



CALLED!

by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
for Berkeley Chinese Community Church
January 15, 2017
2nd Sunday after Epiphany

ISAIAH 49:1-7

*Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
3 And he said to me, 'You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'
4 But I said, 'I have laboured in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the Lord,
and my reward with my God.'*

*5 And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength—
6 he says,
'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'*

*7 Thus says the Lord,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
'Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'*

JOHN 1:35-42

35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' ³⁹He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought Simon* to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter*).*

This is the weekend when we honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. January 15 (today) is his birthday...he would have been 88 today. Tomorrow is a national holiday - it was created in 1983 when Ronald Reagan signed a bill to honor King with a federal holiday. It is now officially celebrated on the 3rd Monday of January.

Indeed, he was a great man. You know, greatness isn't just seen in what special people do—but, more importantly, in what they inspire others to do. Dr. King did both. He led a prolific life of action and inspiring words-- sermons, books, quotes. This is the man who inspired generations of people – certainly he was a hero to my generation!

And like many who grow up with heroes, I used to wonder how does such greatness happen? What is it about people like Martin Luther King Jr.? What is it about their lives that can change the course of history? That seem to create miracles? that can inspire others? I never really came up with answers back then. But now - I may have something to chew on!

Today's passage from Isaiah describes a situation that sounds like "destiny" - something - someone - God - from even before one is born - that has set a path for you...whatever experiences...whatever life throws at you...will be a part of something you are called to be and do in life. Called! That was a concept that my fellow seminarians and I struggled with when I was at PSR. Trying to explain our sometimes gut wrenching, sometimes exhilarating, sometimes bewildering feeling that pulled us to start a new life of service to God.

The definition of "Called!" that resonated with all of us - was a simple one - "Being Called is doing something you cannot NOT do."

King was called! He could not NOT do what he was doing ... especially when we take a look at some of his experiences in his life.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in 1929 during the deep depression in the deep south - Atlanta Georgia. He was the middle child of a Baptist Minister who used to regularly beat him until he was 15. A neighbor would hear Senior telling Jr. while he was beating him, "I'm going to make something of you even if I have to beat you to death."

But Martin Luther King Sr. was also Jr's role model. King watched his father proudly and fearlessly protest against segregation...like when his father refused to listen to a traffic policeman after being referred to as "boy" or when he stomped out of a store with his son when he was told by a shoe clerk that they would have to move to the rear of the store to be served.

One of his good friends and playmates when he was very young was the son of a white business owner near the King home. By the time they started school, the friend went to a white school and King went to a black one...public schools were segregated by state law then. King lost his friend because the child's father no longer wanted the boys to play together. This loss of an important friendship especially at such an early age must have left a huge impression on him.

He was a very bright student - he skipped the 9th grade. Then while he was still a High school junior, a respected historically black college - Morehouse College - announced it would accept any high school student who could pass their entrance test. King Jr., took the test, passed and

wound up skipping his last year of high school and entered Morehouse college at age 15, He graduated with a degree in sociology in 1948 then enrolled in seminary to prepare for ministry and three years later, got his Bachelor of Divinity degree.

The story goes that while he was a student at seminary, he was romantically involved with the white daughter of an immigrant German woman who worked as a cook in the cafeteria. King planned to marry her, but friends advised against it. They told him that such an interracial marriage would make both blacks and whites angry, and that this marriage would potentially damage his chances of ever pastoring a church in the South.

King sadly told a friend that he could not endure his mother's pain over the marriage and broke the relationship off six months later. He continued to have lingering feelings toward the woman he left though. One friend was quoted as saying, "He never recovered."

Perhaps this was one of his experiences that fed his passion for diversity and integration and was the seed for his "I have a dream" speech. With his interracial romance behind him, he met and married Coretta Scott in 1953 and a year later at age 25 in 1954, he was called as pastor of a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Then things really started happening...

- On December 1, 1955, [Rosa Parks](#) was arrested for refusing to give up her seat;
- The Montgomery bus boycott followed, planned and led in part by King;
- The boycott lasted for 385 days,^[37] and the situation became so tense that [King's house was bombed](#);
- King was arrested during this campaign, which concluded with a United States District Court ruling that ended racial segregation on all Montgomery public buses;
- King's role in the bus boycott transformed him into a national figure and the best-known spokesman of the civil rights movement.^[41]

King organized and led marches for blacks' right to [vote](#), [desegregation](#), [labor rights](#) and other basic civil rights.^[40] Most of these rights were successfully enacted into the [law of the United States](#). You can understand why this man is a hero of mine and many of my generation.

His passion and mission was the driving force of many civil rights advocates and activists. He has received many awards – among them the Nobel Peace Prize and the Congressional Medal of Honor and so many others...and his "Call!" ...his doing what he cannot NOT do...was fueled and energized by his life experiences and his faith: his main influence was [Jesus Christ](#) and the Christian gospels. His faith was strongly based in Jesus' commandment of [loving your neighbor as yourself](#), loving God above all, and loving your enemies, praying for them and blessing them.

His [nonviolent](#) ways was also based on another of Jesus' teaching to [turn the other cheek](#). All of his actions were based on his faith! And with God - miracles began...

- different races worked together like never before;
- and the world began to change...

At this point you might be finding yourself wondering, "What can I do?" Let's be honest. MLK

is a very inspiring man, but also a frightening one. Look what one man can do. Look what's possible. So what's keeping us from being like that?

Most of us will not do anything as dramatic as Rosa Parks – remember the woman in 1955 who refused to give up her seat to make room for a white family? We probably won't do anything like what MLK did.

