

## **COURAGE IN SPITE OF FEAR**

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
In honor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
University Public Worship, Stanford Memorial Church  
January 16, 2005**

"In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world."<sup>i</sup> So says Jesus on the night he's is betrayed by one of his own disciples...on the night he's arrested...on the night before he dies a horrible, excruciating death after being brutally tortured for hours upon hours. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we honor today in this service and tomorrow in his national holiday, on the night before he died, on April 4, 1968, said these words: "I got into Memphis [today] and some began to talk...about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers...But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop...I just want to do God's will...I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Those are the last words he ever spoke publicly: "I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."<sup>iii</sup>

Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I preached a sermon from this pulpit entitled "Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself." Osama

Bin Laden had recently spoken these words: "There is America, full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east. Thank God for that." In response, I quoted Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous words in his first inaugural address in the midst of the Great Depression: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Well, here we are, more than three years later. Fear is still in the air. More than a thousand American men and woman have died on the soils of Afghanistan and Iraq. The terrorist threat still looms large, abroad and at home. Much of the world has moved from a sympathetic solidarity with Americans -- "We are all Americans" -- to a deep hatred for America. Meanwhile, we have just gone through an elections season which many have called one of the most divisive in our history. We are no longer united as Americans, but torn asunder into blue states and red states, blue people and red people. I know many liberals who are genuinely fearful now to speak out, to organize, to act politically or even religiously. They feel a new McCarthyism in the air. I know conservatives who are genuinely fearful of where our culture is headed in terms of what they consider its abandonment of fundamental values. Just read Gertrude Himmelfarb's One Nation: Two Cultures following her On Looking into the Abyss, or examine Robert Bork's book Slouching Toward Gomorrah.<sup>iii</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr. writes at some length about fear in his 1963 book, The Strength to Love. He quotes from the first epistle of John: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear."<sup>iv</sup> King wonders: "In these days of catastrophic change and calamitous uncertainty, is there anyone who does not experience the depression and bewilderment of crippling fear, which, like a nagging hound of hell, pursues our every footstep?"<sup>v</sup> He invokes one of the four classic virtues, courage, as a critical antidote against fear. Quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas, King describes courage as "the strength of mind capable of conquering whatever threatens attainment of the highest good."<sup>vi</sup>

King reminds us that Roosevelt's quote was not unique to him. Henry David Thoreau wrote in his Journal that "Nothing is so much to be feared as fear." A century before Christ, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, once himself a slave, exclaimed "It is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of hardship and death." King's own theology was deeply influenced by the contemporary liberal theologian Paul Tillich, who explained that "Courage is self-affirmation 'in spite of'... Courage is self-affirmation 'in spite of' that which tends to hinder the self from affirming itself." King agrees that courage is self-affirmation in spite of the reality of death or nonbeing. He makes sure that this isn't confused with selfishness, though,

"for self-affirmation includes both a proper self-love and a properly positioned love of others." Citing the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, King reminds us that self-love and love of others, properly understood, are interdependent.<sup>vii</sup>

As an aside, it's good to remember, as we honor King, what an intellectual he was, and how naturally he worked literary, historical, philosophical, and psychological references into his writing. And not just his writing. His book Strength to Love is in fact a collection of sermons, most of which he had preached from his then home pulpit in Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church. We can forget from hearing his public speeches, like "I Have a Dream," how profoundly scholarly this man with a Ph.D. from Boston University was, and how you were going to reap the benefit of that when he was preaching.

King's understanding of courage was by no means facile, either. He insisted that courage is not the absence of fear, it is the ability to act in spite of it. As he put it, "Many of our fears are not mere snakes under the carpet. Trouble is a reality in this strange medley of life, dangers lurk within the circumference of every action...and death is a stark, grim, and inevitable fact of human experience."<sup>viii</sup> Recall that King's own fears were often realized: his home was bombed, he was stabbed with a knife -- just shy of

his aorta -- and ultimately he was assassinated by a racist's bullet.

Meanwhile, he constantly put himself in harm's way and reaped the consequences of his nonviolent direct action as he defied unjust laws, marched through mean streets, and was carried off to inhospitable jails.

So King does not counsel trying to eliminate fear from our lives. Indeed, he even calls fear "a powerfully creative force," when it is linked with the virtue of courage. Fear is part of the animal fight-or-flight instinct, and without it human beings could not have survived in either the primitive or modern worlds. "Every great invention and intellectual advance represents a desire to escape from some dreaded circumstance or condition...If people were to lose their capacity to fear, they would be deprived of their capacity to grow, invent, and create. So, in a sense, fear is normal, necessary, and creative."<sup>ix</sup>

Yet, King is well aware that fear can poison and distort our inner lives as surely as it can motivate us to improve our individual and collective welfare. Therefore, the problem is not how to be rid of fear, but how to harness it. The main way to do this, from King's perspective, is through love. He goes to his New Testament and finds: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear."<sup>x</sup> And King does not mean a "soft, anemic, and sentimental" kind of love. As he points out, that kind of love could not have

