

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 2, January 20, 2013, dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Rev. Dr. Fred Shuttlesworth and Bill Willis, Sr. four men who changed my life, and always to the glory of God!

“Becoming King” *

Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

He was born Michael King, Jr. the oldest child of Rev. Mike King and Alberta Williams King on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. When he was nine, following his father’s trip to Europe and walking in the footsteps of the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, Mike’s name (along with “Daddy King’s” name) was changed to Martin Luther King, Jr.

When he was 15 years old, “M.L.” was a freshman at Morehouse College in Atlanta. By 19, he was a first year student at Crozier Seminary in Philadelphia. By 22, he was in Boston University working on his PhD and by 25 he was married to Coretta Scott and had been called as pastor of Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala.

One year and three months later, after Rosa Parks’ arrest on a Montgomery public bus, December 1, 1955, Martin was hand-picked to lead the most important non-violent civil rights protest in American history. Twelve years, four months and three days later, Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered by an assassin’s bullet while standing on the balcony of a Memphis, Tenn., motel just moments before he and friends were headed to dinner at the home of Pastor Samuel Billie Kyles. He was 39 years, two months and 20 days old. An autopsy said his heart was equivalent to a 60-year-old man.

How did Mike become King? How did he become the first and only African-American for whom a national holiday is celebrated? How did he become a non-elected national and global leader whose memory is now enshrined in a beautiful memorial across the Tidal Basin from the Jefferson Memorial and a few hundred yards from the Reflecting pool, the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument? How did Martin Luther become King?

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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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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).

In Martin Luther King, Jr., God sent America and the world a prophet for our times. Like 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 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 because he wore overalls and sold collard greens on the campus of Alabama State College (behavior unbecoming of Dexter Avenue's pastor was the charge). Martin became King because of his wife Coretta – who was much more of activist than he was when they met. She 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 arrived in Montgomery, Ala., in September 1954, six months after the landmark Supreme Court decision of Brown vs. the Board of Education. He became King on the streets of Montgomery, walking, talking, listening and learning from working men and women in the capital city of Alabama. He became King as a pastor comforting victims of racial violence, the victims of lynchings from the hanging trees of Alabama, economic violence and injustice and social evil.

There were many reasons and many people, who pulled, pushed, persuaded and persevered in providing Martin the opportunities to pursue the prophetic imagination which was inside his soul. In the long run, Martin became King because Jesus Christ called him to pick up his cross and lay down his life for his friends.

Let's go back and take a look at the making of a prophet, the becoming of King. One member of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church said in November 1959, when Dr. King was leaving Dexter to head to the SCLC from headquarters in Atlanta and from there into the rest of the world: *"The history books may write it Rev. King was born in Atlanta, and then came to Montgomery, but we feel that he was born in Montgomery in the struggles here, and now he is moving to Atlanta for bigger responsibilities."*

Martin King was born in the struggles of Montgomery.

In late-August 1955 (less than year after Martin's return to the South), in a small, sleepy town called Money, Miss., a 14-year-old African-American from Chicago named Emmett Till was visiting relatives in the Delta for the summer. In the general store in Money, he reportedly flirted with a white woman. Several nights later, the woman's husband and his brother dragged Emmett from his uncle's house, brutally beat him, tortured him and shot him in the head before throwing his body in the Tallahatchie River, chained to a 70 pound cotton gin fan. Three days later his body was discovered and retrieved from the river.

Returned to Chicago, Emmett was buried with an open casket and thousands attending his funeral. With gruesome pictures in *Jet Magazine*, portraying Emmett's condition, the whole world was watching. This was not just another lynching of another young black man. This lynching shifted the way people responded to racial hatred.

How do I know that? Because Rosa Parks, less than three months after Emmett was buried, reported that when she refused to move from her seat on Friday, December 1, 1955, on a Montgomery bus, said, *"I saw the face of Emmett Till and I knew I had to stay in my seat for him."* God bless your memory, Emmett Till. You had a part in helping Martin become King.

Ms. Parks knew exactly what she was doing. She was trained in non-violent civil disobedience. Once booked and jailed for "disorderly conduct," the whole of black Montgomery was in an uproar. Congressman John Lewis tells it this way: *"The buzz flew through town. They arrested Ms. Parks? She wouldn't hurt a fly. This is wrong! We have got to do something this time."*

Over the weekend, the black community was organized. By Sunday morning, the morning announcements and the sermons from the pulpits of many black churches (including Dexter Avenue)

were calling for a bus boycott. By Monday, December 4, the bus boycott had begun. People were walking to work.

That night a huge rally was held at Holt Street Baptist Church. Martin was called on to preach. We need to remember that his preaching didn't inspire the 50,000 bus riders to walk, but it gave them hope and vision and fired them for the second day and the subsequent 385 days. Taylor Branch, in his three part epic on King's career, says that King was in his element. He was a great orator and preacher. While Dr. King participated in many direct actions, he NEVER initiated any by himself in his lifetime. His inclination was to inspire social change through oratory. The combination of his preaching and others leading the charge was to become the perfect storm for non-violent social change that swept the South, then the North and in time, the entire nation in the years that followed.

