



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Dr. King’s Dark Night”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on January 20, 2013

*The reading preceding the sermon was from a sermon Martin Luther King, Jr. preached in 1967:*

The first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years, very happy years; didn’t have to worry about anything. I have a marvelous mother and father. They went out of the way to provide everything for their children, basic necessities. I went right on through school, I never had to drop out to work or anything. And you know, I was about to conclude that life had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package.

Now of course I was religious; I grew up in the church. My father is a preacher, my grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher... so I didn’t have much choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church, and the church meant something very real to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must have it if you’re going to walk the lonely paths of this life...

But one day after finishing school, I was called to a little church down in Montgomery, Alabama, and I started preaching there. Things were going well in that church; it was a marvelous experience. But one day a year later, a lady by the name of Rosa Parks decided that she wasn’t going to take it any longer. She stayed in a bus seat, and... it was the beginning of a movement where fifty thousand black men and women refused absolutely to ride the city buses. And we walked together for 381 days...

Things were going well for the first few days, but then about ten or fifteen days later, after the white people in Montgomery knew that we meant business, they started doing some nasty things. They started making nasty telephone calls, and it came to the point that some days more than forty telephone calls would come in, threatening my life, the life of my family, the life of my children. I took it for a while in a strong manner.

But I never will forget one night very late. It was around midnight. And you can have some strange experiences at midnight. I had been out meeting with the steering committee all that night. And I came home, and my wife was in the bed and I immediately crawled into bed to get some rest to get up early the next morning to try to keep things going. And immediately the telephone started ringing and I picked it up. On the other end was an ugly voice. That voice said to me, in substance, "Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house."

I'd heard these things before, but for some reason that night it got to me. I turned over and I tried to go to sleep, but I couldn't sleep. I was frustrated, bewildered. And then I got up and went back to the kitchen and I started warming some coffee, thinking that coffee would give me a little relief. And then I started thinking about many things. I pulled back on the theology and philosophy that I had just studied in the universities, trying to give philosophical and theological reasons for the existence and the reality of sin and evil, but the answer didn't quite come there. I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born about a month earlier. We have four children now, but we only had one then. She was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted, and loyal wife who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer; I was weak.

Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about. That power that can make a way out of no way. And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee—I never will forget it. And oh yes, I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right; I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now; I'm faltering; I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak."

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world."

And I'll tell you, I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roll. I felt sin-breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone.<sup>1</sup>

I share this story with you because it is key to understanding and appreciating the man whose life and ministry we celebrate today, and because it has something to teach us too. That night was pivotal in forming Martin Luther King, Jr. into the spiritual leader, the civil rights leader, the political leader who changed our nation. It was on that dark night when he discovered that those things he had depended on--his loving family, his upbringing in the church, his fine education, his extraordinary mind--all of these were insufficient in the face of human hatred and injustice.

It was there, on that night, that Martin Luther King got religion. Though he grew up in the church, this was the first time that religion became real for him, got hold of him; that he felt and knew the presence of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool," available online at [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_why\\_jesus\\_called\\_a\\_man\\_a\\_fool/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_why_jesus_called_a_man_a_fool/)

In the years to come, Martin had the strength and courage to struggle and fight and finally to get to the mountaintop, and to lead his people there, because he had been through this dark valley. It was there that he discovered the truth of those ancient words, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 23:4). That's where his strength and courage and grace came from--from the knowledge that God was with him always.

One of the truths about life is that we don't know what the future will bring. And it's good, isn't it, that we don't always know what's coming? There's an invocation that asks, "How do we know that God is with us?" And it answers, "We know, because we will be led to places we did not plan to go."

Martin Luther King, Jr. grew up with some amount of comfort and privilege. He did not plan for the life that he ended up living. After completing his doctorate at Boston University, he could have stayed in the North, where he'd have a safe and successful ministry. But he and Coretta returned to the South, because they were needed, and thought they could do some good there.

