

Glory

January 14, 2018, King Sunday

Readings: "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law In All Its Phases" (Ida B. Wells);
"Let America Be America Again" (Langston Hughes)

"...fellow Americans. Three years ago the Supreme Court of this nation rendered in simple, eloquent, and unequivocal language a decision which will long be stenciled on the mental sheets of succeeding generations. For all men of goodwill, this May seventeenth decision came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of human captivity. It came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of disinherited people throughout the world who had dared only to dream of freedom. Unfortunately, this noble and sublime decision has not gone without opposition. This opposition has often risen to ominous proportions. Many states have risen up in open defiance. The legislative halls of the South ring loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification." But even more, all types of conniving methods are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters. The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic tradition. And so our most urgent request to the president of the United States and every member of Congress is to give us the right to vote."

These words rang out upon the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on May 17th, 1957, at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom rally. It was the third anniversary of the historic Supreme Court decision entitled *Brown v. The Board of Education* that legally proclaimed the right to vote for all people, no matter their color or creed, and yet America still was not the dream it wanted to be, as it refused to acknowledge this highest court's decision. So at the end of the rally, organized by activists Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, and Stanley Levison, a 28-year-old southern Baptist minister and activist stood up to deliver the last address to some 20,000 people, entreating the nation's leadership to make good on what was not just a promise, but was the law of the land in a country that continually found itself falling short of its claim upon life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all its citizens. This young minister, whose name was changed from Michael King to Martin Luther King at the age of 5 by his minister father in honor of the German reformer Martin Luther, found himself living up to his namesake in spite of his skepticism about Christianity. Growing up in Jim Crow Atlanta, young Martin suffered bouts of depression and even a suicide attempt that he attributed to the racial humiliation that he endured on a daily basis. The fundamentalist form of Christianity that Martin grew up with provided little comfort for the existential crisis of being black in a country built literally upon the exploitation of black bodies, a country where America never was America to anyone whose skin deepened beyond a certain pallor. Despite church being like home for this son of a preacher, Martin wrestled with the traditionalism of the doctrines he was taught and struggled to reconcile their meaning for the social context in which he lived. How was a nine-year-old to make sense of personal sin and redemption in light of suddenly being ripped away from his best friend, because his friend's father decides his white son shouldn't be playing with Negro children? What cold comfort did orthodoxy have to offer when young men were regularly hunted down and hanged upon magnolia trees for the crime of walking while black? If this makes your stomach turn now, as it makes mine, imagine the cognitive dissonance for this young soul, this brilliant mind, who prayed to the same God his white best friend did, and yet lived under the sardonic banner "separate but equal." At the age of 15, when he was accepted

early into college, his spiritual life began to fall in line with the lived realities of his physical existence as he delved into Biblical criticism in the academy. Soon, “the shackles of fundamentalism were removed from my body,” he recalled, for he finally found in the Bible the same calls to justice for the oppressed that he had felt his soul crying out for from childhood. It was a powerful epiphany, this realization that the God Martin had longed for, had cried out to, craved for humanity to see in itself the holiness from which it sprung, craved the day when the politics of respectability holding both whites and blacks hostage to their own limited religious claims might be dismantled and replaced with the real work that the gospel demands of each one of us: to usher in an era where everyone is treated as the holy masterpiece that we are created to be.

And so the work began for him, which took the form of Mahatma Ghandi’s model of non-violent resistance of hegemonic powers that systematically stripped people of their rights in order to maintain a social hierarchy that resulted in terror, poverty, and cultural robbery. By 1955, he became the spokesperson for the year-long bus boycott in Montgomery, AL, which legally ended segregation on public buses and provided a launching pad to fight for follow-through on the legal voting rights for Americans of color the next year. Martin became the face of the Civil Rights Movement, a movement which focused its efforts on getting the right to vote for every American. Because the right to vote, its leaders reasoned, was at the heart of democracy, and gave power to the voices that had been so historically disempowered. The right to vote meant actual representation of the concerns of average citizens, and a nation where the concerns of the most vulnerable held the same weight as the most powerful were at the bedrock of a nation that staked its claim in a moral high ground. It was a lofty assertion, this claim that America made and still continues to make, and Martin, carrying the torch after Frederick Douglass and Florence Kelley and Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. DuBois and Langston Hughes and so many others, recognized that such moral proclamations were rooted in the religious traditions that dominated the founding of this nation. These confessions were the very stuff of Judaism, the core of Christianity, because they posited that all persons are made in the image of God. This one audacious idea planted the seed that became a thesis statement for the American Dream when Jefferson declared “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” However compartmentalized his intention behind this statement was, a nation that claimed a Judeo-Christian vision of the world could not long stand without making good on this vow in its purest form. So arose the courageous men and women who would not, and could not, rest until America became America to all. The ground began to quiver with the abolition work of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth giving voice to women of color and carried on by Nellie Griswold Francis in Minnesota and Robert Fox when he boarded a white streetcar in Kentucky. Ida B. Wells continued reporting in the midst of lost employment, unjust lawsuits, and death threats to speak truth to power when to be black in the south was to live in a state of emergency 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year with no paid vacation; to live in a war zone where domestic terror was working overtime shifts, where, as Maya Angelou writes, “the Black woman in the south who raises sons, grandsons and nephews had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose.” If these words shock, if they seem foreign, if they feel like a distant nightmare that we’ve buried in the grave, let us sit with that discomfort. Let us feel it today, holding two distinct aspects: let us hold these memories and this history in