"led Christ to a cross and kept Paul unembittered amid the angry torrents of persecution." The kind of love King means is one, which shows "an infinite capacity to 'take it.'" He's talking about the kind of love that leads to disciplined nonviolent action, in the face of all the blows and the beatings, even unto death. The kind of love that becomes organized goodwill. The kind of love which seeks justice for both blacks and whites, for both the oppressed and the oppressors. Internationally, King claims that war is not a consequence of hate. "Close scrutiny reveals this sequence: first fear, then hate, then war, and finally deeper hatred." In terms of personal anxieties, fear generates a feeling of insecurity, lack of self-confidence, and concern about failure, which can then harden into hatred. Hatred then paralyzes life; only love can release it. Hatred darkens life; only love can illuminate it.<sup>xi</sup>

Where does this kind of courage-engendering love come from? King believes that deep, effective love is linked with faith in God. God for King is a "benign Intelligence whose infinite love embraces all of humankind." When fears inevitably come, faith "assures us that the universe is trustworthy and that God is concerned...Irreligion, on the other hand, would have us believe that we are orphans cast into the terrifying immensities of space in a universe that is without purpose or intelligence."<sup>xii</sup> It is understandable why the latter view would drain courage and exhaust our

energies. By contrast, "Religion endows us with the conviction that we are not alone in this vast, uncertain universe... This universe is not a tragic expression of meaningless chaos, but a marvelous display of orderly cosmos... Beneath and above the... uncertainties that darken our days and the vicissitudes that cloud our nights is a wise and loving God."<sup>xiii</sup>

This may all be a bit abstract and hard to fathom: leading our scientific minds to begin debating and questioning chaos versus order and intelligent design versus evolution by natural selection based on truly random mutation. Don't go there right now. For Christians have an actual manifestation of divine love in the person of Jesus, and Jesus concretizes it all in the human sphere. Jesus models a life of turning the other cheek and loving his enemies. Jesus is the one who talks about love in relation to the hated Samaritans, outsiders and foreigners, one of whom stops and cares for the beaten man on the dangerous road to Jericho, when the Jewish exemplars of priest and Levite have passed by on the other side. Jesus, both in his own life and in his teachings, demonstrates the capacity, as King puts it, "to project the 'I' into the 'thou,' and to be concerned about one's brother."<sup>xiv</sup>

Then, near his death, Jesus affirms that for all human beings his kind of love is the ultimate law of the universe: He tells his disciples: "In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the

world."<sup>xv</sup> Christian hope, grounded in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, is that one's present and future belong to God, and that, as a result, all things are possible.<sup>xvi</sup> Take courage, for fear is never the last word. Ultimately "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear."<sup>xvii</sup>

Jesus himself knew this on the cross, as he died with the words of a Hebrew Psalm on his lips -- a Hebrew Psalm that pre-dated him by at least 500 years.<sup>xviii</sup> "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me,"<sup>xix</sup> is how the psalm begins, rather bleakly. That's as far as Jesus got reciting it on the cross. Yet, by the end of the Psalm, it's affirming the triumph of God's love: "God did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him... Those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever!"<sup>xx</sup>

The psalm that was read earlier in this service explains: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock... Happy are those who make the Lord their trust... I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart... Let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever."<sup>xxi</sup>

A Southern white preacher and his wife who supported Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the 1950's wrote openly in a published memoir that their fear from angry racists who continually



confronted them was overwhelming, until they truly joined with others to shout and praise God. They repeatedly turned to Psalm 27, which begins "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" As they put it, "Our enemies were everywhere. They hated us and did not slacken their determination to harm us. But God's circle of love, made up of our white and Negro friends who stood by us [even as our house was bombed], never allowed us to feel alone. Our entire outlook changed. We became bolder than ever."<sup>xxii</sup>

So, for those of us who fear terrorism, who fear how we Americans are seen in the world, who fear our divided country, who fear being silenced or having our fundamental values betrayed -- Let those of us who are Christian learn the lesson of the church-based civil rights movement. Let's roll up our sleeves and go to work in God's circle of love, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and in the activist tradition of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Maybe we too can then say that we've been to the mountaintop. That we just want to do God's will. That we're happy and not worried about anything. That we're not fearing anybody. That we can truly sing, for our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. Amen.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> John 16: 33.
- <sup>ii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," a sermon delivered at the Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968, as collected in James M. Washington (ed.), A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 286
- <sup>iii</sup> With thanks to my friend Dan Clendenin for suggesting these titles.
- <sup>iv</sup> I John 4: 18
- <sup>v</sup> King, The Strength to Love as collected in Washington, A Testament of Hope, pp. 509-510.
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid., p. 512.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid., pp. 510-511.
- <sup>x</sup> I John 4: 18.
- <sup>xi</sup> King, Strength to Love, pp. 513-514.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid., p.515.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., p. 516.
- <sup>xiv</sup> King, "I See the Promised Land," p. 284.
- <sup>xv</sup> John 16: 33.
- <sup>xvi</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 785.
- <sup>xvii</sup> I John 4: 18.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 570.
- <sup>xix</sup> Mark 15: 34, quoting Psalm 22: 1.
- <sup>xx</sup> Psalm 22: 24, 26.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Psalm 40: 1-2, 4, 8, 11.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Robert S. Graetz, Montgomery: A White Preacher's Memoir (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p.93.