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 Arlington Street Church
 16 January, 2011

Dream

Every year at this time, I reread passages from Taylor Branch's two-volume set on America in the King years, and I can't bring myself to read past August 28th, 1963: the march on Washington, and that electrifying seventeen minutes: *I have a dream* echoing from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. *I have a dream...*

This past week, I rediscovered one of Dr. King's sermons that isn't even referenced in Taylor Branch's book. In these difficult days, as he would say, this sermon speaks to me. It was delivered at Dr. King's home church, Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta, on March 3rd, 1968 – nearly five years after *I Have a Dream*, and just one month before his assassination. It's called *Unfulfilled Dreams*.

The most heartbreaking line of this sermon is, “Life is a continual story of shattered dreams.”

The most uplifting line of this sermon is, “The dream may not be fulfilled, but it's just good that you have a desire to bring it into reality...” Dr. King says, “You may not see it. ... It may not come today, or it may not come tomorrow, but.... It's well that you are trying.... It's well that it's in thine heart.”

He's not just speaking about The Dream – the dream of racial equality – but about all the dreams we dream. “It's well that it's in thine heart.” Dr. King's text is from the eight chapter of First Kings, in which King David has decided to build a church. He intended to do it, he planned to do it, he started to do it, he tried to do it, but, in fact, the church was not built. His dream was left unfulfilled. And g*d says to King David, “Whereas it was in thine heart to build an house unto my name, thou didst well that it was in thine heart.”¹

Dr. King comes to rest right there, in that moment of both profound

¹ 1 Kings 8:18

disappointment and divine reassurance – it would be hard to argue that he is not speaking from his own life – the disappointment in what was left undone, but also the assurance that what was important was the dream itself: the heart with a dream.

In fact, in the very next biblical verse, g*d affirms that King David's son, King Solomon, will see the dream fulfilled, will build the church. This morning, we sang, “What they dreamed be ours to do, hope their hopes and seal them true.”² That's a different sermon, though; that's where we move on to fulfilling the dream. This sermon is about unfulfilled dreams ... and the deep assurance that all will be well if we carry a dream in our hearts.

“So many of us ... start out building temples,” says Dr. King, “... and so often we don't finish them. And I guess one of the great agonies of life is that we are constantly trying to finish that which is unfinishable. We are,” he says, “commanded to do that.”

Dr. King goes on to enumerate some particularly outstanding failed dreams. He invokes Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent revolution for India's independence from British colonial authority – a dream fulfilled – and his great wish for a united India, rather than an India divided from Pakistan: a dream unfulfilled.³ Five months after partition and independence, Gandhiji was assassinated.⁴ He died, says Dr. King, “with a broken heart.... Life is a ... story of setting out to build a great temple, and not being able to finish it.”

He continues, “So many of our forbears used to sing about freedom. And they dreamed of the day that they would be able to get out of ... slavery, the long night of injustice. And they used to sing little songs: *Nobody knows de trouble I seen, nobody knows but Jesus*. They thought about a better day as they dreamed their dream. And they would say, *I'm so glad the trouble don't last always. By and by, by and by, I'm going to lay down my heavy load*. And they used to sing it because of a powerful dream. But so many died without having the dream fulfilled.

“And each of you this morning is, in some way, building some kind of temple,” he says. “The struggle is always there. It gets discouraging at times. It gets very

2 from hymn 358, “Rank by Rank,” in *Singing the Living Tradition*

3 On August 14th, 1947, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was born. At midnight the next day, after nearly 350 years of British presence in India, India won its freedom from British colonial rule.

4 January 30, 1948

disenchanting sometimes.... Well, that is the story of life.”

And now he moves to the heart of the matter; the comfort in his sermon. He says, “... The thing that makes me happy is that I can hear a voice crying through the vista of time, saying, 'It may not come today, or it may not come tomorrow, but it is well that it is within thine heart. It's well that you are trying!' You may not see it. The dream may not be fulfilled, but it's just good that you have a desire to bring it into reality. It's well that it's in thine heart.”⁵

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Long before Dr. King, there was Moses, standing on the mountaintop, looking out over the Promised Land. “And the Lord said unto him, 'This is the land which I swear unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither.’”⁶

Having safely delivered thousands of former slaves to the threshold of their dream of freedom, Moses was shown the Promised Land, but he did not live to cross over the Jordan River. He died with the dream in his heart.

Dreams realized, dreams unfulfilled, dreams we carry in our hearts ... choosing a path with heart. “It's well that [the dream is] in thine heart.”

