



## **DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S BIRTHDAY (BELOVED COMMUNITY DAY)**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

**(See the special poem, “Inauguration Ball 2009,” below.)**

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**Stephen G. Ray Jr., Guest Cultural Resource Commentator**

Neal F. and Ila A. Fisher Professor of Systematic Theology, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL

#### **I. History**

Of the many lessons we learn from the cruciform life of Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps the most important is that to follow Christ means to go where he lives. While biblical scholars and theologians often contend over what was/is the most significant dimension of Christ's life and work (Christology), they all agree that Scripture is a significant guide. When we look at the portrait of Jesus that is given to us in the New Testament (the Gospels and the Epistles), the most consistent feature of this portrayal is the centrality of Christ's ministry to the *least of these* amongst whom he lives both then and now.

The proclamation of his ministry to the poor, the captives, and the brokenhearted found in Luke 4:18-21 presages what will be the dominant contours of Jesus' ministry. So, whether giving sight to the blind, feeding the hungry, or healing those broken in body and spirit, the work of Jesus was most often recalled by the Gospel writers as meeting the immediate material and spiritual needs of those living on the margins of society. In fact, a major complaint of the religious authorities was that he supped too freely with “sinners” which most often meant those cast-off by society. The political authorities were no fans either. We can never forget that crucifixion was most often a punishment reserved for political crimes. It might well be said that Jesus' ministry on behalf of second-class citizens—restoring their hope, health and dignity—was the dimension of his work that the early Church thought it most important to remember and which the authorities would most like us to forget.

It is important to note why we remember these deeds of Christ. We remember because his works and his power created a community of people who lived in the power of God's love made manifest through the love of Jesus Christ and who, thus, became empowered to claim their full inheritance as children of God. This community, a beloved community if you will, was the forerunner and the herald of the Church. In turn, the Church is our home and refuge in this world today.

## **II. Citizen King, the Movie**

Contrary to the story often told about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership of the nonviolent civil rights struggle, the work to secure rights and freedoms for all of God's children began long before he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963 as a thirty-four year old preacher who ignited the imaginations of millions by sharing his dream of an America free of racism. More importantly, **it did not** simply come to a bloody end on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee nearly five years later.

In the years since those events unfolded, the man at their center, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has become a mythic figure, a minister whose oratory is etched into the minds of millions of Americans, a civil rights activist whose words and image are more hotly contested, negotiated and sold than almost anyone else's in American history.

The movie Citizen King<sup>1</sup> explores the last five years in King's life (1963-1968) by drawing on the personal recollections and eyewitness accounts of friends, movement associates, journalists, law enforcement officers, and historians to illuminate this little-known chapter in the story of America's most important and influential moral leader.

Citizen King pushes past the myths that have obscured King's story to reclaim the history of a people's leader and brings fresh insights to King's difficult journey, his charismatic—and at times flawed—leadership, and his truly remarkable impact. Churches, schools, and individuals may want to purchase a DVD of the movie and form discussion groups to talk about the myths, many of which have become legend, about Dr. King. It is a good idea in such discussions to ask the question: who benefits if the real work (his focus on the poor, his fight against war, and his stances against the status-quo black church and white government) of Dr. King is obscured?

## **III. Poetry – “Inauguration Ball 2009”**

Much has been said about Barack Obama's ascendancy to the presidency of the United States as a major representation of the realization of Dr. King's dream, that one day people would be judged by the content of their character and not just by the color of their skin. With this in mind, included in this cultural resource unit is a poem that I hope readers will share with others and include in their Sunday bulletins and use as a teaching and discussion tool. It speaks with poetic license of a special party that will be part of the 2009 Inaugural festivities. While doing this, it provides in a poetic, roll-call like manner, the names of so many who helped pave the way for President Obama and for us all.

## Inauguration Ball 2009

Guests began arriving early. There are no place cards and no name tags. Everyone knows everyone else here. Now, there's a grand foursome - Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz sharing laughs with Martin and Coretta Scott King. Looks like Hosea Williams refused the limo again, keeping it real. And my goodness; is that Rosa Parks out there on the dance floor with A. Phillip Randolph? Seated at a nearby table, Frederick Douglass has a captive audience in W.E.B. DuBois and Fannie Lou Hamer, and Medgar Evers has just joined them.

Marian Anderson was asked to sing tonight, but she only agreed to do it if accompanied by Marvin Gaye, John Lennon and Jimi Hendrix.

Look, there's Harriet Tubman. No one knows how she arrived, but there she is. And my guess is that, when the time comes, no one will see her leave.

There's Jackie Robinson swiftly making his way through the hall as the crowd parts like the Red Sea to the unmistakable sound of applause. "Run, Jackie, run!" Along the way he is embraced by Jesse Owens.

Three beautiful young women arrive with their escorts - Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney. Ms. Viola Liuzzo flew in from Michigan, exclaiming, "I could not miss this." Richard Pryor promised to be on his best behavior. "But I can't make any guarantees for Redd Foxx and Moms Mabley," he chuckled. Joe Louis just faked a quick jab to the chin of Jack Johnson, who smiled broadly while slipping it. We saw Billy Eckstine and Nat King Cole greet Luther Van Dross. James Brown and Josh Gibson stopped at Walter Payton's table to say hello.

