

“The Buoyancy of Hope.”

[Text -John 1:35-42]

Pastor Dave Shackle

January 15, 2017

This morning's New Testament reading gives us a marvelous example of how the Good News of Jesus Christ can take hold of a person's life, and set it on a radically new path. The story begins with John the Baptist directing two of his followers toward Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God!" Jesus then invites those two to "Come and see" where he is staying - to come and observe what he's all about. They hang-around with Jesus for less than a day, yet are deeply impressed with him. One of them, Andrew [a fisherman], finds his brother Simon and tells him, "We have found the Messiah - we have encountered the real deal!" Andrew brings Simon to meet Jesus, who has an immediate effect on him - transforming Simon into a new person, with a new vision, a new name, and a new purpose for living. Simon Peter soon finds his entire life being completely changed, because he has seen the Light of Christ - the One who fully embodies God's radically inclusive Love and Grace.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a person whose life was also transformed by the Light of Christ, and by the radically inclusive Love of God. Born January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, Martin's early goal was to be a Baptist minister in a large congregation - just like his father. In 1947, at the age of 18, Martin was well on his way. He was a licensed preacher, assisting his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. By 1954, at age 25, he had graduated from college and seminary, and was installed as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1955, he became *Doctor King*, earning a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Boston University. King's dream of becoming a successful minister of his own congregation was right on track. However, on December 5th, 1955, something happened in the city of Montgomery, which would launch a different and more

noble dream for Martin Luther King, Jr. and for millions of others.

Rosa Parks, a seamstress returning home from a long day of work, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. With her arrest, began a boycott of the Montgomery Bus Company, which would last over a year. Twenty-six year old Martin Luther King, as president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association, became the leader of that boycott; and from that point forward, King became for this nation a voice of truth, a beacon of hope, and a messenger of the Dream.

The Dream was this: that equality, freedom, and justice be realized by every person, regardless of race or religion, color or creed. And Martin Luther King envisioned and articulated that Dream as well as, or better than, anyone. Of course, the journey toward equality, freedom and justice can be extremely difficult and dangerous, as King certainly realized. In the ensuing years of working toward a non-violent end to racial and economic injustice, King's home was bombed twice, he personally was bombarded with rocks and bricks, and stabbed by a would-be assassin. He was frequently attacked, arrested and imprisoned. He received countless death threats, and endured the violent deaths of many of his brothers and sisters on that journey toward freedom - including four young girls blown-apart in the basement of a Birmingham, Alabama church. And on April 4th 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, an assassin's bullet ended the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. One week later, on April 11th, Congress finally passed the 1968 Civil Rights Act.

The Dream of equality, freedom, and justice, is a dream that requires tireless effort and selfless sacrifice, because it's a dream which is continually being attacked and challenged - even today. And while this may discourage and dishearten us, it is crucial that we don't give up hope. In one of his sermons from the book *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King writes that "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 efforts, I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope."

The past few months I felt that "fatigue of despair", as my sister Mary K. grew weaker and was dying. It certainly didn't help that there also seemed to be a simultaneous weakening and dying of common courtesy and respect among and within our larger society, surrounding the Presidential campaign. Fortunately though, in the midst of all this, I've come to embrace a personal theory [or a personal *theology*] that really seems to help. Simply put, *I* need to help others - the nieces and nephews who were in my sister's care; the family members who continue to bitterly bicker about the election; the people who rightfully fear that their rights and dignity as citizens of this country are being attacked or diminished because of their race or religion, color or creed, gender or sexual orientation.

In this same light, you and I as the Body of Christ need to continue to extend a radically inclusive welcome to *all* people. We need to increase our efforts, by actively inviting others to "Come and See" where Jesus is staying. To tell our friends and families, neighbors and strangers, acquaintances *and adversaries* about the radically inclusive Love of God that we experience and share in this place. For as we do this, we too will feel "the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope." A hope that will lift us up, renew our resolve, and carry us faithfully forward on the path to equality, freedom, and justice for all.