memoriam, but let us also steel our resolve in admitting that this is not just the horror of history, that this is now. That Emmett Till's murder, at 14, by white adult men is linked directly to Tamir Rice's murder at 12 by a policeman on a playground in Cleveland almost 60 years later. That those four young girls, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, are interconnected to Sandra Bland's murder in a Texas jail and 7-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones in her living room in Detroit. Let us sit with the reality that men, women, and children died for the right to vote, and that in 2018, people are still dying because of our refusal as a nation to fulfill the dream that Martin spoke of. The dream that Langston wrote of. The dream that in the ten years between 1955 and 1965 yielded a whirlwind of historic changes for the cause of equality and justice for all, but left in its wake a virulent strain of anti-equality politics that continue to contaminate the body of this nation, a disease that threatens to dismantle and destroy the democratic ideals upon which we derive our very identity. Let us be very clear, beloved, that this disease is not a southern problem, a Midwestern problem, a white working-class problem or an angry billionaire's problem. This is an American problem and it is a moral problem. And we who believe in the dream, we who affirm that the dream is a moral imperative because we have known the glory of a God of the oppressed, we are the ones who cannot rest. We are the ones who must answer to the high call of our God in the midst of this dream. We are the ones who must take up the mantle and do what we can with what we have, today, because the cancer of white supremacy is clinging to our cells, but it will never win without our compliance. So here's a hook into fulfilling our call to fulfill the dream: those words that Martin spoke, the "types of conniving methods that are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters," these words might have been written today. Because ever so quietly, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that so many died for was gutted by the Supreme Court in 2013, rendering a backlash of voter suppression all over the country. Since then, states with diverse populations have with surgical precision enacted laws to control exactly who shows up at the polls on voting day. Here's a peek into the details of what this looks like:

In 2016, right before the November presidential and congressional elections, 14 states in the union passed new laws restricting the ease of voting. In 2017, at least 99 bills were introduced in 31 states in order to restrict access to registration and voting. Most of these bills focus heavily on ID requirements for all eligible voters, as well as purging already registered voters from the rolls, which statistically tends to flag voters of color more than white voters, or reducing early voting and closing polling places so voters have to travel further to vote on election days. I hear a frequent question that you may find yourself or others asking: what specifically is so damaging about requiring voter IDs? Well, here's an example of what this means to someone who doesn't have an ID in a state like Alabama but wants to vote: say you work an average day of an 8-hour shift, 9-5 or 8-4. You're making minimum wage, and you live way out in a rural area because that's what's affordable. You take public transportation to where you work, and it takes you over an hour to get there. You have children at home and you're a single parent. In order to get an ID card, you have to show up in person at the DMV, which is only open until 4pm Monday through Friday. It's also 45 minutes away from where you work on public transportation. You have to have four different documents proving your identity and legal U.S. residence, such as a birth certificate, passport, social security card, visa, and at least one of these has to have a photo

identification proving you're who you say you are. The cost for this ID is \$36.25, and it expires four years later, upon which time you have to go back in person, and pay another \$36.25. Now, while Alabama is one of the most extreme examples of what it looks like to have voter ID laws in place, let's take the cost down to \$5, like it is in Arkansas. You've got the \$5, but you can't leave work or you'll be penalized or fired. Say you've got the \$5, you get time off of work, but you get to the DMV and the line is so long you're not going to get through by the time it closes. This was your one shot. It's gone now. Another scenario: you've jumped through the hoops, and you're registered to vote. You're single, so you don't have to worry about your family or childcare. But you still have a fixed work schedule, and because of the new laws, there's no more early voting in your county. Your regular polling place down the block was one of the 868 that closed between 2013 and the 2016 elections. Your new polling place has limited hours and it's already too far to get to or you'll miss work. In this scenario, you are technically free to vote, but if missing work means potentially losing your job, or failing to pay your bills, then your enfranchisement is nothing but an empty promise.

Voting in 2018 should be simple and easy. These scenarios are the fallout in our failure to fulfill the dream. For millions of Americans, these situations have been happening and continue to happen because of a deep-seated fear that equality for all will feel like oppression for those who benefit from inequality. So we must educate ourselves to the reality of those for whom the dream is most elusive. It is we who must stand against the immoral legislation that continues to undermine the democratic promise, it is we who must press forward together, not one step back, because it is our God who asks, is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? If Martin could see the dream fulfilled then, if he could run up to the mountaintop and see the glory of the coming of the Lord, how much closer are we to fulfilling the dream now? In these short years since his death, how much farther have we come, despite the disease that befalls our nation, despite the dark inheritance that we all must own, despite the forces of evil that belie the promise of justice and equality for each and every person? It is a miracle to come as far as we did since that speech in 1957. It is a holy blessing that those who came before us did not give their lives in vain. It is proof of the glory of the coming of the Lord. On this day, and every day, may we never, ever doubt that the dream will become, must become, is becoming reality. May we never, ever, grow weary in the work that we do on a daily basis to fulfill that dream. May we be meticulous in our speaking about racism, may we be steadfast in resisting death-dealing policy, may we reach out and beyond our sphere to call out where there is injustice, and may we be exhaustive in examining own internalized biases.

The night before he was assassinated, Martin spoke in Memphis at the Mason Temple Church of God In Christ headquarters. He spoke of the victories they had already seen as well as the fears of what may come. Let us close with a renewal of our spirits in his final prophetic words:

Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life – longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about

that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Rest in peace, Dr. King. Amen.