



## **DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'s BIRTHDAY (BELOVED COMMUNITY DAY)**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Monday, January 18, 2010**

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**Lection - Habakkuk 2:1-3** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) I will stand at my watch-post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. (v. 2) Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. (v. 3) For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Today we celebrate the birthday (the actual date is January 15) of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the only African American for whom a national holiday is celebrated in America. Dr. King was a visionary leader; he saw the future in so many instances. He also helped bring to fruition many of the visions he had; some he lived to see and others he did not. In 2010, we are ever mindful that there is so much work that still needs to be done to make many of Dr. King's visions a reality. War is still pervasive, as is poverty. The rich continue to get richer at the expense of the poor, and second-class treatment of one group of people or another due to fear or hate continues. Habakkuk 2:1-3 focuses on the necessity, meaning, and quality of visionary leadership and the sense of direction, hope, and relief it can provide for both the weary leader and the community of faith in troubled and uncertain times. In times like these, we need to hear again the words of Habakkuk and Dr. King.

#### **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Habakkuk 2:1-3**

##### **One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

The key word that the lectionary team chose to sum up today's lectionary material is *vision*. The word is often associated with one's sense of sight or the capacity to see with

one's eyes, but in the larger sense *vision* involves seeing or perceiving what is not actually visible to the eye; whether by some intellectual sharpness or divine endowment. Vision requires extraordinary sight, an anticipatory spirit, imagination, and the capacity to dream what might appear on the surface to be the impossible dream. Moreover, the vision of a people is most often the first step toward much-needed social change, progress, and a more positive, communal, and meaningful existence. The beloved community for Martin Luther King, Jr. was at first a *vision*, and it also became an ethical ideal toward which all moral and rational persons should strive.

**We have accepted Dr. King as a Hero but not his vision to love the other.** The symbolic force of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and what he lived and died for led the United States Senate, on October 19, 1983, to vote overwhelmingly to designate the third Monday in January of each year as a federal holiday in his honor. While the nation claims King as an official hero, few Americans have come to accept him as a visionary leader who spoke out against the nation's racism, militarism, and mistreatment of the poor and oppressed, and who warned that God would not continue to allow devoted people not to practice what they affirmed in creeds on Sunday mornings. King was a modern day prophet who insisted that a just and merciful God was at work in the world to bring the divine purpose to full realization, and that this God would triumph and find vindication. The power of King's moral vision was embodied in his conviction that God is impartial in God's dealings with human beings, and that each individual is a distinct, ontological entity who finds fulfillment, growth, and purpose through personal and social relationships based on the *agape* love ethic.

The message King proclaimed so eloquently to the church and the nation was at once simple and endlessly prophetic. It was a call to constructive self-criticism and to ecclesiastical renewal and national transformation. But almost a half century after King's death, the conscience of the nation, and especially the church, has not been fully awakened. The problem is exacerbated by the many competing images of the civil rights leader in contemporary culture and by the mass public confusion that surrounds the nation's celebration of his legacy and pursuit of his unfinished, holy crusade. King's dream has not yet become our dream, and the nation is perishing because too many have no vision. America is increasingly becoming a nation of peoples of different faith traditions, and, for the sake of moral consistency, they must bring their creedal, ceremonial, and celebrational life more in line with mission priorities that meet human needs, hopes, and aspirations.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

**Being a visionary requires patience.** Habakkuk 2:1-3 pictures a prophet who is concerned about a God who seemingly allows unholiness to parade unrestrained in times of poverty, oppression, and death. The prophet ascends his tower to hear sounds other than the clashing of Babylonian swords and to achieve a better discernment of the divine purpose as it is unfolding in history. The tower, which might be taken symbolically or literally, represents a stage for some spiritual vantage point where the prophet's spirit, in communion with God, may be more at ease and his vision more penetrating. From the tower, the prophet looks out to discern what God's answer is to him and what response he

will get to his complaint. The effort to ascend the tower is not done in vain, for there God answers the prophet. The answer received is significant not only for the prophet himself, but for the weary community as a whole, and the prophet is told to write it on tablets so everyone can read it clearly. Apparently, the prophet once expected the solution to his problem to surface in his own time, but upon getting a more complete view of God's purpose from the tower he learns that the solution will come in the future. It has its appointed time, and it hastens toward its end, but the end is not near. Nevertheless, however far, it is certain it will not lie or deceive, and it will not be late. The solution will come in God's time, if not in the prophet's time. Thus, though it tarries, wait for it, for it will most certainly come.

