

Let Justice Roll Down: Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Yesterday, the United States commemorated Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. His birth is celebrated every year on the third Monday in January. Born on January 15, 1929, King was assassinated in 1968. He was the chief spokesperson for nonviolent action in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. A Baptist preacher, King showed us all how we could stand up and put an end to racial discrimination and to do so in nonviolent ways.

Shortly after his assassination, a campaign was launched for a federal holiday to mark his influence. It was signed into law in 1983 by President Reagan and was first observed three years later.

In 1964, the 35-year-old King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the youngest person to receive the award. The Nobel Committee noted that he was the “first person in the Western world to have shown us that a struggle can be waged without violence.”

He is still remembered for his rhetorical skills and his ability to galvanize a movement with his words. He inspired millions in the struggle for equal rights for all people, and was beaten and imprisoned for his efforts.

In 1963, he organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where he delivered his masterful “I Have A Dream” speech, envisioning a world where all people would be treated equally. In 1965, he participated in the Selma to Montgomery march. At the end of the march, he predicted that equal rights for African Americans would be granted soon in his speech. His legendary words are still quoted, “How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Less than six months later, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act which banned the disenfranchisement of African Americans.

King’s left a strong legacy that we can demand that justice will pervade every area of the national life. All people must be treated equally, and no one should be left out of the national conversation. Although he was a citizen of the USA, his words apply to every nation and every land where discrimination still runs rampant. Today, in the face of multiple threats from white nationalists, his words and vision need to be renewed. His vision is needed today more than ever before.

King was fond of quoting the 8th century BCE Hebrew prophet Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” It has become a clarion call for movements of peace, justice, and equality. Indeed, it shows the continuing relevance of ancient sages and voices speaking in the name of a God who demands justice, compassion, and love above all else.

Amos was an outsider. He claims that he is not a prophet in Amos 7, but that “the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” It is important to note that he was an outsider. He claimed that God chose him from his life as a shepherd to preach to his own country 28 centuries before King was chosen to preach to his fellow citizens.

In Amos' time, 8th century BCE Israel was a prosperous land. It was militarily and economically secure. The rich and powerful of the day had forgotten that their tradition required them to care for those who were less fortunate.

At the same time, they thought of themselves as good people, faithful in their religiosity, spending their time in worship. But they had forgotten that God finds satisfaction only when justice is established. That was a problem for Amos, and he spoke harshly against that kind of religion.

I believe Amos has a word to speak to the church of today. We need another outsider to call the church to faithfulness as followers of Jesus. Insiders are too busy propping up the institutions of the dominant culture.

King's preaching about justice and righteousness comes from a very interesting context in Amos. In the full passage, Amos puts these words in God's mouth: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

As you might imagine, Amos was not popular with the people of his time and place, just as King wasn't particularly popular. Both Amos and King were scorned by the political as well as religious leadership of their day.

People who cry out for justice are never welcomed. Institutions like the church prefer to huddle within the walls of their buildings, singing their praise-songs and offering their prayers. They prefer the complacency of well-worn rituals to the challenge of working for the equal treatment of all people, regardless of skin colour, sexual orientation, gender, or any other way in which we express our prejudices.

Amos and King both exemplify the message of Jesus, who denounced injustice and oppression and called for people to live with justice and compassion and love. The God of the Bible, as opposed to the God proclaimed by certain so-called Christian leaders today, expresses concern for "the least of these". God denounces those who perpetrate injustice and God stands against those who oppress others.

The contemporary church needs to hear this word today, and to begin acting on it with strength and determination. As we celebrate the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., we do so best by acting on his calls for equal treatment for all, whether they be Indigenous Peoples, immigrants to our land, poor and rich, women and men, and all people, regardless of a person's sexual orientation.

Not worship and church services, but justice and righteousness. It's the way of Jesus.