I spotted Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem having a lively political discussion with Eldridge Cleaver. Pearl Harbor WWII hero Dorey Miller shared a few thoughts with Crispus Attucks, a hero of the Revolutionary War. And there is Madam C.J. Walker talking with Marcus Garvey about exporting goods to Africa.

General Benjamin O. Davis flew into Washington safely with an escort from the 99th Fighter Squadron - better known as The Tuskegee Airmen. At the table on the left are three formidable women - Shirley Chisholm, Sojourner Truth, and Barbara Jordan - gathered for a little girl-talk... about world politics.

As usual, all the science nerds seem to have gathered off in a corner, talking shop. There's Granville T. Woods and Lewis Latimer needling each other about whose inventions are better. Someone jokingly asked Benjamin Banneker if he had needed directions to Washington. And George Washington Carver was overheard asking, "What, no peanuts?"

Dueling bands? Anytime Duke Ellington and Count Basie get together, you know the place will be jumping. Tonight is special, of course, so we have Miles, Dizzy, and Satchmo sitting in on trumpet, with Coltrane, Cannonball, and Bird on sax.

Everyone's attention is directed to the dance floor where Bill "Bojangles" Robinson is tap dancing. Right beside him is Sammy Davis Jr., doing his Bojangles routine. And behind his back, Gregory Hines is imitating them both. Applause and laughter abound!

The Hollywood contingent has just arrived from the Coast. Led by filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, Paul Robeson, Canada Lee, and Hattie McDaniel, they find their way to their tables. Dorothy Dandridge, looking exquisite in gold lamé, is seen signaling to her husband, Harold Nicholas, who is standing on the floor with brother Fayard watching Gregory Hines dance. "Hold me back," quips Harold, "before I show that youngster how it's done." Much laughter!

Then a sudden hush comes over the room. The guests of honor have arrived. The President and Mrs. Obama looked out across the enormous ballroom at all the historic faces. Very many smiles, precious few dry eyes. Someone shouted out, "You did it! You did it!"

And President Obama replied, "No sir, you did it; you all - each and every one of you - did it. Your guidance and encouragement; your hard work and perseverance..."

Obama paused, perhaps holding back a tear.

"I look at your faces - your beautiful faces - and I am reminded that The White House was built by faces that looked just like yours.

On October 3, 1792, the cornerstone of The White House was laid, and the foundations and main residence of The White House were built mostly by both enslaved and free African Americans and paid Europeans. In fact, most of the other construction work was performed by immigrants, many of whom had not yet become citizens. Much of the brick and plaster work was performed by Irish and Italian immigrants. The sandstone walls were built by Scottish immigrants.

So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that The White House is, ultimately, The People's House, with each President serving as its steward. Since 1792, The People have trimmed its hedges, mowed its lawn, stood guard at the gate, cooked meals in the kitchen, and scrubbed its toilet bowls. But 216 years later, The People are taking it back!

Today, Michelle and I usher in a new era. But while we and our family look toward the future with so much hope, we know that we must also acknowledge fully this milestone in our journey. We want to thank each and every one of you for all you have done to make this day possible. I stand here before you, humbled and in awe of your accomplishments and sacrifice, and I will dedicate my

Presidency, in your honor, to the principles of peace, liberty and freedom. If it ever appears that I'm forgetting that, I know I can count on you to remind me."

Then he pointed to me near the stage. "Kenya, isn't it time for you to wake up for work? Isn't it time for all of us to wake up and get to work?"

Suddenly I awake and sit up in bed with a knowing smile. My wife stirs and sleepily asks if I'm OK. "I've never been better," I replied, "Never better. It's gonna be a good day."<sup>2</sup>

#### **IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment**

"Why (The King of Love is Dead)" was written by Nina Simone. In her typical queenly and riveting style, she wrote what many were thinking but could not eloquently articulate after Dr. King died.

##### **Why (The King of Love is Dead)**

What's gonna happen now? In all of our cities?  
My people are rising; they're living in lies.  
Even if they have to die  
Even if they have to die at the moment they know what life is  
Even at that one moment that ya know what life is  
If you have to die, it's all right  
Cause you know what life is  
You know what freedom is for one moment of your life

But he had seen the mountaintop  
And he knew he could not stop  
Always living with the threat of death ahead  
Folks you'd better stop and think  
Everybody knows we're on the brink  
What will happen, now that the King is dead?

We can all shed tears; it won't change a thing  
Teach your people: Will they ever learn?  
Must you always kill with burn and burn with guns  
And kill with guns and burn - don't you know how we gotta react?

But he had seen the mountaintop  
And he knew he could not stop  
Always living with the threat of death ahead  
Folks you'd better stop and think  
Everybody knows we're on the brink  
What will happen, now that the King of love is dead?<sup>3</sup>

Youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx-pfZDVm0Y>

The song “Blessed Martin, Pastor, Prophet,” offers a rarely seen in song picture of the full measure of Dr. King.