Although many things affected and influenced Dr. King, the January 30, 1956, bombing of his home in which the front porch of his house was blown up while Coretta and Martin the Third were inside, made Martin realize how dangerous his journey to justice would be. He knew that he may lose his life in the struggle. He knew that his family was at risk as well. That attack convinced him to no longer carry a gun – which he had to that point. He said, “No gun can save me. Guns will only inflict more violence in this nation and in our lives.” These are powerfully prophetic words for our day and time as well!

Dr. King's essential message was clear and it was formed throughout his childhood and youth. Clayborne Carson, King biographer and archivist of King's sermons, letters and other writings, has studied the work of Dr. King more closely than anyone else. Commenting on the Montgomery years, Dr. Carson writes:

“King's optimistic, hope-filled message rooted in the power of God inspired men and women to remain in and sacrifice for the struggle. His consistent emphasis on the love ethic found in the life and teachings of Jesus provided the theological undergirding for the strategy of nonviolence. King's growing faith in God also fueled his

conviction that the civil rights movement could become a vehicle for redemption in Montgomery, the South and the throughout the whole nation.” (Troy Jackson, *Becoming King*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, 2008, p. 5).

King was passionate in his commitment to the power of love and the centrality of the social gospel in his preaching and teaching throughout the Montgomery boycott.

But he came to Montgomery ready for this task. He was fortunate to cut his preaching teeth before arriving in Montgomery. While a student preacher at Daddy King’s Ebenezer Baptist Church in the “Sweet Auburn” section of Atlanta, King had been addressing his views on race, segregation, peace, economic injustice from the pulpit. He had sharpened the tools for his craft in the workshop of his daddy’s church – his childhood church.

He tells the story of his first sermon at Ebenezer. He was nervously pacing and talking to himself when one of the elder women of the church came upon him.

“Martin, what is the matter?”

He responded, *“I am not sure I should be preaching. I am not sure this is right.”*

She smiled and responded, *“Like Jeremiah, God claimed you in the womb of your mother. What’s right with God is right. It’s not for you to be nervous about. It is your destiny, son.”*

With these words and a tender touch to the cheek, Martin felt the peace of God which passes understanding sweep through his body and soul.

Writing to Coretta during their courtship, he included a prayer with which he had ended a sermon three years earlier - when he was 20 years old.

“Let us continue to hope, work and pray that in the future we will live to see a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color.” This time, he added to his beloved, *“This is the gospel that I will preach to the world.”* (Ibid, p. 49).

During these years before Montgomery, Martin worked hard at developing quotation laden refrains that he memorized and used countless times in sermons and speeches to justify hope. From the pulpit of Ebenezer he tested out his cadence and his refrain of hope:

“There is something in the universe that justifies Carlyle in saying, ‘No lie can live forever.’ There is something in this universe that justifies William Cullen Bryant saying, ‘Truth crushed to the earth will rise again.’ There is something in this universe that justifies James Russell Lowell saying, ‘Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet the scaffold sways the future and, behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, keeping above his own.’ This is something in the universe that justifies the Biblical writer saying, you shall reap what you sow.” (Ibid, p. 42)

No matter what the circumstances he faced, Martin maintained the hope and optimism of his faith grounded in the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Montgomery, the young King was to face the challenges of any Baptist preacher. He was warned by friends and family that there was a small group of people in Ebenezer who didn’t like preachers. He was warned about Deacon Thomas H. Randall, who if he was still alive, was known to take pride in bringing down the pastors of Dexter Avenue.

When Martin arrived, Deacon Randall was not only alive, but the chair of the Deacons. He kept a notebook on King recording any misdeeds, shortcomings, when he was late for meetings, and complaints from members and other citizens. While leading the movement for social change that would rock the nation, Dr. King

had to deal with Deacon Randall. Even Jesus had his inner-church challenges and he had a membership of 12!

Martin surrounded Deacon Randall with love and a plan. Martin took the high ground laying out to the whole church 34 recommendations for them – including a plan for growth and a social and political action committee.

In the end, it was Deacon Randall who wrote of Dr. King at his departure in 1960, *“The kind of life Dr. King has lived as pastor has been inspiring. His sermons and talks have served as a compelling force in our lives – urging us to live the full life – thus broadening the horizons of our responsibilities beyond our own church.”* (*Ibid*, p. 174).

In time, his greatest detractor became his great friend. What a friend we have in Jesus!

Forged in the crucible of Montgomery, Martin went forward his last eight years to change the course of history. As a prophet of the social gospel, Martin saw the world with the eyes of God – holding God and humanity in one thought, at one time, in all times (to paraphrase Rabbi Heschel). He spoke with the passion of God, feeling fiercely and casting events and always keeping step with the divine pathos he had come to know in Jesus Christ his Lord and savior.

In the end, we come to know the divine pathos by walking with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In the end, he became King by knowing and following his King. We would be wise to follow Martin and Jesus in our journey of faith. After all, Martin had the drum major instinct. What a great gift! So let us be wise so that we too may become like King. Thanks be to God for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Amen.

*A special thanks goes to my friend and colleague the Rev. Dr. Troy Jackson whose 2008 book, *Becoming King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Making of a National Leader*, is a wonderful study of King

and great addition to the King legacy. I draw heavily from Dr. Jackson's book in creating this sermon. Thank you, Troy.

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