

Sermon: Being God-Determined People
Scripture: Amos 5:20-25; Matthew 11:25-30
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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Although he grew up deep within the church, Martin Luther King said that his growing realization of the truth of God, the truth of a personal God who “both evokes and answers prayer” and is involved in our lives came as a result of his putting himself on the line for what was good and right, no longer making a premium of his own safety and comfort. In his essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” King speaks of his trials like this:

Due to my involvement in the struggle for the freedom of my people, I have known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been imprisoned in Alabama and Georgia jails 12 times. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near-fatal stabbing. So in a real sense I have been battered by the storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden, and been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appears, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination. I have learned now that the Master’s burden is light precisely when we take his yoke upon us. P. 153

The yoke of Jesus is a yoke that has us pulling and working for justice and righteousness and peace. It is a yoke that reminds us that our lives are not given unto us, for our own purposes, to do with as we see fit, but rather as Christians our lives are given unto us for God’s purposes. We are not self-made, self-determined people. We are God-made and seek to be God-determined people. What that means, exactly, to be God-determined people we learn from Jesus himself. We learn that it means forgiving when we feel least capable of it. It means opening ourselves to the other when we most want to shut them out or reject them. Being God-determined people means we pursue justice for others with the same fervor as if we’d been the ones

wronged. It means, as Jesus demonstrated time and time again, crossing boundaries of class, race, religion, politics, to create a brotherhood/sisterhood of God. And, like Dr. King so powerfully exemplified, being God-determined people means responding to hate with love, violence with nonviolence, hardness of heart with gentleness of spirit. It's those kind of choices in the day to day happenings of our lives that make us not self-determined but God-determined people. The people who learn to live in such a way, whether they are Christians or not, whether they are public figures of power or not, are the yeast, the leaven in the bread of society that can raise us all up. There's of course a very different rhetoric and narrative being promoted out of the highest position of power in our country today but I think in certain ways it just makes our work all the clearer, because God's will and the kingdom of heaven are not going to arise from those halls of power, no matter who is sitting there, rather it is going to arise from the ground of our own being and of our own communities. There will always be small and narrow-minded men with dangerous amounts of power, but we know where the true power is God's.

What Dr. King discovered in his struggle for justice with the right kind of heart, is that it leads one to a greater dependence on one's relationship with God. Without the willingness to be vulnerable and open by following the way of Jesus, a relationship with the living God can be an abstract thing. "The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years," King says simply, "have drawn me closer to God." And he goes on:

More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner

voice saying “Lo, I will be with you.” When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my [own] efforts, I have felt the power of God, transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship. P. 154

It is in the struggle for righteousness, he says, that the human being has divine companionship. That is a provocative statement because it suggests that divine companionship is not necessarily there in – say - the struggle for our personal safety, nor in the struggle for making all the money we want or feel we need, nor in the struggle for keeping the foreign other separate from us, nor in the struggle for political ascendancy, BUT rather it is in the struggle for righteousness that the human being has a cosmic companion. So it’s not the Stat Oil Corporation up in Alberta destroying the earth in massive swaths and denying its poisonous impact upon the local waterways that has cosmic companionship, but rather the indigenous people fighting nonviolently for the rights and justice of the earth and her people who do. This means that likely it’s not those making a load of money off of private prisons and lobbying the government for harsher laws to fill their prisons who have divine companionship, but it’s the prisoners, with a huge racial disparity against black men, who do. This means that it is not those telling the poor that they need to work harder to reap the benefits of our society who have this divine companionship but the poor – blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God. I don’t know, but what if God’s divine companionship is actually reserved for those seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God?

The Prophet Amos sure doesn’t mince words, does he? He has God saying to the high and mighty and righteous – God hates all your pomp and circumstance, religious or not. God above all else wants to see justice, mercy in the way you are living your lives and in the systems surrounding

you. Let justice flow like streams and there you will find God. So if we want to discover God as our companion then we should be risking the struggle for justice and righteousness. It's what Jesus and all the other Hebrew prophets called for; always speaking up for God's vision of how things are supposed to be as opposed to how things were humanly constructed to be. The prophets always hold out for how we must change, which is why we tend to kill prophets be they Jesus, the Apostles Peter or Paul, Martin Luther King, Gandhi or the next voice that becomes too loud and too challenging of the way things are. And yet because the prophetic voice is not their own but the voice of our Cosmic Companion, if they are being true to their vocation, the voice inevitably continues to sound beyond their deaths. King says this in the closing section of his writing "Strength to Love" which can beautifully and remarkably apply to today as well:

The past decade has been a most exciting one. In spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period something profoundly meaningful is taking place. Old systems of exploitation and oppression are passing; new systems of justice and equality are being born. In a real sense this is a great time to be alive. Therefore I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted that the easygoing optimism of yesterday is impossible. Granted that we face a world crisis which leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life's restless sea. But every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark, confused world, the Kingdom of God may yet reign in the heart of men [and women].

- p. 155

And so may it reign and may we be a part of its reigning.

*All quotes taken from "Strength to Love" by Martin Luther King, Jr. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963.