

SINGING IN THE NIGHT¹
Psalm 139
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
January 18, 2009

As we do every year on this Sunday, we remember Martin Luther King, Jr. with high ideals and music and prayer, and also determined action to continue the dream that he so eloquently articulated.

I

Two things stand out about this year's remembrance. The first is that those among us who heard him speak and knew him personally are getting fewer and fewer. He was born on January 15, 1929, which would make him 80 years old this week. But his image is frozen in our minds at the age of 39. Our perceptions of other prominent leaders were also frozen in time. John F. Kennedy would be 92; his brother Robert would be 84. *Time, like an ever-flowing stream, bears all its sons [and daughters] way.*

The other striking thing about this year's MLK Day is that it comes just a day before the inauguration, and this is no ordinary inauguration. I like to imagine King himself standing in the crowd watching this inauguration. Along with him stand other martyrs of the movement he led. Medgar Evers would be 84 years old. Standing next to them I imagine four women: Denise McNair, who would now be 58 years old; Cynthia Wesley,

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now 60; Carol Robertson and her friend Addie Mae Collins, also now 60 years old. Their lives were cut short when on a Saturday night in September, 1963, three Ku Klux Klan members planted 122 sticks of dynamite with a delayed time release in the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, and at 10:22 AM on Sunday morning, when 26 little children were walking into the basement assembly room for children's worship time. They were about to hear a children's sermon entitled "The Love That Forgives," when the dynamite exploded. I think of those four young girls, who would now be grown, standing there on Tuesday.

Near them I imagine James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, now well past retirement age. They lost their lives in Philadelphia, MS after traveling down from the north to work for CORE, the Congress for Racial Equality. The list of martyrs standing there in our imagination is long. If we look closely in our imaginations we might see Emmitt Till of Chicago, the Rev. James Reeb of Boston, Vernon Dahmer of Hattiesburg, Jimmie Lee Jackson of Selma. Only a small sample of those whose lives were lost in the pursuit of justice and equality. Perhaps we can imagine a special section of the inauguration dais reserved for these now silent but oh so eloquent witnesses.

However you voted in November, this inauguration, coming on the heels of MLK weekend, is a poignant time, a time to consider how far we have come and how far we have yet to go. Black, white, Republican, Democrat, Christian, Muslim, Jew, faithful, and faithless- we are all in this together, and we all will pause to recognize that this inauguration has particular historical significance.

II

I want to share with you an image of Martin Luther King that has stuck with me since the time I first read the biography of King written by Stephen B. Oates, the professor of history at UMASS, Amherst. The biographer comments that ~~in~~ his public appearances, King seemed confident and composed. But among his intimates, away from the crowds and the cameras, he showed the prodigious strain he was under.²

In mid-February, 1968, he was able to get away for a few days to Acapulco with Ralph Abernathy. One night in Acapulco, King and Abernathy went out to eat and then back to the hotel for the night. In the middle of the night- at 3:00 AM- Abernathy waked up with a start. He saw that King's bed was empty. He got up to look for him, and could not find him in the living area, and then he became alarmed. Just when he was

² Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound* (London: Search Press, 1982), p. 465.

about to call hotel security, he saw the outline of King, standing on the balcony in his pajamas, gazing into the gloom of the Pacific.

Abernathy went out to him and said, "Martin, what are you doing out here this time of night? What is bothering you?" King kept staring out into the ocean, listening to the roar of the waves. "You see that rock out there?" he said. "Sure I see it," said Abernathy. "How long do you think it's been there?" King asked. "I don't know," said his friend, "I guess centuries and centuries. I guess God put it there."

Then King looked at Abernathy and said, "You can't tell what I'm thinking?" And Abernathy replied, "No." Then King started to sing quietly: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me; let me hide myself in thee" .³

It is that very human image of King that keeps recurring to me because like King on that night, we are all staring out into the unknown. Last month's report says that another half million Americans are out of work. The ranks of the unemployed have now reached beyond 11 million, and millions more are underemployed, working part time because they can't find full time jobs. And the official statistics don't even count the discouraged workers who have given up looking for a job. With credit tight, savings depleted, the stock market in the tank, and home prices collapsing,

³ Ibid., pp. 465-66.

it is a wonder that any new President is not staring wide-eyed out into the darkness in the middle of the night.

III

This is where I want to commend to you our psalm for today- Psalm 139. It may be my favorite of all the psalms. This psalm, remember, is a statement of faith. Nobody can dissect it with the tools of scholarship and determine whether or not it is true. No matter how many times you read this psalm, it still requires a leap of faith. Some of you may not be able to take that leap- at least not yet. Some of you may be dealing with such terrible experiences that you cannot bring yourself to affirm with the writer of this psalm that,

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
 If I...settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 Even there... your right hand shall hold me fast.⁴*

Have you thought about how far this faith reached? In a world where most people hardly left their village during a lifetime, here was a writer who expressed the extreme of God's love and care.

...ascend to heaven..., the height of God's love!

...make my bed in Sheol..., the depth of God's love!

...the farthest limits of the sea..., the breadth of God's love!

⁴ Psalm 139: 9-10.

Even here, hundreds of years before Jesus, God's love is in the shape of a cross!

Early in King's ministry, when he was still pastor in Montgomery and leading the bus boycott, he experienced his first brush with death. His house was bombed. His family could have been killed. They all escaped alive, but he said that late the next night, when darkness came again, he was absolutely terrified. And he sat in the kitchen by himself late that night, thinking that he might have to quit the boycott, abandon the movement, and give up the leadership into which he had been thrust. He said that sitting there at the kitchen table, there came to him the words of an old gospel song: *No, never alone; no, never alone. He promised never to leave me alone.*

He said that something happened to him that night, and that through the years and through the terrible time when he was afraid that something awful would happen, the words of that old gospel song would inevitably come back: *No, never alone. He promised never to leave me alone.*

It seems that King often turned to old hymns for reassurance in times of terror. The next time you are sitting alone at the kitchen table in the middle of the night, or lying with eyes wide open in your bed in the wee hours, or staring out of your window in the middle of the day— the next time

you find yourself looking out into the dark and fearful sea of your own future and your own decisions, unsure of what to do ã I invite you to think of this ancient psalm:

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I...settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
Even there...your right hand shall hold me fast.*

IV

On this remarkable MLK weekend, when people all across the land will once again join hands and sing *We Shall Overcome*, I invite you to connect with this psalmist, as if you are holding his hand over the centuries. In the long line of hands holding on to each other you will see Christ himself, along with the faithful of every age, and connect once again with the God *whose hand will lead you, whose right hand will hold you fast.*