

Ushering in the Kingdom of Greatness

Arlington Street Church

January 18, 2009

The sun that rose in the East this very morning has witnessed staggering adversity and stifling suffering in its crossing over half of the earth to arrive at our shores on the Atlantic Ocean and Boston Harbor; war raging in the fertile crescent – the very cradle of civilization – terror and deprivation on the desolate plains and craggy mountaintops of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the wanton destruction and horrific deaths of innocents in the Holy Land of the Israelis and Palestinians.

It has shone down upon the genocide in Darfur and in the fetid desert encampments of its refugees, the starving and the imprisoned masses in Zimbabwe, and the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons of the region of the Congo, dying of diseases long-since eradicated by modern medicine. It has borne witness to the paralyzing fear of terror in the West and the burning hatred of those misguided minions who would inflict that terror in the name of their peaceful and loving God.

This even before it has reached our shores – a land where financial and economic calamity has caused millions upon millions of working families to be uprooted from their homes, while even millions more lose their jobs. A land where still millions more suffer from illnesses with ready treatments and cures that they are denied because of greed-driven machinations that they had nothing to do with and that they have had no power to influence or change.

Yes, our morning sun today rises upon a land beset by, in Dr. Thurman’s words, “the terrific lashing and tearing of winter storms...by the most terrific flailings of desperate adversity.”¹

Yet in dawning on our shores this day, its rays reach down upon a land that is filled with new hope. It warms a people already suffused in hearty anticipation. It casts its light on a day where one of the greatest injustices of human history is about to witness a new chapter – one written in redemption and hopeful expectancy; one that holds promise for all of humanity, not just those who live within its gleaming shores.

Yes, my dear ones, morning *has* broken. Today *is* “the harbinger of a new day.”²

¹ Thurman, Howard. “Concerning the Yucca”, *Meditations of the Heart*. Beacon Press, Boston 1981. Pp. 87-88.

How, you might ask, can two such contrasting and even opposing circumstances exist at the same time? How can a time of terrific flailing and desperate adversity be a time of hope – the time of the ushering in of the kingdom of greatness?

Dr. Thurman said it perfectly,

Such qualities as endurance ... tenderness, gentleness and boundless affection ... emerge in their fullest glory only when there is nothing more that adversity can do. There is a strange halo surrounding great tribulation which shines in a transcendent glory.³

Thurman spoke from experience. He has been called one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century. Yet he was a black man born to sharecropper parents in the south, in 1900. He and his wife were the first African Americans to travel to India to meet with Mohandas Gandhi. It was a prescient meeting:

During their discussion about systemic racial oppression, Gandhi predicted it could be through the African American(s) that nonviolence would exert its greatest global impact. This prediction found fulfillment in the unique and prophetic leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who

² Scott, Clinton Lee. "Morning", *Singing the Living Tradition*. Unitarian Universalist Association 1993. Responsive Reading 438.

³ Thurman. 88.

always carried a copy of Dr. Thurman's powerful and best selling book, *Jesus and The Disinherited*.⁴

Thurman was a spiritual mentor and guide to Dr. King. Thurman, chaplain at Boston University's Marsh Chapel for many years, founded the first intentionally inter-racial, inter-cultural and non-denominational congregation in the United States, in San Francisco, in 1944 - during the very height of World War II.⁵

The Church of the Fellowship of All Peoples was acclaimed around the world at the time of its founding and its members and financial supporters included such luminaries as Eleanor Roosevelt and Josephine Baker. Dr. Thurman attracted these people, and he needed them, because there was no Protestant denomination that would consistently support, sponsor or fund such a radical and quixotic enterprise. In fact, the very first worship service of Fellowship Church took place at our San Francisco church, then the First Unitarian Society of San Francisco – the only white church in the city that would allow blacks inside its doors.⁶

Dr. Thurman wrote powerfully of adversity - not of it quashing hope, but of its power to nurture, strengthen and embolden hope.

⁴ The Church of the Fellowship of All Peoples – History.
<http://www.fellowshipsf.org/history.html>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

This is yet another lesson that Martin Luther King took from his mentor.

Thurman's influence on Dr. King and, in turn, the course of American history cannot be overstated. We find in his words and deeds the road map to Martin Luther King's transformation of the United States and the lives of its black, brown, white and entire rainbow spectrum of citizens.

We are familiar with so much of the desperate adversity that Dr. King encountered, not the least of which was his own martyrdom to the cause of equality, justice and peace. Last Sunday, Reverend Kim spoke movingly of Dr. King's efforts for racial justice, his numerous arrests, the bomb threats, how the Christian clergy of this country turned their backs on him and his cause, prompting his iconic Letter from the Birmingham Jail.

King's Christian colleagues complained that he brought the arrests, the violence and the unrest on himself and "his" people. He did it to himself and "his" people by peacefully and lawfully insisting that the deprivations, degradations and despair that he and they had suffered for centuries must finally come to end. He brought it on

himself and “his” people by proclaiming that the law of our land should actually and truly be the law of our land.