When the times demanded a leader, he answered that call. Asked to head the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as a new and inexperienced minister he could have said "No, not yet." But he said yes, putting himself and his family in harm's way. He wasn't the only one--the history of the Civil Rights Movement is full of names and stories of those who sacrificed for the cause of freedom, most of them common people, whose acts of extraordinary courage brought us to where we are today.

It would be so easy, on this day, to put Rev. King on a pedestal and worship him. It would be so easy to sing his praises and to ask, "Where are the leaders, the prophets, of today? Where are those who will stand up for love and justice, against violence and against hate? It would be so easy say "I wish I had some of what he had," and to ignore the fact that, if things are going to change for the better, we each have a part to play. His words from the Birmingham Jail should ring in our ears:

"More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in the generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people." His life and witness calls each of us to not be silent, to spend our lives on what matters, to stand for what is right and good.

For your minister this is a full weekend. There's the interfaith service at Temple Emmanu-El on Friday night, our breakfast with Calvary and then worship today, the NAACP breakfast tomorrow. Sometimes I wonder about these gatherings, where we sing songs and hear speeches and sermons and the words of Dr. King. I wonder, is anybody changed? Is anybody inspired to do something to expand civil rights, and serve the poor, and decrease violence and increase love? Because if no one is strengthened and inspired to make this world a better place, then what's the point?

Well, on Friday night at the temple, I wish you had been there. Because you would have heard the young people of the Temple and of Calvary singing together, and their enthusiasm and their music lifted me up. Because you would have seen and heard the joint choir of Jews and Baptists, singing together. Because you would have seen Martin's dream come to life: "that day when all God's children, blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, join hands and sing." You would have felt the spirit alive and flowing through that place. And you need a dose of that, if you are going to have hope and faith, if you are going to have the energy and courage to do some good in this world.

Rev. King doesn't need us to pay him homage. What his legacy demands is that we pick up his work and carry it forward. On this day, when we remember and celebrate his life, aren't we compelled to ask, "Am I doing my part?" It's a good day, remembering those who have gone before us, to look in the mirror and ask, "How am I serving the cause of love and justice? Are I spending my life on what matters? Am I serving something larger than myself?"

We celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. because of what he accomplished and what he sacrificed. We love and admire him, because of how he lived so fully and beautifully the life he was called to live. In some deep place, don't we wonder, "Can I be that fully alive, that committed, too?"

On that dark night in Montgomery, fearing for his own life and the life of his family, fearing that he would let down the people and the movement that so depended on him, he came face to face with his own inadequacy. Tired and weak and worn, he discovered his deep need religion for that was real, not theory or theology, but the felt presence of the living and liberating God.

This moment calls to mind words attributed to President Lincoln: "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." At his kitchen table on that dark night, Martin Luther King admitted his weakness and he asked for help. And help came. He said, "It seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.'"

Have you ever felt the power of that mysterious and holy spirit that tends to come when the night is darkest, when you are at the end of your rope, aware of your frailties and failings, pushed to your knees?

In my experiences of that dark night, when I have asked for help, it has always come. Not always how I wanted or expected, but what I needed--liberation from my fears and the assurance of God's promise: "I am with you." I need that assurance and I crave that presence, and I suspect you do too. So why do we, so often, resist it and hide from it?

That holy spirit was alive and coursing through Temple Emmanu-El on Friday night, and I left there filled with that spirit. What I experienced there is what I hope for us, as individuals and as a church--that we will "get religion" in the best possible way--that we will be filled with the spirit and in touch with that force which is always on the side of love and justice; that this will compel us to

be grateful and glad for these lives we have been given, and to remember that we each to have a part to play, a contribution to make.

There's an old Hassidic saying about the importance of being true to who you are. Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?'" So don't ask, "Why am I not more like Dr. King?" Ask, "Am I fully living my own life, this one life I have been given?"

This day, when we celebrate a great American, a man of deep faith and commitment, when we remember those who, through the generations, struggled for and finally gained basic civil rights, we are compelled to pray:

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,  
Thou Who hast brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou Who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.<sup>2</sup>

Keep us faithful, God, keep us moving forward together, toward that day when all of us, all of us, shall be free.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> These lines are from James Weldon Johnson's hymn *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.