Here one hears a wonderful counsel of patience and faith, punctuated by a sense of hope. There is indeed relief for those who wait humbly while trusting God for the answer and the prophet himself sets the example. The answer comes in part in the promise and power of visionary leadership, which is indispensable to the preparation and maintenance of both the weary leader and the community. The messages of Habakkuk and other prophets, who confronted crass idolatry and ruthless oppression and injustice in their own times, became a source of encouragement and inspiration for Dr. King, who urged people to seek God and not evil in the face of the coming judgment, and those messages should still be heeded in this age of peril.

The prophet of God in any age becomes the visionary who is willing and ready to discern the purpose of God as it marches through history. God's will and purpose for humanity are revealed daily, but the full realization of God's plan for humanity does not always come in our own time. Even so, God is an on-time God. The best humans can do is to remain spiritually and morally active while waiting for the fullness of the divine answer.

Prophets of God still function in the midst of evil, oppression, and injustice. Today, they live in a nation marked by greed, bigotry, and intolerance, and in a world haunted by war, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. The sounds of weapons of war permeate the atmosphere in Iraq and Afghanistan and too much of Africa. The forces of terror take hundreds of innocent lives in different parts of the world almost daily, and the evils of ethnically inspired violence and genocide have, in recent times, threatened the very fabric of human existence in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur. There is a need for a new vision, of discovering God's will anew, and both the Prophet Habakkuk and King have something to say to America and the entire world about this.

The prophetic visions of both Habakkuk and King can be useful in reawakening, humanizing, and advancing the human family. Both highlighted, in their own unique ways, the need for a consistent culture of life rooted in the conviction that the preservation of the "other" is the highest priority. Much is said and written today about a consistent ethic of life, especially in fundamentalist and evangelical Christian circles, but there are sharp disagreements among humans and different faith traditions worldwide about what this actually means. Many equate this ethic with opposition to abortion and stem cell research. Others associate it with environmental stewardship, the fight against HIV/AIDS, and meeting the basic necessities of those who are undernourished, ill-housed, and shabbily-

clad. The Prophet Habakkuk lamented the ruthlessness of the Babylonians and the rapacious exploitation of the poor by the Judean nobility, and he proclaimed God's enduring sovereignty over God's creation. King spoke to the evils of the Vietnam War, racial oppression, and poverty and economic injustice, affirmed the dignity and worth of human life, and lifted a vision of true life and humanity characterized by the beloved community.

King took seriously the significance of Jesus Christ for the experience of the abundant life, and he understood the life-giving power and resources of the church in these terms. For King, structures that produce unhealthy environments and people, instead of caring for people in healthy, life-giving ways, cannot be tolerated on moral grounds. Standing in the tradition of the ancient Hebrew prophets, Dr. King projected a vision of what human life at its best can be, and he taught us much about how to achieve moral consistency around this question of reverence for life. Those who politically hijack and manipulate sacred texts and theological language to oppose abortion and stem cell research while simultaneously sanctioning capital punishment and war lack vision and are susceptible to what King called "a tragic ambivalence in the soul," or, in psychological terms, a schizophrenic personality. King's strong opposition to the death penalty, war, and the taking of life generally should never be casually dismissed because it is in conformity with age-old church teachings, particularly as they relate to the *imago dei* principle and to the concept of the communion of all human lives equally precious before God.