Maybe, just maybe, there was the adversity lesson that King learned from Dr. Thurman. That in the adversity engendered by his nonviolent protests and actions he could create the conditions under which hope could germinate and blossom into a reality that had for so long, and for so many, been an impossibility. History has taught us that the adversity brought about by those nonviolent actions, the barbaric, inhumane and murderous reactions, finally did bring much of our country to its senses. Religious men and women from around the country, and the world, finally came to recognize and reject segregation, legalized discrimination and enshrined dehumanization.

But Dr. King did not stop there. Just as Howard Thurman had taught that bigotry and hatred hurt the oppressor as much the oppressed, so Dr. King insisted – time and time and time again – that equality and justice were indivisible. He preached and he prodded that equality under the law and civil rights for blacks meant nothing if they did not equally extend to impoverished whites, migrant workers and Native Americans.

Just five days before his assassination, in a speech at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, he repeated those stirring words from his Letter from the Birmingham Jail,

We must learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.⁷

And then he preached,

I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.⁸

He called to action those assembled in that great cathedral, “We are challenged to rid our nation and the world of poverty. Like a monstrous octopus, poverty spreads its nagging, prehensile tentacles into hamlets and villages all over our world.”⁹

He spoke movingly of a Poor People's Campaign, another non-violent march on Washington, which he planned to lead in just a few weeks. He sought to disabuse those gathered of the notion of poor people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, when so many had no boots at all. His booming voice declared,

⁷ Letter from the Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963.

⁸ Remaining Awake Through the Great Revolution, March 31, 1968.

⁹ Remaining Awake Through the Great Revolution, March 31, 1968.

Not only do we see poverty abroad, I would remind you that in our own nation there are about forty million people who are poverty stricken. I have seen them here and there. I have seen them in the ghettos of the North; I have seen them in the rural areas of the South; I have seen them in Appalachia. I have just been in the process of touring many areas of our country and I must confess that in some situations I have literally found myself crying.¹⁰

Can you imagine that? With all of the injustice, violence and hatred that he personally suffered during the civil rights era, and in its preceding years, he was moved to tears by the poverty of *all* Americans.

And he didn't stop there, he vociferously and repeatedly insisted that justice under the law in United States meant nothing if those same United States continued to perpetrate injustices around the world, especially in Southeast Asia – in Vietnam. Even in the face of adamant and growing opposition to his work for peace – from within in his own ranks and especially from without – he responded, “I’m not a consensus leader. I do not determine what is right and wrong by looking at the budget ... or a Gallup poll. Ultimately a genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus, but a molder of consensus.”¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Aside from the injustice of war, Dr. King sought to arouse consciousness that the vast expense of war precluded the country from making its vast wealth a bridge to the kingdom of greatness – a Promised Land here on earth – where deprivation, oppression, injustice and iniquity would exist no more.

And here we are now, some forty-one years later – the year that would have marked Dr. King’s 80th birthday. Much of Dr. King’s dream remains unrealized. Nevertheless, he would no doubt again be moved to tears – this time of joy – on the eve of the inauguration of our very first African American president. President Obama will take his Oath of Office on the Bible that both provided the faith, and bore witness to, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation; the Bible that emboldened him to fight a war for the cause of freedom, justice and the God-given premise that all humans are created equal.

Dr. King would likely shudder at the realization that our president will make his Oath of Office on the very grounds that once served as the swampy, mosquito-infested encampment that held captive the legions of slaves that built the Capitol building and the White House. But these acts alone will not be what ushers in the kingdom of greatness.

Our new president has repeatedly pledged that his government – our government - will act on behalf of all people not just the wealthy and powerful, the corporate executives and Wall Street scions. We are witness to this in his demands that the government act to keep workers working and homeowners in their homes. We have been participants in this by electing a president who promises to make healthcare accessible to all Americans – even in the face of our government’s staggering and war-bloated budget deficits.

We hear echoes of Dr. King’s demand that justice under the law within the United States must mean the same when our government acts outside of its borders, in his steadfast promises to close the Guantanamo Bay prison camp and to end all government-sponsored torture.

We see in President Obama a consensus molder who reaches to the far right and Pastor Rick Warren while at the same time including the voice of gay Episcopal Bishop, Gene Robinson; in his enlisting the support of conservatives as well as progressives.

Our new leader knows much of what it will take to create the kingdom of greatness. Even before he takes his oath, he has called

the nation – all of us - to a National Day of Service in honor of Dr. King. And he and his family will work alongside everyday Americans in providing that service. Even in the midst of his ascent to this highest office in the Land, he is cognizant of, and caring for, the poorest and most challenged among us.

In this call to service President Obama has acknowledged that he alone cannot usher in the kingdom of greatness. He needs us – each of us, all of us, every single one of us. In this call to service and in his own service, President Obama is planting hope in the soil of our nation's great adversity. It is for us and for him to cultivate that hope into action that brings to fruition the kingdom of greatness.

My dear ones, we are all the ushers into that kingdom. And that kingdom will not exist until each and every one of us resides in it, works for it, and unstintingly builds it. He cannot do it alone. We cannot do it alone. The kingdom of greatness calls to all of us. May we have the courage, the vision and the hope to answer it.

May it be so. Amen.