“A Movement to Change the World”
I Samuel 3:1-10; I Corinthians 6:12-20;
John 1:43-51

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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy Carl Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, MLK, Jr. Day 2015, dedicated to Jim Roehm upon his death on Monday, January 12th and Jim and Carol Woodard who celebrated their 50th Anniversary by renewing vows in our sanctuary on January 17th and to Carter Stewart and Michelle Alexander who have dedicated their lives to show Black Lives and all lives matter and always to the glory of God!

“A Movement to Change the World”
I Samuel 3:1-10; I Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

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.

If you look through the books of the ages, you will find people who are named and claimed by God for a special purpose. Many of them are set aside for leadership as children. Today, we meet such a man. In Samuel 3, we are introduced to Samuel. He has an encounter in the night with the presence of God who – once Samuel figures out it is indeed God’s voice speaking. God tells the boy a story of judgment upon the house of Eli, the lead priest of the
temple. Not the kind of message you wish hear from the voice of God at midnight.

In “A Knock at Midnight,” The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. tells how he received a call at midnight in the early weeks of the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott Campaign. The voice at the other end of the phone was not the voice of God. It was the voice of hate with a death threat attached to the message. The voice said, “Unless you get out of town, in three days I will blow your brains out and blow up your house.” Although he had received many hateful letters and calls as the leader of the Boycott, this one really shook him. His daughter Yolanda was just a tiny baby – no other children yet.

Fear grabbed his heart. The call put Dr. King on his knees. He started praying. And then he heard another voice - the voice of Jesus. This voice spoke to Martin in the silence of the midnight hour. Beside himself with anxiety and fear, Martin prayed for God’s guiding hand. It was then that he heard Jesus say, “Stand up for righteousness! Stand up justice! Stand up for truth and lo I will be with you even `til the end of the world.” In the telling the story years later, Martin recalls, “I heard the voice of Jesus promise that night never to leave me alone.”

How about you? Have you ever heard the voice of God calling in the night? Or even in the brightness of day? Have
you heard God calling you to lead, to be still, to stand up, to sit down, or to follow? Through the years, I have felt the presence of God in clear and undeniable ways. I have heard the voice of God speak – at noon and at midnight. God is still speaking!

In recent weeks I have heard God speaking in the movement of all people on the streets of America. Young and old, black, white and brown are crying out for justice. They are crying out to be heard. While policy-makers turn a deaf ear to their constituents and the people of this land, the cry is going out and up for change. I have looked into the eyes of those who are crying out. Their eyes speak love – but it is love which is enraged at the indifference, injustice, and indecency of those around them. It is love for the underserved; the under-represented and the under-aged.

I have heard the voice of God in the midst of this movement. It echoes the voice of Dr. King. In the film “Selma” Dr. King says about his movement, “We do three things: We Negotiate. We Demonstrate. We Resist. These three things lead us into Protest, Marching, Disturbing the Peace and Risk all for righteousness’ sake.” These foundational principles should be at the heart of the new movement to change the world. The movement needs to move from tweeting to marching; from Facebook to
demonstrations. From social media to social change. And it must happen now.

In her book, **The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness**, civil rights lawyer turned legal scholar, Michelle Alexander chronicles the horrific terror of our justice system which has systematically targeted African-America youth and particularly young black men for the past 30 years. In truth, the War on Drugs in this country is a war of black men. This book is a brilliant book. I read it before my class on Social Change in the doctoral program, but it was required reading. It should be required reading for everyone in our congregation. Can I assign books for reading from the pulpit in our congregational church? Well, I just did!

At the end of the book, Ms. Alexander wrote these timely and prophetic words five years ago. They resonate and resound even more strongly today.

“**Given what is at stake at this moment in history, bolder, more inspiring action is required than we have seen to date. Piecemeal, top-down policy reform on criminal justice issues, combined with a racial justice discourse that revolves largely around the meaning of Barack Obama’s election and “post racialism,” will not get us out of our nation’s racial quagmire. We must flip the script. Taking our cue from the courageous civil rights advocates who brazenly refused to defend themselves,**
marching unarmed past mobs that threatened to kill them, we too, must be the change we hope to create. If we want to do more than just end mass incarceration – if we want to put an end to the history of racial caste in America – we must lay down our racial bribes, join hands with people of all colors who are not content to wait for change to trickle down, and say to those who would stand in our way: Accept all of us or none” (Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, The New Press, NY, p. 245).

