

Micah 6:6-8 / Acts 5:27-32

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Letters from a Birmingham and Jerusalem Jail

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Our first and second testament readings are Micah 6:6-8 / Acts 5:27-32, let's lean in and listen with fresh ears that we might hear anew God's word for us this day.

Scripture

Micah 6:6-8 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

What God Requires

⁶ "With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

Acts 5:27-32 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

²⁷ When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,^[a] yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority.^[b] ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

The Word of the Lord / **Thanks be to God**

Let us pray:

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.
Come as the fire and burn,
Come as the wind and cleanse,
Come as the light and reveal,
Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:
That the words of my mouth
And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you,
for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

Sermon¹

What were you doing in April 1963?

Depending on your age:

You might have watched the debut of the long-running soap opera General Hospital.

You might have purchased the first album put out by the Beatles.

You might not have been born.

If you were a leader of the clergy in Birmingham, Alabama, you would have received a strongly worded letter from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On Good Friday, April 12, 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. and 50 others were charged with violating a court order against mass demonstrations. He had been part of a nonviolent protest conducted by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. King was invited by the Alabama Christian Movement to take part as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He was arrested and taken to the city jail where he was placed in solitary confinement.

On the same day, eight prominent clergymen published a letter in the *Birmingham News* characterizing King's movement as "unwise and untimely." The writers of the letter – four bishops, three pastors, and one rabbi – agreed that racial segregation was a problem, though they felt it should be handled in the courts instead of the streets. These clergy leaders characterized the movement's leaders as "outsiders" and rebuked King for causing trouble in Birmingham.

King scribbled his response in the margins of the newspaper and sheets of stationery smuggled in by a sympathetic jailer. King's reply – now published over 60 years ago – is known as "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The letter first appeared in a Quaker publication and then gained national circulation through *The Christian Century*, where King was a contributing editor in June 1963.

It has since entered the mainstream of the nation's self-awareness:

- Since 2019, the letter is read aloud annually on the floor of the US Senate as a model of conscience and patriotism.

¹ I utilized the article *King's letter to an unfaithful church* by Richard Lischer in April 2023's "The Christian Century," pp. 54-58 as a source for this sermon.

- It is dissected in English composition classes as a model of clarity.
- Advanced Placement US government high school classes study it as part of a small canon of civic classics.

King responded to the clergy leaders by saying that he was not an outsider because he had ties to the Alabama Christian Movement. He consistently drew his arguments from biblical or theological sources familiar to the recipients of his letter – connecting (or convicting) them out of a shared fund of knowledge. The underlying presumption being that God operates without boundaries. *Doesn't truth come from out of town? Towns like Tarsus and Nazareth?*

More importantly, King stated, “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.” All communities and states are interrelated, he asserted, and “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. – Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Therefore, “anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an *outsider*.”

King acknowledged that the demonstrations – which upset the Alabama clergy leaders – were unfortunate. “It is even more unfortunate,” King added, “that the city’s power structure left the community with no alternative.”

Church leaders also questioned the timing of the protests. They wanted King to wait and see if the new city administration would improve conditions for blacks. King responded that for blacks in the United States, the word *wait* had almost always meant *never*. They had already been waiting 340 years for their “constitutional and God-given rights.”

Three hundred and forty years is a long time to wait – too long – the time for waiting had reached an end – at least waiting for human authorities to act – it was time to act.

Not that King was the first to practice civil disobedience. King spoke of the First Testament’s *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego* who refused to obey Nebuchadnezzar’s laws. He reminded of Socrates practicing civil disobedience in Greece. American patriots participating in the Boston Tea Party.

Of course, King leaned heavily into the early Christians who faced persecution for their faith. They, like Martin Luther King, Jr., knew they must obey God – especially as they bore witness to injustice.

In our First Testament reading from Acts 5, the story of Peter and the apostles had been arrested for performing numerous healings and for telling Jesus’ story. On the day of the apostles’ trial, the temple police arrested them again, and they were brought to stand before the Jewish council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach [in Jesus’ name], yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us” (27-28).

One might say the apostles' efforts were *untimely and unwise*.

Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him" (29-32).

Peter and the apostles – the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* – are the church's call to be a leavening agent in the world. It is a call to be the very thing that causes us to work toward God's vision of God's kingdom here on earth. We pray it weekly in our communal prayer, "[God's] will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The church is called to become what King or St. Columba² (another "outsider" who brought good news to a foreign land) would call a "colony of heaven."

This is no where more poignantly stated than in the *Letter of Diognetus* written by an unnamed Christian to a Roman Official in the 2nd or 3rd century. The letter asserts, "What the soul is to the body, that Christians are in the world."

King's letter – Peter and the apostles' words – point us to our moral responsibility to *openly and lovingly* act and advocate in ways which promote joy and justice.

Leaning into the words of theologians and saints, like Augustine, we are called to see that "[injustice anywhere] is no [justice] at all."

In theological terms, it is our call to work for a world which seeks to find ways to replace:

- as the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 12:21 "evil with good"
- what the Christian existentialist, Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich calls "awful estrangement" and "terrible sinfulness"
- what the Jewish mystic Martin Buber calls the dehumanizing "I-It" relationship **with** the divine, life-giving "I-Thou" relationship.

In everyday terms, it is our call to care for others the way we would like others to care for us.

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman calls this *The Work of Christmas*.

Born in 1899, grandson of a former slave, Dr. Thurman was a Baptist pastor, theologian and civil rights activist.

In 1953 LIFE Magazine voted him one of the 12 greatest preachers in the country.

² Columba was an Irish Abbott and missionary who is credited with converting Scotland to Christianity.

Thurman mentored a young Martin Luther King, Jr. where he received his Ph.D. in 1955 at Boston University – the institution where Thurman was serving as the first Black Dean of Marsh Chapel.

Thurman's theology expounds on Jesus' example of unconditional love and illustrates how this agape love not only helps the disinherited endure oppression, it also holds the power to change the heart of the oppressor.

Thurman's belief in such a redemptive, transformative love can be seen in his writings like *I Will Light Candles at Christmas* – which you may recall we used as our call-to-worship throughout Advent and Christmas.

Dr. Thurman's post-Christmas writing *The Work of Christmas* is a theological statement to which I return annually about this time:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

Thurman's words – King's *Letter* – Peter and the apostles' interaction offer the church a chance to remind themselves who they are called to become:

not monolithic steeples atop stone edifices

rather a movement of hope, understanding, reconciliation, joy, and justice

what Diognetus' letter called "the soul" in a battered and bruised world.

On this day before MLK Day when we will commemorate Dr. King's life and work, may we, who make up the church – remain committed to – do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God – not just one day but every day.

For it is through the church's repetitive practice of just actions, merciful love, and humble walk with God that we more fully become an illuminating life-giving version of:

the church Christ died, rose from the dead, and reigns in power for;

the church the Holy Spirit empowers, sustains and breathes life into;

the church God knows, loves and believes she can be.

While the church may find herself at times walking on the outskirts of King or Columba's "Colony of Heaven" – it is in following the prophet Micah's disarmingly simple yet profound

command, “to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with your God” – that we will find ourselves nearer to becoming the church and people God knows we can be.

To God be the glory – this day and every day. / Amen and Amen.