

**“Dispatches from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial”
Amos 5: 18-25; Matthew 12:1-21**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
January 14, 2017**

The Park Ranger on duty at the Memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr., suggested that visitors return to experience it after sunset, when the image of Dr. King astride the inscribed granite is particularly spectacular, bathed against the night sky by the bright beam of spotlights.

So, I did. At midnight. Unaccompanied except for another man privately pondering the tributes, and a preoccupied couple walking through, arm in arm. For me, and I pray for you, Martin—whether standing public and strong in the promise of daylight, or standing alone and faithful against the powers of darkness—Martin is one of the most devoted modern-day disciples of strong, faithful Jesus. The Ranger is correct. Spectacular!

There were, of course, more people present at the Memorial on the occasion of my daytime visit. Talton, to whom I introduced myself, is a groundskeeper who testified to the excitement on the faces of elderly visitors who had experienced first-hand the pervasive, overt racism that once characterized America.

Kiara, an employee at the memorial's bookstore, tells of a visitor who revealed to her that, against the wishes of his supervisor, he left work to participate in the Poor People's Campaign at which Martin spoke in 1963. That supervisor later admitted that he had no idea the event was destined to be so large, so historically significant. Kiara told me that her mom was on the Mall that day, too, as an impressionable 5-year-old child!

Following the conversations with Talton and Kiara, I asked the thoughts of a slight, full-bearded man exiting the Memorial—his appearance was that of a flower-child of the 1970's. He briefly responded that it was beautiful, and that he didn't want to say anything more, and off he scurried.

My attention turned to a collection of some twenty folks happily arranged for a group photo at the foot of Martin's stone image. I asked a gentleman named Wayne about the occasion, and he told me that he was the uncle of the young lady at the center of the gathering. Wayne introduced me to Gary, the young lady's father. Turns out that Gary's daughter Simone had, by special arrangement, just been commissioned into the Navy by a presiding officer, right there under Martin's gaze.

The dream lives!

I came upon that Park Ranger, providing context for a group of half-a-dozen visitors. Having passed through the opening that symbolically divides the "mountain of despair", I joined a gathering at the symbolic "stone of hope", from which the image of a bold, determined Martin breaks forth. The Ranger pointed out what is geographically obvious, and what is essential to an understanding of the Memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr.: By intention, it graces a parcel of the landscape of the nation's capital centrally located under the watchful eyes of such protectors of the American legacy as Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt. It is as if the Rev. Dr. King represents the realization, at least in part, of the ideal pursued by the nation's earliest founders and iconic leaders. Here the many past, historic manifestations of the "dream" are unified. Here the hard-fought, and hard-won moral principles of a maturing democracy are etched in permanency.

That's what Laura, age 13, and Erica, age 15, were feeling with their mother and father, at the end of a trip across the country. They said "It's peaceful here." They said the Memorial is a reminder that some people are afraid of being treated differently than other people are treated. They said this is better than just a "birthday" for Martin, because you can turn a corner and find more ideas to think about. They said that even though he is not here, his ideas are.

Look! Inscribed on the wall over there is one of those ideas: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Over there, another: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice." And there: "We shall overcome, because the arc of the

moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” And there: “We are determined...to work and fight until justice runs ‘down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream’.”

It’s not as if the young preacher in Montgomery expected to personify the words of the prophet Amos. But what was he to do? The diminutive Rosa Parks had refused to follow the rules of public transportation! And just a few blocks from his church! I’ve stood in the pulpit of the Southern sanctuary in which Martin presided, and I can tell you that his rise to prominence was from a setting as humble and unassuming as was that of Amos, the reluctant messenger of another time—and as humble and unassuming as the setting in which we worship today..

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman contends that the words of Amos have “become the impetus for prophetic faith and ground for prophetic critique of social systems that disregard and violate the most elemental command of God”. That is: “They articulate the urgency of a failed society that does not measure up to covenant requirements.” The words of Amos to which Brueggeman refers, the words which inspired the minister memorialized on the Mall, are these:

“I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)

Amos and his contemporaries were trying to get the people to shape up before God would intervene in their world, which in fact happened 700 years later. That “intervener”—fulfilling the prophecies...Emmanuel...“God with us”—serves as a model for Martin, as for each one of us.

As reported by Matthew, Jesus--the nonconformist--challenged the authorities and the accepted norms of his time: “You priests say we should not work on the Sabbath, but you do work in the temple, and would you not work to administer aid to someone on the Sabbath if it meant life or death?” Martin—one of the most devoted modern-day disciples of strong, faithful Jesus—Martin, the nonconformist, challenged the authorities and accepted norms of his time: “You politicians say we are all created equal, with the same inalienable rights, but you allow

designated drinking fountains and separate schools, and would you not administer aid to this nation if it meant life or death?"

For other devoted modern-day disciples to ponder, there is another idea of Martin Luther King, Jr., that did not find its way to the walls of the memorial that honors him. While detained in a Birmingham jail in 1963, he scribbled the idea in a letter to clergy across the country critical of his activities: "Yes, I see the Church as the Body of Christ. But oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists."

A few years ago, the then Governor of North Carolina pardoned the so-called Wilmington Ten, activists who became political prisoners in 1972 for a crime they did not commit. New evidence—namely the perjured testimony of witnesses and the documented unfair treatment by the original prosecutor—brought justice after 40 years. One of the ten, a clergyman whom I knew, later headed the national NAACP.

The dream lives!

Myrlie Evers-Williams, an author and scholar and another Chairperson of the NAACP, gave the invocation at the second inauguration of the first American President of color. She was the widow of Medgar Evers, the civil rights leader slain in Mississippi in 1963.

The dream lives!

That Park Ranger? Her name is Kawther Elmi. She is a Muslim from Ethiopia, a nation of people, according to the opinion of a current American leader, not as desirable for admission here as say, Norwegians. Kawther came to the U.S. as a student in 1982, and has earned multiple degrees from Mary Washington, Virginia Commonwealth, and the State University of New York. She knows American history much better than most of us. Kawther told me: "The whole Mall is inter-connected as if one organ. This Memorial puts all elements of American history on the same page. It helps move democracy forward."

See for yourself. There is Martin, in the tradition of Amos, modeling Jesus: Standing public and strong in the promise of daylight...standing alone and faithful against the powers of darkness.

Park Ranger Kawther Elmi is correct...Spectacular!

The dream lives!