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 Arlington Street Church  
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### **With This Dream**

Dedicated to Rev. Edmund Robinson  
 on the occasion of his installation as minister to the  
 Unitarian Universalist congregation in Chatham on Cape Cod, Massachusetts

Jacob is out on the road. After a long day's journey, he lies down to sleep, using a stone for a pillow. He dreams: "behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it." God appears to say he's giving Jacob the land on which he is sleeping, and blesses Jacob and his descendants. "And behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest.... I will not leave thee...."

Jacob awakens, terrified. "Surely, the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not.... This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Early the next morning, Jacob takes his stone pillow, sets it up as a pillar, anoints it with oil, and makes a vow: "If God will be with me, and will keep me.... and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God, and this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be the house of God: and of all that thou shalt give me, I will surely give a tenth unto thee."<sup>1</sup>

This story is the "how the leopard got her spots" of the creation of the first shrine; of Jacob's dedication to his god; and of his promise to tithe. We dream of sanctuaries where heaven and earth connect, and build houses of worship. We give away a part of our gifts, in thanksgiving, so that others may live, and so make heaven on earth. This is a vision of the church as both cradle and safe harbor, not an end in itself, but a means by which we bless and are blessed.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was raised with the story of Jacob, and, like

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 28: 10-22

Jacob, throughout his life, the church remained a touchstone for him. We remember that up through the night before he died, he returned to the church for prayer and hope and inspiration, even when his dream – the dream of a world of justice and equality and peace, the dream of the beloved community – his dream called him out of the academy, out of the pulpit, out into the streets, where he gave not one tenth, but ten tenths, gave it all away for the dream.

This coming Thursday, January 15<sup>th</sup>, Dr. King would have celebrated his eightieth birthday. I returned this past week to Stephen Oates' magnificent biography, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, and was reminded of a story not often told, but deeply moving, and central to Dr. King's understanding of the power of the church, the power of the beloved community.

In January, 1963, Dr. King announced that he was going to Birmingham, Alabama, which he called “the most thoroughly segregated city in the country.” It was his intention, he said, to lead demonstrations until “Pharaoh let God's people go,” inaugurating the centennial year of the Emancipation Proclamation. This prompted Governor George Wallace to speak his infamous lines, “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!”

Dr. King traveled to New York, where Harry Belafonte had gathered seventy-five “celebrities, activists, and politicians” in his “palatial” apartment. They agreed “to help raise fund for bail bonds.” Back in Georgia, Dr. King issued the “Birmingham Manifesto,” the “battle for the soul of Birmingham,” demanding the desegregation of all lunch counters, restrooms, and drinking fountains, and calling for the creation of a bi-racial committee to plan desegregation in other parts of city life. Amidst a storm of controversy, sit-ins and pickets began. In nightly worship services in black churches, Dr. King called for volunteers to serve in his nonviolent army, an army, he said, “with no supplies but its sincerity, no uniform but its determination, no arsenal except its faith, no currency but its conscience.” By mid-April, about three hundred protestors had gone to jail.

Dr. King decided it was time for him and his close advisor, Ralph Abernathy, he said, to “present our bodies as personal witnesses in this crusade.” Hoping to create sympathy for the movement and to inspire the black community, they set the date for what would surely be their arrest on Good Friday.

But late Thursday night, word came that the campaign was out of bail money. Dr.

King had announced he was going to jail, but he was needed to fundraise. He was devastated. “I sat in the midst of the deepest quiet I have ever felt,” he said later. Praying for guidance, he knew there was no choice; “he had to make his witness, on the faith that [his] God would not abandon him.” “I’m going to jail,” he told a gathering of his lieutenants. “I don’t know what will happen. I don’t know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act.” The men joined hands and sang *We Shall Overcome*.

And then they went to the church. Of course they went to the church! He issued his call from the pulpit, strode down the aisle, and through the streets of Birmingham, until he was face to face with a shouting Sheriff Bull Connor. He and Ralph Abernathy knelt in prayer, and were arrested immediately.

