

Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Amos 5:24
 January 15, 2023

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Today, we honor the living legacy and prophetic words of Dr. Martin Luther King. It's amazing to think about the fact that if he were alive he'd be 94!

In a moment, we'll hear Dr King's voice reading the opening lines of his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” where he was imprisoned on April 16th, 1963. The city of Birmingham was experiencing extreme racial violence. Demonstrations and peaceful protests were only met with more violence.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in Atlanta at the time and decided to travel to Birmingham to help mobilize the intensifying movement. Eight white clergymen had just published an open letter on April 12 in the Birmingham News urging “restraint”. King was arrested later that day and spent 9 days in the Birmingham jail, sometimes in solitary confinement. He was not allowed to make a phone call even though Mrs. King had recently given birth. In the end, the Kennedy Administration intervened on King's behalf and he was released.

While imprisoned, King wrote his letter in longhand on scraps of newsprint and even toilet paper, anything he could find in his cell that would hold his heavy heart.¹ The letter itself was his response to a public statement issued by **the** white religious leaders of the South. King's notes, passed through a jail trustee and then to King's lawyer, were transcribed by a secretary and compiled into a letter that would then be sent out to seven of the eight clergymen. The letter was copied by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and mailed to other clergy throughout the state and ultimately, the world.

As people of faith and people of justice, hearing this letter again is a reminder to me of what the summons of human rights is. Dr. King addressed this letter to white clergy and by implication to all of us who are white.

King's letter is today's living scripture along with the Old Testament prophet Amos' pronouncement that “justice shall one day roll down like a mighty stream...” (5:24) And the word is still speaking among us...After we hear Dr. King's voice, others in our community will read aloud for us parts of the letter printed before you in the bulletin. In between each section of the letter, we as a congregation will say: “We shall overcome.”

I told some of my 6 nieces and nephews this week what I was working on for today's Sunday service and how I was re-reading and listening to Dr. MLK's letters and speeches. They are all children of color. They are Indian American and African American with roots in New Delhi, India, Tanzania, Namibia, Congo and Nigeria. The oldest, Christopher, is in college outside of DC, the youngest is 6 months old from Houston. I am afraid for them. I am afraid for them and the Birmingham that they may experience and will experience.

Being part of a congregation like ours that sees injustice and seeks to change it and dismantle racism, is energizing. We need each other to support one another as we engage in anti-racism work. And yet, I know that as a white cis-gendered clergy woman of privilege from Old

¹ A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. Edited by James M. Washington. (1986).

Lyme, I can do much more than I am... as I commit and recommit to anti-racist work on behalf of the children in my family and all children. I also recognize (and wince) when I know that I have the luxury to put it all aside whenever it feels like too much.

In her recent book, *The Trayvon Generation*, Elizabeth Alexander, writes about her two twenty-something sons and all the Trayvons that have been killed by systemic, racial violence in their lifetimes thus far. With all of this as a backdrop, she writes of her hope and knowing “there is no progress without generations working together. And there is no North Star without vigorous creativity to imagine it for us and mark where it lights the way.”²

Dr. King, of course, was that light (among many lesser known heroes of the Civil Rights Era and the unnamed multitudes in his generation)- he remains a north star for us, a light that continues to shine more truth, wisdom and challenge into our world.

Let’s listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATPSht6318o>

² Elizabeth Alexander, *The Trayvon Generation*, pg. 130.