Ms. Alexander goes on to say that the leaders of this new generation arising should respect their elders and the past and then respectfully march right past them emblazoned by the fierce urgency of now (Ibid, p. 247). The reality is that those who have been locked out economically and politically and locked up in cages we call prison cells now have rage and ages of experience.

**We are facing a movement that could change the world – our world.** Every one of us should find our place and get engaged in this march for justice. We should use the principles of non-violence taught by Mahatma Gandhi and utilized by Dr. King to join the movement to change the world. We should negotiate, demonstrate and resist for what is right and just. However, we get there, we must get there.
I am still caught in the afterglow of the march Saturday night, January 10th. In zero degree weather, 300+ were on the streets praying, marching, and praying some more. I felt old as I looked around, but the fire in my bones was young again! I want to walk with the young African-American pastors who have gathered to change the world. They are bright, gifted, and driven to a new understanding of what is needed to do justice. In the words of Michelle Alexander, they are going to march right by us emblazoned by the fierce urgency of now.

Of this fierce urgency of now, the 34 year old Dr. King said from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the March on Washington, “We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now…. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.”

We are facing an urgent and potentially fatal moment for our society. In his clarity and prophetic honesty, Dr. King knew that. Dr. King was no dreamer. He was a prophet preacher and strategic activist for nonviolent action. He was a pastor committed to the cause of social and economic justice. He used the power of nonviolent civil disobedience to shine the light of justice upon the dreaded and evil injustices of his age.

As we stand up in his birthday weekend, his 86 birthday, were he still with us, his model for engagement
should guide our path for seeking to change America today – preaching God’s prophetic word coupled with nonviolent direct action which brings economic consequences and social change to the world in which we live. There is a fierce urgency of now because Black Lives Matter. For that matter, ALL lives matter. And it will take all our lives focused on the change of economic, political and legal malaise to bring about change.

The powerful song that has been beating in my head entitled “Glory” by John Legend and Common calls us to remember God’s glory in the midst of the struggle. The Chorus cries out:

*One day when the glory comes
It will be ours, it will be ours
One day when the war is won
We will be sure, we will be sure
Oh glory*

And Common wraps these words in verse 1 and 2 (which I add for this printed sermon, but only glanced in the spoken sermon).

*(Verse 1 – Common)*

*Hands to the Heavens, no man, no weapon
Formed against, yes glory is destined*
Every day women and men become legends
Sins that go against our skin become blessings
The movement is a rhythm to us
Freedom is like religion to us
Justice is juxtaposition in' us
Justice for all just ain't specific enough
One son died, his spirit is revisitin' us
Truant livin' livin' in us, resistance is us
That's why Rosa sat on the bus
That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up
When it go down we woman and man up
They say, "Stay down", and we stand up
Shots, we on the grown, the camera panned up
King pointed to the mountain top and we ran up

[Chorus]
[Verse 2: Common]
Selma's now for every man, woman and child
Even Jesus got his crown in front of a crowd
They marched with the torch, we gon' run with it now
Never look back, we done gone hundreds of miles
From dark roads he rose, to become a hero
Facin' the league of justice, his power was the people
Enemy is lethal, a king became regal
Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle
The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful
We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through
Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany
Now we right the wrongs in history
No one can win the war individually
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy
Welcome to the story we call victory
Comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory

So what will it be? Will we see the coming of the glory of the Lord? Will we listen to the voice of God calling to us – at midnight? At noontime? Will we see the love in the rage of the voices who call us? Will we move out of the way and follow them as they forge a new path in these times of ours?

One day when the glory comes
It will be ours, it will be ours
One day when the war is won
We will be sure, we will be sure
Oh glory

Faced with the fierce urgency of now, I say we get on board – this train is bound for freedom! Amen.

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