

**“HOW LONG TO SING THIS SONG?”**  
**Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; John 1:29-42**  
**January 16, 2005**  
**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday**  
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We are separated by miles, by a couple of generations, and by political and social agendas from the days when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., sermonized from the inside of a Birmingham Jail, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and from the pulpit of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Although I was born two and one half years after Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, his life and ministry have always been an inspiration to me. I have always been intrigued by his ministry and talent at bringing his faith into immediate dialogue with his public life. He could have chosen to preach messages of equality from the pulpit and simply leave it there, hoping that some would take his words and take action. But as we know, his sermons carried him far beyond the pulpit and into a ministry that changed and continues to change our nation. As a pastor, I find it is a daunting task to even step into a pulpit when I know that Dr. King stood in a pulpit much like this one. As I prepared my sermon this week, the legacy of Dr. King has pushed and prodded me more than I was prepared for.

The lectionary readings for today take us from the Psalmist’s song of thanksgiving and praise to the second of the Servant songs of Isaiah; and, finally, we again return to the shores of the Jordan River where John’s gospel recalls the aftermath of the baptism of Jesus.

The words of the 40<sup>th</sup> Psalm are words that I hear often. This is my favorite Psalm, but I most often hear this psalm as a benediction to a rock and roll beat. As a serious student of popular music, especially the music of the Irish quartet known as “U2,” I know the first three verses of this Psalm as the lyrics for a song simply titled, “40.” I have heard these words echoed by 60,000 people as “U2’s” band leaves the stage. And on video, I have heard the words of this Psalm echoing through Red Rocks Canyon in Colorado. These words have been imbedded in my brain as I have waited in seemingly endless lines of people waiting to get out of a parking lot. This is my favorite Psalm because of the brilliant images that are found here—images that translate from an intimate Bible study to a concert hall. As the Psalm begins, the psalmist speaks of God hearing his desperate cries and somehow lifting him out of the muddy and slimy pit so that he could stand on solid ground—upon a rock. And in that moment of rescue, the psalmist was no longer filled with a song of desperation but with a song of praise for the God who rescues. And so the Psalmist begins to sing a new song, a song that proclaims the good news of a God who has an open ear; a God whose love and faithfulness is overwhelming and cannot be hidden. This Psalm is a proclamation of the blessings of knowing and trusting in God. It is a song of giftedness where the overwhelming realities of God’s gifts simply must be shared. Many will see and hear a new song of faith and trust.

As we move to Isaiah, we encounter a familiar theme. The reading from Isaiah follows directly from the Isaiah passage we heard last week. However, it doesn’t follow chronologically in the

Bible; this is the second of the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah. Last week’s reading from the 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter spoke of the coastlands that await the establishment of justice and law. In this reading we begin with a plea for the coastlands to hear the words of the prophet “who was born already called into God’s service.” In this servant song we, as Christians, recognize the prophetic language of the “as-yet-far-off” Jesus. But before we throw our “Jesus is coming” vision upon this passage, we must first see that this passage again reminds each one of us of our call to be a servant in the service of God’s vision. It is too easy to see this passage as a proclamation about Jesus when the true measure of these words are in the steady hand that God is offering to the ancient nation of Israel. As the outcast and lost people in Babylon, Israel had every reason to turn its back on God or to think that God had abandoned them; but this passage is calling them back, reminding them that God has not forgotten or forsaken them—that their city will rise again. And not only will their city rise, but it will be a light to the surrounding nations: God’s people shall lead the world into the light of justice and mercy. To the servant people the prophet brings a message of hope and promise.

Finally, we have the gospel reading from John, which comes in the aftermath of the baptism of Jesus. In this passage, we are reminded that in his baptism, the Holy Spirit came and rested upon Jesus and that that vision proclaimed to all who saw that Jesus was the Messiah who came to fulfill all prophecy and restore God’s mercy and justice to the world. As the Holy Spirit lingers, proclaiming that God’s promises have come to be, Jesus begins calling his disciples. And so, after John shares his experience of identifying Jesus, he also tells of the calling of Cephus, which is translated as “Peter,” which, in turn, means “the rock.” Peter is a leader among the disciples, but he is also the one who would later deny Jesus. And so, by calling him “Peter,” we are reminded of the foundational nature of his role in Jesus’ ministry, and perhaps we can also see Luke’s model of the disciples who just don’t quite get it. Peter as the “rock-headed” disciple. However we look at Peter and his name, we have essentially come full circle through our scripture lessons: from the Psalmist standing on newly-found solid rock, to the calling of Peter, the rock of the disciples around whom the church would be built.

And so we have these three scripture passages, a rock and roll song, and remembrances of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You may be wondering just how I have decided to tie them together, and where did that awkward sermon title come from?

It came from song lyrics of course. In U2’s song, “40,” they break up the verses of the 40<sup>th</sup> Psalm by singing the words, “How long to sing this song?” after they tell of being brought out of the bog and the clay. These words form the rest of the song as they question how many times they will find themselves in desolate places only to be rescued by God and set upon a solid surface with a new song exploding from their mouth.

I love the image of constantly asking, “how long?” It reminds me of a small child sitting in the back of the car on a long trip, incessantly asking, “Are we there yet?” I think that is where we often are as Christians: how many times do we ask if we are there yet? Are we good enough? Have we done enough? How many times have we seen another person in need only to wrestle with that nagging voice from deep inside us that says, “I’ve already given enough.” How many

times have we asked God when our luck is going to change? Why is everyone else getting ahead, yet I still seem to be stuck in the same old place, with the same old job, with the same old car, with the same old doubts about whether God really even cares at all? Let's be honest: we all have those moments; we all have those doubts and frustrations, at least sometimes.

And that is why I have such deep respect for Dr. King. Yesterday would have been Dr. King's 76<sup>th</sup> birthday; and if he had simply chosen to preach his sermons and do his ministry in Montgomery, Alabama, there is good reason to believe he would have been blowing out candles on a cake yesterday, and we would not even know who he was. But instead of simply fading into a meaningful, yet obscure ministry, Dr. King instead became the voice that eventually changed the way race and class are defined in this country. As I read the lectionary passage from Isaiah, I could not help but see Dr. King saying: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." It was too small a thing that he would be called to serve a congregation in Atlanta or in Montgomery; instead, God was calling Dr. King to be a light to the nation.

And so it is with each one of us. As we celebrate the life and ministry of Dr. King, we must ask ourselves, "How are we doing at being the light to the world?" Are we still doing the work that Dr. King started, or has that work fallen by the wayside?

How long to sing this song? How long will we sing praises to God for the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. but know that there are streets, schools, and workplaces where racial prejudice still reigns? How long will we sing this song? Where is the next prophetic minister, the next leader who will bring the poor, the forgotten, the lost of our culture and our world into the forefront?

I don't want my daughter, Grace, and her friends, to be in their retirement years still wondering when the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., will be done. There is an urgency about these songs; there is an urgency in the servanthood songs; there is an urgency in how we live our life—not just for my child but for all of us. This is the call not only of our scriptures but also of servant leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—they who call upon us every day to continue the work of servanthood so that that light may continue to shine into the world.

But it's also true that our songs of desperation, our songs of change, are needed. We must be the people who continue the vision and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. How long are we going to sing this song? I hope for many generations so that they, too, will know the bright light that shone in this country: one of equality and hope.

Thanks be to God for the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and thanks be to God for the challenge that stands before us. Amen.