### **Blessed Martin, Pastor, Prophet**

#### *Verse One*

Holy God, you raise up prophets; praise and honor do we sing,  
for your faithful, humble servant Dr. Martin Luther King.

#### *Refrain*

Blessed Martin, pastor, prophet, you the mountain top did see;  
Blessed Martin, holy martyr: prayed that we may all be free.

#### *Verse Two*

Moral conscience of his nation, reconciling black and white,  
dreamed he of a just society, we must carry on his fight.

#### *Verse Three*

Teacher of Christ like non-violence to the outcast, poor and meek:  
greater weapon ‘gainst oppression is to turn the other cheek.

#### *Verse Four*

Preacher of Christ love for neighbor, he won Nobel’s prize for peace;  
people, beat your swords to plough-shares, wars ‘twixt nations all shall cease.

#### *Verse Five*

Champion of oppressed humanity suff’ring throughout all the word; he offered pride and  
dignity  
Let Christ’s banner be unfurled!

#### *Verse Six*

So, when felled by sniper’s bullet under heavens overcast, he could cry, “thank God  
almighty, I am free, I am free at last!”<sup>4</sup>

## **V. A Cruciform Life**

As we look at a portrayal of Jesus in today’s text, (Matthew 25:34-40) we take from it some sense of what the cruciform life looks like when we see its theological realization in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life. Most apparent is the dedication of King’s embodiment of the cruciform life to those persons who had been labeled by society and the religious authorities as “outside of the gate” of God’s love. While in his early ministry this meant a dedication to the plight of the entire black community, as his life and ministry unfolded, what this meant for King was a deeper and deeper involvement in the lives and struggle on behalf of the poorest African Americans in the rural South and urban North. This is not a small point of recognition as we remember King. Many of the organizations dedicated to the eradication of Jim and Jane Crow laws focused their work and advocacy on the empowerment and growth of the African American middle class. While certainly

this was a needed project, it is essential, if we are to fully appreciate the cruciform nature of King's life, to see that this was not his primary focus. We see this in many ways—whether it was him choosing to live in one of the poorest sections of the African American community in Chicago during his northern campaign or in the last two struggles of his life the Poor People's Campaign and the Memphis garbage workers strike, King demonstrated his dedication to the *least of these* as the central understanding of his calling.

## **VI. Stories and Illustrations**

We must never forget that King's journey begins as that of a prince in the black church. As numerous books on Dr. King's life and ministry suggest, by having a pedigree in the Baptist Church and exemplary credentials in the world of academia, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. could have chosen a life of privilege at any number of seminaries or universities or claimed the pulpit of any number of prestigious churches.<sup>5</sup> Instead, he first chose to go back to the South, forgoing greater freedom and opportunity in the North. Next, when the call of history fell upon him at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, King answered it and for the rest of his life moved farther and farther away from personal security until, finally, he met "his day" while taking a break from organizing poor people in order to work on behalf of garbage workers. While we cannot ever be sure about these things, one wonders if indeed it might not be that when King strides into the Kingdom he will have a poor person on one side of him and a garbage worker on the other.

During this year's King Day celebrations, churches may want to recall that what his life was, and is, for us today, is a shining symbol of what it means to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and to live the cruciform life. Living this type of life is the call to every Christian but, especially, to those whom God has given such a powerful witness.

## **VII. Making the Day a Memorable Learning Moment**

The following suggestions, along with the material provided in the lection commentary and the worship unit, are provided to assist preachers, Christian Education leaders, worship leaders, and others in making Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday (Beloved Community Sunday) or other King Day celebrations memorable for your congregation or organization.

- Show video footage from the 2001 television movie, Boycott, about the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the rise of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the leader, not only of the local efforts to desegregate buses, but eventually the international struggle to establish human rights for oppressed people worldwide.
- Books to enhance understanding of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Beloved Community Sunday):

Baldwin, Lewis V. To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992.

Carson, Clayborne, Ed. The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. New York, NY: Time Warner Publishing, 1998.

Dyson, Michael Eric. I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr. New York, NY: Free Press, 2001.

Harding, Vincent G. Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.

Washington, James M., Ed. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1991.

Dyson, Michael Eric. April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How it Changed America. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2008.

### Notes

1. Bagwell, Orlando and W. Noland Walker. "Citizen King." American Experience. PBS. WGBH, Boston. 19 Jan. 2004.
2. Kenyada, Richard. "Inauguration Ball 2009." Reflections in the Dark Room: The Black Essays. (To be published January 2009) Copyright © 2008 Richard Kenyada
3. "Why the King of Love Is Dead." By Nina Simone. Nina Simone: The Legend. Manchester, MO: Quantum Leap Records, LLC, 2004.
4. Lewis, Harold T. "Blessed Martin, Pastor, Prophet." Ed. Horace Clarence Boyer. Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal. New York, NY: Church Pub, 1993. #46
5. For more details see, Garrow, David J. Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. New York, NY: W. Morrow, 1986; Branch, Taylor. Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989; Baldwin, Lewis V. There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991; Oates, Stephen B. Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1982.