**We need openness, acceptance and enlargement.** It is around this need for a culture of openness, acceptance, and enlargement that King's legacy challenges humans on so many levels. King displayed an amazing openness and receptivity to human differences, and not simply tolerance. A culture of openness, acceptance, and enlargement was quite consistent with his understanding of the prophetic heritage, as indicated by his many references to the proclamations of Habakkuk, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets. Unfortunately, *intolerance* has become a metaphor for virtually all that has gone awry in the world since King's death. Much of this spirit of intolerance is evident in the lingering antiquated thinking about race and ethnicity, the deeply entrenched structures of sexism and male patriarchy, our troubled and uneasy relationship with other world philosophies and religions, and in the contemporary moral quagmire surrounding sexual ethics and the broader issues of human sexuality.

A culture of openness, acceptance, and enlargement means that the Christian Church must be receptive to human differences, especially since it is functioning in an increasingly multicultural and multi-faith world. King spoke of "the world house" and "the worldwide neighborhood" in which people expand their horizons and their sense of what it really means to live in a culturally, religiously, and ideologically diverse world. In this regard, he was a precursor to much of the contemporary thinking about globalization. Strangely, the church universal has not learned how to nurture and sustain diversity in constructive and meaningful ways or how to witness and do mission in a pluralistic or multidimensional world. The increasing diversification of the world demands a movement away from viewing *difference* as a weakness to legitimizing it as a source of strength, or perhaps as God's greatest gift to humanity. Those of us who are devoted to the fulfillment of King's

vision must continue to call for cooperation between people of different faiths, cultural backgrounds, and political persuasions, so that the work of changing society and the world for the better can be more effectively achieved. In other words, our commitment must be aimed at the globalization of the ethical ideal of the beloved community.

This commitment should not ignore the need for a culture of radical democracy. The reference here is to the kind of participatory democracy King had in mind; namely, that which encourages the mobilization and empowerment of persons and local communities, mass mobilization and movement, and increased possibilities for the expansion of rights and civil liberties. What is happening in contemporary America with the right wing extremists' involvement in politics is not a healthy leveling of this kind of democracy. The same might be said of authoritarian and oppressive regimes worldwide. Radical democracy serves the interests of what King called "the least of these" and not merely the elite.

King viewed freedom as the most inestimable gift of God conferred on humanity, and the goal of his sacred crusade was the overturning of the prevailing political order while creating in its place a democratic experience grounded in a concern for justice, equality of opportunity, and the promise of civil and political liberties. This is why King stands as a model for how humans might envision and practice democracy. **Moreover, King demonstrated that prophetic advocacy is always germane to the processes of true democracy, and one of the most monumental achievements of his movement is that it reminded people that even acts of organized civil disobedience are morally justified as a protest against the denial or erosion of basic constitutional guarantees and protections. King made the church an instrument of this endeavor.**

As the nation and the world struggle with the increasingly illusive concepts of liberty and equality which are contributing to political currents more uncertain than ever before, the church needs to be empowered by a fresh moral vision. As King so often said, the body of Christ universal has much to gain from a more perceptive and healthy view of how to reconcile faith with modern pluralistic democracy, and a more prophetic understanding of the role that religious convictions should and should not assume in public debate, in political decision-making, and in matters of public policy.

**Peace and Nonviolence are still needed in America.** Another major challenge for the Christian Church rests in the harnessing of its commitment and energy in pursuit of a more vital culture of peace and nonviolence, especially in this age of relentless and often violent change. Domestic abuse, criminal violence, and violence against children and the elderly are growing at alarming rates in the United States. Religiously-based violence, political assassinations, and the seemingly endless cycles of violence, repression, are proof the moral insensitivity of humans to violence in its many horrifying dimensions.

King called the church back to the example set by the Prince of Peace. He understood Jesus as a persistent, prophetic voice for peace, without which the beloved community becomes an unreachable or unattainable ideal. King also urged people of faith everywhere to take the lead in forging a peacemaking culture to restrain the war machine mentality of the present age. Often quoting the Prophet Isaiah, King envisioned a day when "Men will

beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and nation shall not rise up against nation, and neither shall they study war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).