The Mexican Yaqui shaman, Don Juan Matus, told his most famous student, Carlos Castaneda, “Look at each path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question. I will tell you what it is: Does this path have a heart?”⁷ Dr. King's sermon neither encourages us to dwell on the many, many ways in which his dream – The Dream – remains unfulfilled, nor to gloat about the progress we have made toward its fulfillment. Instead, he invites us to do our part in dreaming, to carry a dream on a path with heart.

William Falk, editor in chief of *The Week*, writes, “Looking back ... is a perilous exercise. It can shake one's faith in the long-term viability of our species. Economic chaos, political deadlock, religious and ethnic conflict ... what a mess. And yet ... In defiance of both evidence and reason, I cling to the conviction that human beings have a

5 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Unfulfilled Dreams*, preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, 3/3/68. Please see mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/

6 See Deuteronomy 34:1-4

7 from Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan*

spark of the transcendent within us, and that we are part of the unfolding of something ... mysterious [and] ... wonderful. Here and there, I see encouraging signs and portents.... Even in the most poisonous environments, ... life finds a way. It survives. It thrives – impelled onward by something defying rational explanation. George Bernard Shaw called it the Life Force; call it what you will. But this astonishing persistence, this upward, Promethean striving from the muck, is no accident. It speaks of a purpose and a destiny. It suggests that all our struggling is not for naught.”⁸

“It's well that [the dream is] in thine heart.”

Some of you have seen *127 Hours*, the new movie starring James Franco as the young mountaineer, Aaron Ralston. In May of 2003, as Aaron descended into a slot canyon in Utah, a massive boulder came loose and pinned his right hand to the canyon wall, trapping him for six days. Do or die, he cut off his hand to save his life, and walked out alive.

Before there was the movie, there was Aaron Ralston's book, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*. Toward the end, he writes, “For all that has happened, I feel blessed. I was part of a miracle ... and I wouldn't trade that for anything, not even to have my hand back. My accident in and rescue from Blue John Canyon were the most beautifully spiritual experiences in my life.... It has affirmed my belief that our purpose as spiritual beings is to follow our bliss, seek our passions, and live our lives as inspirations to each other. Everything else flows from that.”

The year after his accident, Aaron participated in a ski race in Colorado, and took six hours off the time he had made the year before. He joked “Next year, I'm going to cut off my left arm and see how much faster I can go.”

Aaron Ralston concludes, “When we find inspiration, we need to take action for ourselves and for our communities. Even if it means making a hard choice, or cutting out something and leaving it in your past.”⁹

“It's well that [the dream is] in thine heart.”

Do you know the story of the star thrower? Philosopher and literary naturalist

8 William Falk, *The Week*, Volume 10, Issue 495-496, December 24, 2010 – January 7, 2011, p. 7

9 *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, p. 342

Loren Eiseley was walking the beach after a huge storm. “Long-limbed starfish were strewn everywhere,” he writes, “sprawling where the waves had tossed them, as though showered down through the night sky. ... Ahead of me,” he continues, “... I discerned a human figure ... gazing at something in the sand. He stooped and flung an object beyond the breaking surf.

“I labored another half a mile toward him.... In a pool of sand and silt a starfish had thrust its arms up stiffly, and was holding its body away from the stifling mud.

“It's still alive,' I ventured.

“Yes,' he said, and with a quick, yet gentle movement, he picked up the star and spun it over my head and far out into the sea.... 'It may live if the offshore pull is strong enough.... The stars throw well. One can help them.'

“... Do you collect...?’

“... He stooped again, and skipped another star neatly across the water.... 'Only ... like this,' he said softly, gesturing amidst the wreckage of the shore, 'and only for the living.’”¹⁰

“Only like this” means “I attend to what lies before me, collecting the dying starfish in my path.” “Only for the living” means “I do my part to tip the balance back to life.”

“It's well that [the dream is] in thine heart.”

Dr. King's friend and biographer, Vincent Harding, writes, “... Several years after his death, ... I saw my friend in a dream. And it was indeed amazing: All the tension, all the dividedness that had been in [Martin's] face, in his eyes, during those last months of life were now gone. ... And in the dream, as he looked at me, and even though he did not say it, I somehow knew he was saying ... 'It is well with my soul.’”

Beloved spiritual companions, Dr. King speaks to us, is still speaking to us, across the generations, affirming not only the power of The Dream, but the power of dreaming. *Can we, too, be star-throwers?*

Let us hold a dream in our hearts,

¹⁰ Loren Eiseley, “The Star Thrower” in *The Unexpected Universe* (1969), p. 72

attend to the fallen stars in our path,
throw our weight to the side of life,
and choose life abundant.

May we carry forth The Dream, and dreams,
knowing that, whether or not it bears fruit in our lifetime,
“thou didst well that it was in thine heart.”