

“Making Dreams Real”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, January 17, 2021

Reading: Our reading is an excerpt from the speech given by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King shared his dream. We share his words as he delivered them, acknowledging that he was a product of his time.

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

Sermon/Homily

This weekend, as a nation we turn our attention to honoring the life, work and prophetic voice of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As with all of our rituals and routines, this year’s events are impacted by COVID, and many celebrations will be virtual. Honoring Dr. King this weekend is made even more poignant by the events of last Wednesday when white supremacist militants attacked our nation and attempted a coup of our democratically-elected government.

There is so much in our world right now: on-going denial of the democratic process, the violent display of right-wing extremism, the Martin Luther King holiday, the upcoming inauguration, oh, and the pandemic. I recognize that I often feel overwhelmed by a whole range of emotions from sadness to rage to guilt, embarrassment and worry. Perhaps these emotions sound familiar to you. I have been trying hard to center myself so that I can be present to my emotions and yours, as well as others that I am in contact with. Some days are better than others. I hope that you are taking care in ways that nourish you, too.

For some of us, last week's violence was surprising-attempted coups happen in other countries, not the US. For some of us, our experience of social norms and known history told us that something like this would not happen here.

And, some of us weren't surprised by the events last week. I don't say that to minimize the terrible attack at all. It's just that the 1-6-21 attack on democracy was just the latest horrific display of the supremacy that has been in this country for the past 400 years. Those who attacked democracy last week are part of America and this is part of our American history. Just like previous violence by white supremacist militants, those who participated in the attempted coup last week used their power and privilege to armed themselves and plan for violent overthrow of the government. They received encouragement and aid from the current president, some members of congress, and some members law enforcement. Despite warnings from the FBI and others about planned violence, the response to protect people and property was ineffective, harmful, and fatal, further signs of a deeply-biased system.

In 1963, the nation was in the destructive grip of Jim Crow and racked with division about calls for racial justice. On August 28, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King spoke of the urgency to address racism in America. He named that black children were stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: for whites only. He named that African-Americans could not find rest at many motels and hotels when they were travelling. He named lack of access to housing, police brutality, and barriers to voting for black citizens. Some of those more explicit signs of racism are no longer apparent, but the racism continues in systems set up to support some and exclude others.

The first black president and the backlash against him, President Obama's very existence as well as all he accomplished, has taught us that anti-racism work is not even close to finished. Dr. King warned us: "The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."

On that same August day almost 60 years ago, Dr. King spoke of his dreams. He spoke of realizing the dream of America that all men would be created equal. He spoke of a time when (quote) "the sons of slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." He spoke of the transformation of Southern states into oases of freedom and justice.

King was a product of his time and so were his dreams. Did he imagine a world where women and LGBTQ activists marched for their own civil rights, or where activists joined together to call for all human rights? Could he have imagined a black president? Could he imagine that the two senators from Georgia would be a Jewish man and a black preacher from his own church in Atlanta, brought into office because of organizing by powerful, strong, black women like Stacy Abrams?

King did know that his calls for justice were seen as a threat by some and that he might not see racial justice advance as much as he wished in his lifetime. He drew on his faith and the power of his ancestors to sustain him. Stacy Abrams and other women organizers in Georgia called on the legacy of Dr. King and those before him. And, they have been persistent; their organizing did not begin 6 months ago, or last year or even four years ago. They have been working hard for more than a decade to educate and register voters and turn out the vote. Their work is not done and must continue.

The work is the same, but dreams change over time. They change as people grow and change. Dreams change as situations and times change. Every new generation requires revisiting our dreams and our work, refining how we will be together. Many of you have memories of the anti-racism work of the 1960's, and from your stories, I know many of you participated in that work. Many of you are participating in anti-racism work today. Some things are the same and some are different. Supremacy and racism are the default in our nation; each generation must unlearn biases and learn how not pass them on to the next generation.

Times of crisis and uncertainty, like 1963 and like now, invite us to revisit big questions of who we are, why we are here, and what comes next. As we remember Dr. King's dreams and calls for justice, we recognize that it is time for new dreams for our nation. As we are taking in and processing all that has happened, many of us are asking, "What now? What next?"

It is also time for us as a faith community to revisit our dreams.

I believe that asking big questions and accompanying each other as we seek answers is one of the purposes of a faith community. This is reflected in the 4th Unitarian Universalist principle, in which we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This time of crisis and uncertainty is exactly the time to ask big questions for our community.

The OUUC Board has been clear that it is time to ask some big questions together, a longing that the Ministerial Search Team and I heard about throughout the search process and have heard ever since. We are hungry for clarity about who we are as a community now and how we want to be together and in the world. After research and discernment, the Board has selected a facilitator and process to guide us in this work. UU minister, Jake Morrill and the Board will offer a structured process for imagining our future together and how to make our dreams real. We hope you will lend your voice to this important work. We welcome all voices, those connected to our community and those who haven't found us yet.

To help guide our work, Jake will focus our inquiry at four levels: within, among, beyond, and throughout. Each of these is important and each offers the opportunity for justice work.

"Within" addresses the spiritual needs of individuals in our community; how we grow spiritually and how we articulate our values and beliefs. This focuses our attention on individuals. The justice work for "within" is that we must understand our own values in order to express them in the world, and we must know our own challenges and biases in order to transform them.

"Among" is how we are together in the OUUC community; how we covenant to be together, how we make decisions, how we govern ourselves, how we share ministry,

and how we address conflict. This focuses our attention on the OUUC community as a whole. The justice work for “among” is creating clear and inclusive covenants and living into them, as well as naming and working through conflict.

We will focus on “beyond,” how we express our values in the larger world, whether it is Olympia, Washington, the nation or the entire Earth. This focuses our attention out beyond ourselves. This is an area that has been a focus in the history of OUUC, so the justice work here is clear-it’s our Faith in Action in the larger world.

Last, we will reflect on “throughout,” which addresses the institution of OUUC. It is our organizational structure, staffing, financial foundation, technology, and capacity to provide safety. This focuses our attention on our organization. The justice work here is how we create and support an organization that is diverse, inclusive, strong, and just. It’s things like acknowledging and addressing power and authority, spending our money and using our resources in line with our values, and creating infrastructure to support our mission.

All of this may sound a bit overwhelming. The visioning process will ask us to step outside of how we have done things. It will invite us to ask big questions to imagine who we are and how we want to be together. Rest assured that it is a process we will do together, supporting each other to share our dreams and make them real.

In the speech naming his dreams, Dr. King also articulated his spiritual grounding:

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... 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.

There is much work to do in this world in so many areas, anti-racism, economic equality, climate justice, and more. In the months to come, together we will draw on our ancestors and spiritual grounding to articulate our faith and the transformation we long for in ourselves, in our community and in our world. We will speak our dreams and draw on our belief that it is possible to bend the future toward justice.

Poet Lucille Clifton said, "We cannot create what we can't imagine." Dr. King dreamed big and he sacrificed to make those dreams real. Let's be inspired by Dr. King's example. Let's dream together, dream big and deep and wide. And, then we'll roll up our sleeves and get to work, together. May we by our actions, make this so.