Dr. King was thrown into solitary confinement; at first, not even his lawyers were allowed to see him. Worried sick about the movement, he suffered through Easter weekend in “a nightmare of despair.” Then he had a brief visit from a lawyer; and another, with two more lawyers, brought word that his brother, A.D., was leading more than fifteen hundred people in the largest march of the campaign so far. On Monday, another lawyer appeared. “Harry Belafonte has been able to raise fifty thousand dollars for bail bonds,” he said. “It is available immediately. And he says that whatever else you need, he will raise it.”

Eight days later, having composed his iconic “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King, along with Ralph Abernathy, posted three hundred dollar cash bonds and, sporting eight-day beards, walked out of Birmingham jail together. “I cannot express what I felt,” Dr. King recalled later, “but I knew at that moment that ... [God] had been with me there in solitary.... that God’s presence had never left me.”

You know the next chapter: one thousand school children marching on Birmingham, Alabama; the protests that television news brought right into America’s living rooms, with billy clubs and police dogs and fire hoses; the policeman asking the little eight-year-old girl, “What do you want?” and her clear-eyed response: *Freedom*.<sup>2</sup> But let’s look more deeply at all that led to that turning point.

Take your place in this drama. Imagine yourself as Dr. King or Ralph Abernathy ... George Wallace or Bull Connor ... Harry Belafonte or that little girl or one of the

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2 Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 202, 205-208, 210, 212-214, 223, 227

thousands of foot soldiers that peopled this revolution. Can you imagine coming to the church each night? Can you imagine the role of the church as being that pillow, that pillar, that shrine from which we go forth in blessing, and to which we return for blessing; that touchstone from which we go forth in battle, in faith, and to which we return in glory or despair, to be renewed again and again?

On January 17, 1991, when the U.S.-led coalition launched air attacks against Iraqi targets, the Unitarian Universalist ministers were on retreat. We held a hasty, heartbroken worship service to give one another solace and courage, and left – not for home, but for our churches. In the car, I prepared the outline of an evening worship service. This was before the time of wide-spread use of the web, e-mail, and cell phones, but people instinctively migrated to the church as soon as they got out of work, and this sanctuary was filled by the time we began a beautiful service of prayers for peace.

On December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1994, Shannon Lowney and Leanne Nichols were murdered at reproductive health clinics in Brookline by a member of the so-called “right to life.” The young martyrs were memorialized here at Arlington Street, and on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, the twenty-second anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision, the church was filled beyond capacity for the second time in a month, with more people listening to speakers set up outside, reaffirming our commitment to uphold the right to reproductive freedom for all.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, I drove on a completely empty highway into an eerily empty downtown Boston; apparently everyone else was escaping in the opposite direction. But when I got to the church, I was greeted by my entire staff. “What are you doing here?” I asked them. Our administrative assistant replied, “Where else would we be?” Soon, the rest of the congregation began drifting in, staggering under the weight of the day's devastation. Where else would we be?

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Dave Wilson and Rob Compton were the first same-sex couple to be legally married in a church in the United States of America. Where did they choose to be, to what community did they turn, in their hour of triumph? To the beloved community, the community that had helped and healed and held them through the long night of injustice to that great day: right here at Arlington Street; their Unitarian Universalist church.

*Where else would we be?* In the great words of George Odell,  
We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.  
 We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation,  
     and need to be recalled to our best selves again.  
 We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose,  
     and cannot do it alone.  
 We need one another in the hour of success,  
     when we look for someone to share our triumphs.  
 We need one another in the hour of defeat,  
     when, with encouragement, we might endure, and stand again.  
 We need one another when we come to die,  
     and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.  
 All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.<sup>3</sup>

Jacob dreamed, and anointed pillow and pillar as the first shrine; Dr. King dreamed, and returned to the church for his deepest nourishment, for strength; we dream, and over and over again, we come to mourn and to celebrate, to gather in love and service for justice and peace. We come, and we return to dream.

Dr. King admonished us that the church should be neither a servant nor a master of the state, but its conscience; not a tool of the state, but its guide, and critic. And he exhorted us to recapture the church's prophetic zeal.<sup>4</sup> My spiritual companions, I invite you to join me in the deepest consideration of all that this church has meant to us, and all that it can mean; I invite you to a deep and abiding devotion to this, our church. May this be the place from which we go forth, and the place to which we return; a pillow for our dreams; and a pillar of our faith.

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<sup>3</sup> George E. Odell, "We Need One Another," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #468

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, 1963