But what about Raymond Parks? Who's he? He was Rosa's husband. He had been attending NAACP meetings and he recruited her. It's because of Raymond that Rosa received her training in civil disobedience and other principles of non-violence. Rosa Parks was just another ordinary woman riding the bus. But she had done her homework and she was ready. Her moment came. She refused to move. The blight of racism was forever challenged, and civil rights took a quantum leap forward.

Fast forward 50 years – Atlanta Georgia, 2005: I was there for UCC's General Synod and had a free afternoon...so, I decided to go to the King Center. Starting with the bus ride it was a powerful experience. I sat with a family also going to the King Center – this black family and me - all sitting at the front of the bus.

When I arrived, there were lots of kids on field trips with the classes. While the older ones roamed around on their own, the little ones - the preschool kids and the younger elementary age kids were in orderly lines, two by two, holding hands....and yes, there were twosomes in which a black child was holding the hand of a white child....tears were falling before I even entered the building called the King Center. In my lifetime, in two generations, Martin Luther King's dream is coming true!

It's been more than fifty years after MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech. But I can hear it as if it were yesterday...when he stood on the steps at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963. and shared as only Martin Luther King, Jr., could share.....

"I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers."

And with those words and his other inspiring speeches and actions, he inspired a generation that they become the midwives who birthed MLK's dream....in spite of the social context...in spite of the times that threatened the new way of life King spoke about.

The next generations - that would be everyone - that would be all who are committed to following Christ - that would be us - we are called, too! Just like the unsuspecting Simon Peter in today's passage.

Remember the Gospel reading for today? John the baptizer tells us about an incident that happened when he pointed out Jesus to his friends and followers. There - that's him - the Lamb of God! When Jesus saw them following him, he asked - What are you looking for? "Rabbi - teacher". They wanted to know where Jesus was staying - they probably wanted to shadow him and learn from him - kind of like a minister, teacher in training. And all Jesus said,

was - come and see. They stuck around him that day and we find out that one of the two followers was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. Andrew must have been excited when he finally found his brother and can say to him, We have found the Messiah! When Jesus was introduced to Simon Peter...we witness another calling, another transformation...when Jesus said, "you are Simon, son of John...You are to be called Cephas" and the rest is history. Simon Peter...the rock upon which the Christian church is built!

Simon Peter might have come to support his brother Andrew and wound up to be renamed, revamped, reborn as Cephas and the first church!

It is amazing what one person can do - with God's help! Rosa Parks – her action made things happen. Another ordinary person! And Raymond? It wouldn't have happened this way without him. He didn't get any of the glory—that's ok. For every person who gets the glory, there are countless others who do their own, ordinary human-being part. And they all, together, give love and justice a chance.

Think about each child who has been affected by Raymond & Rosa and MLK. I happened to come across some quotes about Martin Luther King from school children from around town. Joshua Kery, a sixth grader, said: "Everybody can be great." That pretty well sums it up.

Then there was a discussion that some 2nd graders had with their teacher:

- "Love is the key to the world. Hate can't break hate."
- "Martin Luther King Jr is the man who stood in Washington, D.C., and talked about freedom and rights."
- "He's the guy who stopped segregation. It doesn't matter if you're black or white."
- "MLK helped people to make powerful decisions. He didn't care if he died."

He was only one person, but what a person indeed. How easy to be intimidated by his example. We hear his words every year. Sometimes they are so familiar that they just bounce off, don't sink in. But we KNOW that when we take them seriously, we have to look in the mirror—and ask, what am I doing about injustices, unfairness, broken love, in this day and age. And if we come up empty, we haven't heard. "What can I do? I'm just an insignificant person. My lonely voice or action won't matter." Listen to this story and think again!

Once upon a time there was a snowflake falling along with many other snowflakes. It was sad all the way down from the heavens because there were so many snowflakes falling...it felt it didn't matter to anyone whether it existed or not. But when it alighted on a branch, the branch broke – this lowly snowflake made all the difference! One lowly snowflake!

Well – all this is fine – good stuff about MLK and inspiration and changing the face of the society as we know it...But what does it have to do me? what does it have to do with us at BCCC? Where does it connect with our scripture readings for today? We are in the midst of New Beginnings - we are doing our best to discern what God's call is for us as this church in Berkeley in 2017! What is it that we are called to do and be? What is it that we have to do and be? What is it that we cannot NOT do? And how does one voice, one person make a difference?

When you think about it – MLK and Rosa Parks and Raymond were following a call - doing

something that was right in God's eyes – isn't that what God is calling us to do? To be in synch with God's dream –

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a book called God's Dream.

“God dreams about people sharing,
God dreams about people caring,
God dreams that we reach out and hold one another hands, play one another's games and laugh with one another's heart. Each of us carries a piece of God's heart within us and when we love one another, we make God's heart whole.”

Desmond Tutu an opponent of apartheid in So Africa - a contemporary of Martin Luther King Jr. articulated God's dream...he was in synch with the dreams of Martin Luther King, Jr..... Isn't it curious that this generation spawned two such prophets in two very separate continents? Must be a God thing -

The thing is – I think if this world that we long for...the one that we sang about in our opening hymn...a world where everyone respects each other's ways and where love is lived and all is done with justice and praise and where goods are shared and misery relieved...if we allow ourselves be led by God's call - individually and collectively as BCCC ...the one person that each of us are can make a difference...like Martin Luther King, like Rosa Parks, like Raymond Parks...like Desmond Tutu...like the lowly snowflake...we can rejoice in being “Called!” and we...with God...shall overcome...and become God's Beloved Community. And an ordinary person like this plain green stole can be transformed into the flip side that is colorful, magical and live and love “Imagine what's possible!” Amen!