the nation that cares for the health and wellbeing of all our citizens – from the child in embryo to the oldest, poorest man and woman in wheelchair and nursing home bed. We are great. America needs great. No one man will make us great again. Let's not lose the fire that God has put in our bones! We are the people of God. We are the prophets that God is calling this time, for this moment. Are you ready to live into our calling- your calling? DO it for

Ansell! Do it for Charlie! Do it for the other children – your children, your grandchildren and those yet to be born in the USA.

Are you ready?!?!?!? Let's go....

Fired up! (Fired up!) Ready to Go! (Ready to Go!). Amen!

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