Unfortunately, King's idea that only peaceful means can secure peaceful ends has been replaced with the strange and destructive notion that peaceful ends can be achieved via violent means. We are compelled by our faith and sense of decency to reclaim King's conviction that charting a course of strength and honor has much to do with the pursuit of peaceful means and the nonviolent resolution of conflict at the inter-personal, inter-group, and international levels, and nothing really to do with gaudy displays of military might.

**Moral vision and servanthood are imperatives.** There is an equally important need to reclaim King's legacy of moral vision and active faith by committing ourselves to a culture of sacrificial servant-hood. Nothing short of this can suffice in these times of growing economic crisis and in light of the appalling contrast between wealth and poverty in the world. King maintained that the greatest expression of the human spirit involves the willingness to suffer and even die, if necessary, for the common good. He found inspiring examples of this sacrificial spirit in the Hebrew Prophets of old and in Jesus Christ, who lamented the mistreatment of the poor and humbled by the privileged, who were concerned with public affairs and service, and who put themselves at risk for the cause of human welfare and dignity. Furthermore, King, perhaps more than any other visionary in his day, exposed the superficiality and frivolousness of arguments made against the church's involvements in public service, while making a persuasive call to practical Christianity and radical, costly discipleship. King lifted a vision of the church as Good Samaritan, the sacrificial church, the cross-bearing church, or the church as suffering servant, and his own life and eventual martyrdom stand as an affirmation of these ecclesial images and as a blueprint for the contemporary church.

The very idea of Christians bearing a cross in the act of service to humanity seems so distant and unreal in today's world. Instead of parading as centers of sacrificial service, all too many churches have retreated into enclaves of moralistic, revivalistic, and capitalistic Christianity. King's concept of a committed and sacrificial life is being overshadowed by the mega church's emphasis on personal enrichment themes, the abundant life, and prosperity theology. Interestingly enough, sacrificial servant-hood is too often equated with certain charity and social outreach ministries, and seldom with a persistent, prophetic assault on the structures of power and of social, economic, and political injustice. To be sure, King's prophetic vision, advocacy, and activism, rooted in the value of unearned suffering as a redemptive force, remains a much-needed corrective for those Christians who construct edifices to shield themselves from any form of crucifixion.

Equally significant is the necessity for the church to reassert its role in promoting a culture of constructive self-criticism. Very much like the Hebrew prophets, King turned his critique inward to keep himself true to his calling and mission, for he knew that he too was under the judgment of what he proclaimed and advocated. Also like the prophets, King experienced one failure after another, was often unpopular and castigated, and died before accomplishing his goals, but he was sustained by the conviction that though he was unsuccessful at times, the God of history would not ultimately fail.

King held that constructive critics of the church had to come from within that institution, and no one fulfilled that role better than he, even as he loved, served, defended, and used the body of Christ as a social and political platform for his civil and human rights activities. The call to constructive self-criticism was clearly a part of King's vision for ecclesial renewal. The dominant model of the church today, which is not conducive to an intense, internal critique of its leadership and structures, falls short of this vision. This explains why the contemporary church is facing an identity and definitional crisis. In this situation, King's idea of a church that avails itself to the same type of prophetic critique it so freely visits upon nightclubs and gambling establishments obviously has some preaching and teaching value.

## **Celebration**

We celebrate a God who is concerned about bringing what Dr. King called "the disjointed elements of reality" into a harmonious whole. Put another way, God, in and through Jesus Christ, is about reconciling people to themselves and to each other. Disunity and discord seem so natural to the human spirit, but there is space for those who proclaim the gospel of reconciliation and community. The church in its most authentic sense is a symbol of the beloved community, and this means that the task of forging bonds between peoples of different nationalities, races, and classes extends beyond the experience of worship to the larger realms of society and the world. As Dr. King often noted, we are co-workers with God in the creation of the beloved community.

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sights:** A man standing on a rampart/tower; a plain vision being written; a person running after having read a vision, a vision that surely comes; and

**Sounds:** The Lord answering a person who seeks help; the steps of a runner.