



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

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Friday, January 17, 2011

(Be sure to view the great videos and links included in this material.)

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I. Historical Considerations

Racial discrimination continued after the end of the slave system in the United States. The Civil War and Reconstruction did not wipe-out a disregard for African Americans, but the ways in which this disregard could be expressed and structured changed in that racism would come to be defined by rules and regulations that hide some of its ugliest dimensions. For instance, there were no more slave plantations; instead, there were sharecroppers who seemed to have “freedom.” No physical bondage, but rather low paying jobs that kept African Americans confined to a low quality of life, and restrictions on where and how African Americans could live. We call these restrictions and regulations “Jim and Jane Crow.” This pattern continued until the civil rights movement, when the nastiness of racial discrimination was exposed by the light of non-violent and direct resistance.

While there were many moments of protest, we often think of the modern civil rights movement as having taken form with the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and growing beyond this point until the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Numerous figures played a role in this movement toward a reconstituted United States based on democratic principles and full citizenship for all; however, Martin L. King, Jr. captured the popular imagination of the United States like no other. His graphic language of transformative possibilities, laced with the best of the Christian tradition, and peppered with keen insights from the best of the Western intellectual tradition, sparked a sense of hopefulness that came to define the human potential for progress and life affirming

activity. His dream for a new United States came to represent the dominant model of new life, in a new United States:

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character... This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.¹

Some objected to his approach and fought against the goals of the civil rights movement as he articulated them, but the positive impact of his vision and work are undeniable. In significant ways he has come to represent the best of the US vision of life during the twentieth century, and this is graphically represented through the making of his birthday into a national holiday as of 1983. (The holiday was first celebrated in 1986, and in all fifty states as of 2000. Consistent with the “Uniform Monday Holiday Act,” the holiday is not on Dr. King’s actual birthday (January 15) but is celebrated on the third Monday of January. However, the federal holiday during which the birth (and legacy) of Dr. King is honored is one of only eleven federal holidays.)

King is best associated with the struggle to end race-based discrimination, yet the push for human dignity expands beyond that particular struggle to solidarity with all who are oppressed. In this regard, our celebration of King’s legacy should include efforts to end sexism, ageism, homophobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination that still plague our churches and our country. The King Center, in Atlanta, provides these words that speak well to this larger obligation: “We call you to commemorate this Holiday by making your personal commitment to serve humanity with the vibrant spirit of unconditional love that was his greatest strength, and which empowered all of the great victories of his leadership. And with our hearts open to this spirit of unconditional love, we can indeed achieve the Beloved Community of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream.”²

II. Biographical Reflection

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 to Martin Luther King, Sr. and Alberta Williams King. He and his father were actually named Michael Luther, but changed their names in honor of the Protestant Reformation leader Martin Luther.

He was born into a middle-class family in Atlanta, Georgia. And while Georgia contained all the markers of segregation, King remarks that his family’s stature and his father’s strong attitude toward white supremacy meant that he had few encounters with the worst and more violent dimensions of segregation. King remembers his father’s determination to maintain integrity and self-worth. Young King embraced this posture toward the world; and, it would continue to inform his sense of the full humanity of all people. King’s father and grandfather were prominent Baptist ministers, but King, Jr., did not decide to enter ministry until he was in college. While at Morehouse, King

encountered figures such as Benjamin Mays, who demonstrated an ability to combine a commitment to the life of the mind and the church. King would gain much inspiration from figures like Mays, and would use them in the church and academy to shape both his intellectual growth and his sense of church and world ministry.

After attending Morehouse College (1948), he undertook his theological training at Crozer Theological Seminary graduating in 1951, and eventually completed his PhD at Boston University (1955). While working on his dissertation he also began his work as a civil rights leader and pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. From the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 through the ongoing activities in other locations such as Birmingham, Alabama, King established both the theological commitments and form of activism that would mark the civil rights movement. He also played a significant role in the development of the movement's infrastructures, as a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This organization was meant to help civil rights activists better coordinate the resources available through the participating churches.

What King embraced, and is remembered for, is his preaching and practice of a "Social Gospel." This means King understood Christian commitment to have felt consequences. He believed anyone who claimed to be a Christian had an obligation to express that commitment through work on the behalf of others. King combined this attention to the best of the Christian faith with the activism style associated with Mahatma Gandhi's struggle against injustice in India. What emerged was the non-violent and direct action that came to define so much of the modern civil rights movement. King maintained this approach to struggle, and with time expanded his commitment to include poverty (i.e., "The Poor Peoples Campaign") as he came to better understand the numerous forms of injustice that impact life in the United States.

The pressure placed on the United States – the images of brutality against those involved in the civil rights efforts, the demands for new legislation – resulted in progress, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that outlawed significant forms of discrimination against African Americans and women in organizations and institutions serving the public. King would see this major victory against injustice. But, he would be assassinated (April 4) days before the Civil Rights Act of 1968 that outlined on paper an end to discrimination in housing was signed into law (April 11).

III. Songs That Speak to the Moment

We Shall Overcome

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
We shall overcome someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.

The Lord will see us through, The Lord will see us through,
The Lord will see us through someday;

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.

We're on to victory, We're on to victory,
We're on to victory someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We're on to victory someday.

We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We'll walk hand in hand someday.

We are not afraid, we are not afraid,
We are not afraid today;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We are not afraid today.

