

“Another World is Possible”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval and Verdis L. Robinson
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading

Selection from “I Have a Dream” speech by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
<https://youtu.be/smEqnnkIfYs?t=650>

Sermon

Verdis L. Robinson

In the N.W. section of Washington, DC, not too far from the Capitol, sits one of the District’s oldest Black-owned restaurants called the Florida Avenue Grill. It’s a very small diner-like establishment that has been serving up Soul Food since the 1940s. This is where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Bayard Rustin, and other key leaders of the Civil Rights Movement planned the March on Washington in 1963.

During the Women’s March on Washington four years ago this week, I sat in that booth that they frequented.

In my imagination, I could overhear their conversation reflecting on what brought them to that point. That moment in time, in which a vision of another world, this dream, was not only articulated but shared.

I can imagine them reflecting on how they filled the jails in Birmingham, AL, earlier that year committed to peaceful protest and passive resistance. How they were in constant harm’s way but committed to the doctrine of love and nonviolence. They smiled as they remembered how their plight was not just there’s but many who had rallied with them, and many across the country who watched their demonstrations against racism and discrimination, and the violent reactions to peace.

They remembered how when they were imprisoned, their children took up the mantle on a children’s crusade. Just like their parents and adults, they marched for their freedom, they marched for justice, they marched for their lives. And the dogs were sicked on them and hoses sprayed on their little black bodies. They also filled the jails- just like the adults. The nation witnessed in horror and in sorrow.

These reflections informed the March. Their sacrifices fueled the fires of commitment, the spirit of change- their actions leading up to this momentous occasion were not in vain...they could see victory. The dream was in arms reach.

This vision of another world inspired many... but frightened others, fueling hate.

Two weeks later, on a Sunday morning, like this one, at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, a central institution in that community, and a place where they rallied and planned for demonstrations, the congregants were gathered together in prayer and were suddenly brought to their knees, seeking safety under pews as an explosion rocked the church, breaking many of its windows. Many of them were injured.

But then the discovery of four of their little girls who had violently lost their lives...words cannot adequately express the feelings, emotions, the pain, and the hurt that this act of hate caused...in addition to the Fear it perpetuated. The movement had turned more deadly. Despair sunk in.

For just two weeks ago, a shared vision of another world seemed so possible. So attainable. But this tragedy caused a pause in hope. It blocked the vision of that shared dream.

Some of you remember this day. And Some of those same feelings and emotions, many of us felt it just a week ago.

But in his eulogy for the victims of what he called "one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity," Rev. Dr. King said, that:

"In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter nor must we not harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. Nor must we not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personalities."

Even in this grief-stricken moment, he acknowledges the despair, the pain, and the anger that this hate-filled tragedy wrought on the grieving parents and community, but reminded them that:

"Like the everflowing river, life has its moments of draughts and its moments of flood.

Like the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, life has its soothing warmth of its summers and its piercing chill of its winters.”

He said that “Their deaths say to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.”

The dream that will not be destroyed.

Clara Jean Ester was a high school student when the bombing happened, but when she entered college four years later, she began organizing for greater justice and equality in her community. She was especially drawn by the plight of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee.

On the evening of April 3, 1968, she joined hundreds of others to listen to Dr. King give a speech at a rally. A speech in which we now know that Dr. King shared fateful words concerning the promised land they had been working towards. He said, “I may not get there with you.”

The next day, Clara Jean Ester was at the Lorraine Motel along with a friend to get some catfish for dinner.

When the shot rang out that took Dr. King’s life as he stood on the motel balcony, Clara Jean Ester ran up the steps. Yes, she was there. You can make out her hand and her penny loafers in that famous photo of the witnesses to this world-changing and devastating event pointing towards the source of the gunshot.

It was another day where the weariness of despair again blocked that vision of hope, that dream of another world.

But..The dream will not be destroyed.

Clara Jean Ester went on to become a deaconess in the Methodist Church and to serve her community by creating support services for people living in poverty and by mentoring young people. How did she find the will to continue after witnessing such hate-filled tragedies?

In an interview with StoryCorps aired this past Friday, she reflected on the decades of violence against African Americans since Dr. King’s death, and said, ““You think that’s

gonna destroy his dream? Y'all are wrong. I think children years and years to come will continue to have his dream.”¹

In an earlier interview, Clara Jean Ester proclaimed that: “Dr. King has lived on. He is still alive today. He is the driver behind Black Lives Matter, women’s rights, gay rights. You can kill the dreamer, Scripture says, but you can never take away the dream. And he gave us that dream of a better world where we could live in harmony. He lived that, and it still lives in a lot of us.”

