

January 15, 2017  
Epiphany II and MLK Sunday  
Psalm 146; Luke 4:16-30

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“Do not put your trust in princes”

On August 28, 1963 more than 250,000 people gathered in Washington, DC for a political rally known as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The march was a critical moment in the struggle for civil rights in the United States. It was in many ways an unprecedented moment in the long walk toward freedom for African Americans in this country, culminating in Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous speech, “I Have a Dream” from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. King’s speech came 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, a decree that came as a “joyous daybreak,” King remarked, “to end the long night of [African American] captivity.” “But 100 years later,” King went on, “crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination,” African Americans are “still not free.” King spoke of the ongoing exile of African Americans and the need to demand freedom not later, but *now*. It was King’s unwavering insistence on what he called “the fierce urgency of the now” that best characterized his speech and the civil rights movement at-large. In speaking out against the great temptation of what he called “gradualism”—which is the decision to opt for gradual change and which tacitly puts trust in the processes of the established political and legal order—King situated himself within the long tradition of abolitionism. “This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism!” King insisted. It was as if King was harnessing the voice and energy of the Old Testament prophets or perhaps it was the voice of the psalmist of our passage for today: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is *no help*. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish” (Ps 146: 3-4). The abolitionist cry of justice out of which King drew inspiration resists the great temptation of the tranquility of gradualism, which as the psalmist writes, wrongly places its trust in princes, in the rulers of a given age; instead, King opted to serve the living and active God who *always* executes justice for the oppressed not later but *now*, who *always* gives food to the hungry not later but *now*, and who *never* waits patiently, silently, and passively in the face of injustice.

Forty-five years later, the United States elected its first African American president. And did so *twice*. While his election was, indeed, a watershed event in the history of the African American struggle for freedom, as we know, his presidency did not finally bring in an end to racial discrimination, justice was not always granted to the oppressed, and food was not always given to the hungry, the prisoners were certainly not set free; instead, during his presidency many of us began to come to grips with the reality that his election *did not* mark the beginning of a post-racial age in the United States. During his presidency we witnessed the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the Occupy Wall Street movement, as well as a broader awareness of the legacy of settler colonialism. Despite the legalization of same-sex marriage during his presidency, we witnessed the attack in Orlando and an increase of violence against transgender people.

In November, many of us had thought that another watershed event would take place in the history of this country with the election of the first woman as president of the United States. But this did not happen, of

course, and while many of us have been grieving over what feels like a punch right in the gut for women everywhere, we also know that just as the election of a black president did not mark the end of racism in America, so too the election of a woman to the presidency would not have marked the end of patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. I say all of this not as a way to downplay the extent of the blow nor to downplay the tremendous threat that the country now faces and that we as a Mennonite congregation must not be afraid to face head-on as well. Instead, I say all of this as a way to remind us this week especially that hope in a Mennonite perspective is never hope in this or that government, this or that ruler or prince or power; it is always *hope* against the false hope of political leadership; it is hope in a power of justice that transforms the earth not gradually from above, but from below. It is a power that moves always with the “*fierce urgency of the now*,” as King put it.

Now, fifty-three years since the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and King’s famous “I have a Dream Speech,” several women from our congregation, along with their daughters, will join many many thousands for another March on Washington. Just as hundreds of thousands of people sang songs of freedom in late August of 1963 against the scourge of racial discrimination and segregation, so too I imagine that this week many hundreds of thousands of people will gather in Washington to once again sing songs of freedom against the scourge of patriarchy, misogyny, and toxic masculinity. *Now* is the time to sing songs. *Now* is the time to say “No!” to so-called “locker room talk” and the abuse it legitimates and “Yes!” to women’s freedom and liberation. There is no middle ground here. Freedom does not come from the halls of power, but from the people who will march for truth and justice in love, prophetically confronting the princes in Washington.

Psalm 146 challenges us to think about where we find our hope; the psalmist re-orientes our imagination away from trust in political leadership and toward the God of justice who reaches out in power and transforms the earth from below. The God whom the psalmist praises and adores is the same God we see in the life and ministry of Jesus. In our Gospel reading for today from Luke, we hear Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, unrolling the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and quoting: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And Jesus says that “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, Jesus is saying “*this* is the heart of my life and my ministry.” But this kind of power does not conform to the princes and presidents of the world who always settle for gradual change, who always side with the maintenance of law and order over against the love for freedom embodied in the abolitionist cry of justice.

And it is, I think, for this reason that the Gospels always portray Jesus as the Rejected One; it is for this reason that the apostle Paul always turns to the *crucifixion* of Christ when he speaks of the power of God. Does not the crucifixion of Christ place an ultimate question mark on the claims of *all* political power? Does not the crucifixion of Christ mean that the justice of God is to be found not in the work of princes--there is no *help* in them!--but in the power of the love of God who transforms the earth from below? And that’s Martin Luther King’s message too, right? It is only through the power of love--a power that always appears to the world who put their trust in princes, as foolishness and weakness--that transforms and will transform the world. The psalmist knew this well: help comes from a much more

radical and revolutionary source than mere mortal princes; help comes from the power of the One who created the heavens and the earth; and it is this One that moves from below in love and in truth, it is this One who calls us out of our silence and passivity and sets on the road to march for justice, to participate in God's work of *setting the prisoners free, opening the eyes of the blind, lifting up those who are bowed down, watching over the strangers and the refugees, upholding the orphan and the widow*. With the psalmist we sing: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! For you are the God of Jacob, the God of the earth and heavens and everything in it, the God who delivered Israel from slavery, who raised Jesus from the dead, and whose life and whose power is always to be found not in claims of princes but in the cries and the songs of those who actively struggle in love for freedom and justice *now*. And as King said, echoing the words of the prophets, we cannot and will not and must not be satisfied "until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." So, march on.