

A Message The Dream Still Lives

The Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton, Bishop of Maryland
August 28, 2013

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

Fifty years ago today, on a hot humid summer day in the nation's capital, a young preacher walked up to the podium on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to give voice to the hopes and dreams of millions of disenfranchised Americans to live and work in dignity. He had a manuscript from which he read dutifully, until midway during the speech he heard a voice of an angel behind him imploring him to go beyond his prepared text, to give his hearers a verbal picture of what was welling up in his mind's eye. The angel over his shoulder was none other than Mahalia Jackson, the renowned gospel singer, who in a moment of inspired courage shouted out to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. these words:

"Tell 'em about the dream, Martin...tell 'em about the dream!"

What followed were words that not only transfixed that multiracial crowd of over a quarter million people gathered on the National Mall, but they have become a kind of national sermon for generations of Americans who long to see God's vision of the beloved community here on earth:

"I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.....I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal.'

I have a dream today.....I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the south with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood [the human family]. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

(From the "I Have a Dream" Speech by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC, August 28, 1963)

What has become of Martin's dream today? That vision for our nation was nurtured by Dr. King's faith in God; he learned it from years of hearing and meditating on Holy Scripture, from reflecting on the Hebrew prophets and on the life and ministry of Jesus, and from committing himself to fearlessly living out the Biblical mandates for love, reconciliation and justice. Those who gathered at the March on Washington in 1963 were committed to these values, and together they formed a nonviolent army of witnesses of "God's Truth Marching On" in the face of hatred, bigotry and violence. I wonder if the Christian church still has the clarity of vision and spiritual fortitude to recommit to these same truths today?

On April 4, 1968, less than five years after giving his speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. was gunned down in Memphis, TN. Inscribed on the plaque affixed to the railing at the Lorraine Motel where he was assassinated are these words based on Genesis 37:20: "And they said one to another, behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him... and we shall see what will become of his dreams." (KJV)

I do not believe that Martin's dream died with him on that fateful day. Killing the prophets of God has never silenced the divine message of justice, compassion and peace.

The question before us today, then, is what will we do with the dream? Our answers to that question have to be expressed in our minds, in our hearts, and in our hands by our actions. I call upon everyone in the Diocese of Maryland to pause and take some moments this day to reflect upon the words of the "I Have a Dream" speech which have now been grafted into the collective soul of the country and beyond. I especially invite you to consider taking a moment of silence for prayer and reflection at 3 PM today, when many churches will be ringing their bells in commemoration of the event. At that time we will offer up to God our prayers...

...of confession, for our continued inability as a church and as a nation to fully realize the dream as so eloquently given to us by our brother, Martin.

...of thanksgiving, for the progress that our church and our nation has made in the years since Martin's death in continuing his vision and work, and

...of commitment, for our resolve as a church and as a nation to overcome the sins of institutional racism and injustice wherever it may be found.

Let us not fail today to look inside of our hearts and minds to discover anew what the Holy Spirit wants to do in us. In so doing, we will ensure that the dream still lives.

Faithfully yours,

The Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton
Bishop of Maryland