The dream will not be destroyed.

Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

In this moment, we cannot let that dream be destroyed.

It is a frightful time, for certain. We are witnessing how hateful rhetoric that stokes division combined with the propagation of lies and conspiracy theories has radicalized many of our fellow Americans and even fellow Vermonters.

Those who believe in the aspirations of our democracy across the political spectrum are worried and scared today with the calls for further attacks on the seats of democracy in states across the country.

And, anyone who is the target of white supremacist hatred and violence is living with fear of actual bodily harm.

Dr. King and the activists and organizers and freedom fighters of the Civil Rights Movement showed us what it means to move with and through fear and despair.

Dr. King once preached on the antidotes to fear which he named as honesty, courage, love, and faith.²

He preached that we have to recognize with honesty what our fears are. We have to cultivate the courage to face those fears with resolve. We must come back to love as an antidote to fear.

“Hate,” Dr. King said, “is rooted in fear, and the only cure for fear-hate is love.”

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/956537033/i-may-not-get-there-with-you-an-eyewitness-account-of-mlks-final-days>

² From [Strength to Love](#)

And, finally, he urged us to have faith. He, of course, was a Christian preacher, so faith had a particular meaning to him rooted in a belief in God and the ultimacy of God's love and goodness. I believe, though, that this call to have "faith" can apply to any of us regardless of theology. It's a call to have faith in the meaning of our existence and a purpose in our lives.

At this cusp of a new year, a new administration, the air is tinged with fear. And, yet, it is still a time of looking forward and re-imagining who we are together.

Speaking at the funeral of the girls killed in the bombing in Birmingham in 1963, Dr. King called on his faith to remind the congregation of a God that "is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope."

We, too, can be lifted to this buoyancy of hope with our honesty, with our courage, with our love, and with our faith in a better day.

On the Sunday following the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, Senator-elect Rev. Raphael Warnock spoke to his congregation. The same congregation that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. served in his final years, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Rev. Warnock asked his congregation: "So here's a question for this day: Do we want to become a more hateful, fearful, divided nation, or build a beloved community?"

If you had been amongst Rev. Warnock's congregation that morning, how many beats would have gone by for you to answer his question?

Do we want to become a more hateful, fearful, divided nation, or build a beloved community?

Let's build.

As mixed with emotion as our hearts may be, that is the imaginative work that lies ahead. The work of dreaming, imagining, and building.

And, today we can continue to nurture the dream that Dr. King so eloquently and powerfully gave voice to on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial more than 55 years ago.

A dream that Americans and people all over the world have carried in our hearts and have marched and organized and worked to fulfill.

We are still a long way from fully realizing that dream - a dream of freedom and the transformation of “the jangling discords of our nation” into something beautiful and symphonic and based in our common bonds.

In the year 2021, we are still dreaming this dream and giving it new colors and notes.

With its durability and resilience, the dream will not be destroyed.

Joan: The dream of a multiracial, inclusive democracy will not be destroyed.

Verdis: The dream of a land free of hatred will not be destroyed.

Joan: The dream of a nation that has grappled with its past and rectified harms done will not be destroyed.

Verdis: The dream of a country where all are housed and all are fed and all are paid a wage that can be lived on with ease will not be destroyed.

Joan: The dream of communities where neighbors know one another and treasure their differences while building a future rooted in equity and justice. This dream will not be destroyed.

Verdis: The dream of hueing out of this mountain of despair a stone of hope. That dream will not be destroyed.

Joan: The dream of every child, every parent, every elder, every prisoner and detainee, the dream of freedom ringing loud and clear, a freedom that leaves none of us behind.

Verdis

The dream will not be destroyed. The dream will not be destroyed. In fact, it will be a dream realized rather than a dream deferred. We will reach that promised land. But we are not done yet. Let that dream motivate you to action, let that hope keep you in the trenches, but not to give up to despair just yet but pressing forward with the buoyancy

of hope with the end goal that we can, as the African-American spiritual says, Lay our burdens down and study war no more.

What a beautiful day that will be. To study war no more. Why? Because we won't have to. There will be nothing to fight, no burdens to carry, We will be able to study war no more! The dream, that beautiful dream, that hopeful dream, that audacious dream will not be destroyed.

May it be so, amen, and blessed be.