

Letters from Prison

Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; Psalm 92:1-4; Philippians 1:27-29

Reverend Dr. Louise Barger

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Justice, justice! Where there is no justice there is no peace. Where there is no justice, the people perish.

Generation after generation after generation finds individuals whom God calls out to speak words of truth to the generation in which they live. Those who bring the message of the displeasure of God about how the people or the society is acting are often martyred for their unpopular message.

We might just have as easily entitled this sermon "Letters from the Martyrs." Amos and Micah were contemporaries and prophets during the reign of King Uzziah in the southern kingdom of Judah and King Jeroboam, the ruler over the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah and Hosea were also their contemporaries, so reading from them would give a broader picture of what was happening among God's people.

Quietly living out their lives as faithful followers of Yahweh, Amos and Micah were chosen by God to bring God's message to God's chosen people. God's people had turned away from the God's teachings. Society consisted of two classes of people: the very wealthy and the very poor. There was no justice in the courts. The rights of the poor, the foreigners, the widows and orphans were ignored. Bribery was the order of the day. The people still sacrificed as a *form of worship*, but their worship had no value in Yahweh's sight. Because Amos and Micah spoke the word of judgment of God upon them, both men were martyred. We are left with their "letters" of prophecy in the Old Testament.

Move forward 600 years. The Apostle Paul arrives on the scene. He is also a righteous man, a Pharisee of the Pharisee, blameless in nothing. He has been schooled by Rabbi Gamaliel, the best of the best. Saul, as he was named before he became a follower of Jesus, could not abide this new sect of Judaism that did not follow the Law as he knew it. Following this Jesus as the Messiah was anathema to him and he would do everything that he could to stamp it out.

And then he met Jesus. On the Road to Damascus, on his way to persecute more Christians, he was encountered by Jesus and he became as ardent about following Jesus as he had been about following the Law.

Paul, as he then became named, became the missionary to the Gentiles. His mission was to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to those thought outside of the promise of God.

Upon a day, Paul returned to Jerusalem from one of his journeys. His desire was to worship in the Temple again. Coming with him were two gentile men. All three went through the purification rituals that were necessary to worship in the Temple and he brought the Gentiles into the Temple with him. With the Apostle Paul there was "neither Jew nor Greek, for all were one in Christ Jesus."

The uproar was not to go unnoticed by the authorities of the Temple. No Gentile was allowed to come into the central area of the Temple. A crowd gathered, a riot ensued, and the Roman soldiers intervened and placed Paul in jail for disturbing the peace. Hearings followed; three times he told his story and

defended the equality of all people before God. Paul could get no decision; and, as a Roman citizen, he appealed to Caesar.

Now, Paul is in a prison in Rome. Paul has been a church planter. He has opened the continent of Europe to the Gospel. He has opened the Near East to the Gospel. It was his pattern to go back and visit the churches that he had planted and be sure that they were doing well. He can no longer do that, so he writes lengthy letters to them. He writes from prison to the churches at Ephesus and Colossae, and Philippi.

Paul was particularly fond of the church at Philippi. It was the first church in Europe. He expresses his hope to visit them one more time, but seems to know that he may lose his life. His word to them is to remain faithful to the things that he has taught them. They may also suffer persecution because Philippi is a Roman garrison city even though it is in Greece.

In 65 A.D. Paul lost his appeal and was executed as a “trouble-maker against Rome.” As a Roman citizen, he was beheaded rather than hanged on a cross.

Almost two thousand years later another Christian leader would become a martyr for justice. On January 15, 1929, the civil rights leader, Michael Luther King, Jr. was born. Yes, his birth name, as that of his father, was Michael, not Martin. His father was the pastor of Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist church. When young King was 5 years old his father traveled to Germany. He became so inspired by the Protestant Reformation leader, Martin Luther, that he came home and changed his own name and the name of his son to Martin.

King was a gifted student and entered Morehouse College at the age of 15. Although his father, his grandfather, and his great grandfather had been pastors, King had no intention of entering the ministry. His mind was changed while at Morehouse and he graduated with a degree in sociology and was ordained to the ministry. King then earned a degree from Crozier Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. That Seminary is now part of the seminary in Rochester. He then earned a doctorate in systematic theology at Boston University.

Dr. King became the Pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. It was in Montgomery that he became a leader in the bus boycott following the arrest of Rosa Parks. During that time the Kings would receive continual threatening phone calls every day. On one of those calls the person said, ““N, we don’t like your mess. If you are not out of town in 3 days, we are going to bomb your house and kill you.”

King recounts that on that night, after midnight, after Coretta and the baby were asleep, he sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands praying, “Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right...But...I must confess...I’m losing my courage.” King said he heard the Lord speaking to him as clearly as if the Lord were in the kitchen with him, and saying, “Stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. Stand up for righteousness.” King said that his fear ceased, but not the threats. The parsonage was bombed, but fortunately no one was injured.

Perhaps our most vivid memory of Dr. King is his “I have a dream” speech at the March on Washington for jobs and voting rights, but before that he spoke to thousands of people in the shadow of the Lincoln monument urging Americans to “give us the ballot.”

During his ministry Dr. King was imprisoned 29 times, one time in Montgomery for driving 30 miles an hour in a 25-mile zone. (Let me add that I heard stories this week of the same kind of traffic stops. People didn't go to jail but they received tickets. One was stopped for going 3 miles over the speed limit.)

In April 1963 Dr. King joined with other marchers in Birmingham, known as the most segregated city in the South. Bull Conner, the Commissioner of Public Safety, arrested him and jailed him. It was during his days in jail that he penned what would become one of his most famous letters, the Letter from the Birmingham Jail. It is a long letter. Dr. King remarked that he had little else to do but write. The pages were secreted out of jail in the shoes of visitors who came to see him. The letter was addressed to his fellow clergy. I urge you to print it out on your computers and read it in its entirety.

In the letter he says, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

Largely through the leadership of Dr. King the Voting Rights Act was passed on August 6, 1965.

Dr. King had perhaps foreseen his death. On April 4, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

Amos and Micah and the Apostle Paul and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were men who died for the sake of fighting for justice,

- equality of justice for all people, regardless of their social status;
- equality of the right to worship God, regardless of one's ethnicity;
- equality for the right to desegregation and the right to vote regardless of one's skin tone.

The struggle continues for justice for all today. Power over the lives of others can become an addiction that must continually be reinforced with the gaining of more power. As the people of God and followers of God's Son, Jesus the Christ, let us be people who

- do justice,
- love kindness, and
- walk humbly with our God.

Amen.