The truth shall set us free, the truth shall set us free,
The truth shall set us free someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
The truth shall set us free someday.

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall live in peace someday.³

Keep Your Eyes on the Prize (Hold On)

Paul and Silas, bound in jail
Had no money for to go their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on
Hold on, (hold on), hold on, (hold on)
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!
Hold on, (hold on), hold on, (hold on)
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!

Paul and Silas began to shout
Doors popped open, and they walked out
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on
Hold on, (hold on), hold on, (hold on)
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!

Well, the only chains that we can stand
Are the chains of hand in hand
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Got my hand on the freedom plow
Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!
Hold on, (hold on), hold on, (hold on)
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!
Hold on, (hold on), hold on, (hold on)
Keep your Eyes on the Prize, hold on!

Hold on, (hold on), hold on, (hold on)
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!
Hold on, (hold on), hold on, (hold on)
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!

(Hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on)
(Hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on)
(Hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on).^{4&5}

Someday We'll All Be Free

*The spoken word selection that accompanies today's material is titled "Someday We'll All Be Free/Psalm 78." By Raphael Warnock with Jennifer Holiday. [Goodness and Mercy](http://www.rafaelwarnock.com). INDIE. 2010. Available at <http://www.rafaelwarnock.com>

IV. Making This a Memorable Learning Moment

Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.'s birthday is an opportunity to reflect on the challenges we face in life, and to celebrate the many ways in which we have overcome those difficulties. This is not to suggest that we should embrace suffering and misery as necessary; but rather, we should celebrate each third Monday of January as a reminder of our obligation to never let suffering have the last word in our lives and the lives of those with whom we are in community. This federal holiday provides an opportunity to renew commitment to religious faith that sustains and advances our activity on behalf of those who encounter hardship in this life. Commitment to the work and sacrifice exemplified by King should be borne out on this federal holiday as our embrace of religious life and faith-based work that enlivens the full humanity, or as King said the "somebodyness" of those who enter our lives and maintains the vision of the "Beloved Community."

V. Learning More about This Moment

Video Presentations

- "Citizen King." Television series, PBS. Dir. Orlando Bagwell and Noland Walker. 1988. PBS Paramount, 2005. DVD.
- "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Historical Perspective." Dir. Thomas Friedman. 1994. Xenon, 2003. DVD.

- “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965.” 1987. Dir. Henry Hampton. Blackside and PBS, 2010.
- “Let Freedom Sing: How Music Inspired the Civil Rights Movement.” Dir. Jon Goodman. Time Life Entertainment, 2009.
- King, Martin Luther. “I Have a Dream.” YouTube. Online location: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbUfL_0vAJk accessed 1 December 2010
- King, Martin Luther. “Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam.” YouTube. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b80Bsw0UG-U> accessed 1 December 2010
- King, Martin Luther. “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” YouTube. Online location: Part One: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2EnnciLMX4> Part Two: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySGDMdQaDA0> accessed 1 December 2010

Images

- Flip Schulke Archives online location: <http://www.flipphoto.com/> accessed 1 December 2010
- Various prints and photographs of Martin Luther King. Prints & Photographs Online Catalogue. Library of Congress. Online location: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=martin%20luther%20king> accessed 1 December 2010

Books

- Baldwin, Lewis. Never to Leave Us Alone: The Prayer Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.
- Baldwin, Lewis. To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Baldwin, Lewis. There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991.
- Cone, James H. Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.
- King, Martin Luther. Strength to Love. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.
- King, Martin Luther. Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010.

- King, Martin Luther. The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2001.
- King, Martin Luther. The Measure of a Man. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
- King, Martin Luther. Why We Can't Wait. New York, NY: Signet Classics, 2000.
- King, Martin Luther. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. Ed. James Washington. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1990.
- Pinn, Anthony. The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003.

Notes

1. King, Martin L. "I Have a Dream." Martin Luther King Online. Online location: <http://www.mlkonline.net/dream.html> accessed 1 December 2010
2. King, Coretta Scott. "The Meaning of the Martin Luther King Holiday." The King Center. Online location: <http://www.thekingcenter.org/KingHoliday/Default.aspx> accessed 1 December 2010
3. "We Shall Overcome." The lyrics for this song were derived from Charles Tindley's gospel song "I'll Overcome Some Day" (1900), and the opening and closing melody from the 19th-century spiritual "No More Auction Block for Me" (a song that dates before the Civil War); "We Shall Overcome." Lyrics. Online location: <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/We-Should-Overcome-lyrics-Variou-Artists/410AAAC037CA3D6248256AF3003CD7BC> accessed 5 December 2010
4. "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize (Hold On.)" The Lyrics for this song were written by Alice Wine in 1956. The song was composed as a hymn before World War I and is based on the "Gospel Plow" also known as "Hold On" or "Keep Your Hand on the Plow." Moses, Robert Parris. Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1990.
5. Jackson, Mahalia and Duke Ellington and Orchestra. "Keep Your Hand on the Plow." Historic performance at Newport Jazz Festival, 1958. Hear Ms. Jackson introduce herself and Duke Ellington close the show. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzcYajuigHk&feature=related> accessed 5 December 2010. There is more information about the recording and Ms. Jackson online at: <http://www.musthear.com/music/reviews/mahalia-jackson/live-at-newport-1958/> accessed 5 December 2010