

## Martin Luther King, Jr.: Whitewashed?

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 23

Epistle Reading: Romans 12:14-21

Gospel Reading: John 18:1-11 (The Arrest of Jesus)

Almost 34 years ago Martin Luther King, Jr., died. For some of us, it is hard to believe it was that long ago. For others of us who are younger, we never knew of him *other* than as dead.

But for *all* of us, young and old, King lives on in the ghostly black & white newsreels of the civil rights era. All of us can picture him, in black & white, giving a speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, or arm-in-arm marching down some city street. The soundtrack of those black & white images is invariably Martin's voice--the slow but urgent cadences of the poet of racial equality.

Recall with me one of those street scenes--a group of marchers--blacks and whites--arm in arm--proudly moving forward. A line of police or hecklers surrounding them--lining the street--producing their own counter-surge--shields fixed, wielding batons, fire hoses blasting people off their feet. The marchers regain their feet, continue on. Not fighting--only continuing. In my own mind I hear the stately King James Version of the 23rd Psalm: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

As time passes, one of the things we have to deal with is our increasing distance from those events and Martin's presence with us. His presence and the events are replaced by *images* of him and those times. The images that we increasingly rely on are not only literal black & white images, but they are also symbolic images--*what* about him and his teachings will we *keep*, and what will we relinquish? What will we pick out to teach our children, and what will we let float past--receding into the distant waters of time?

Black History Month, of which this is the first Sunday, is one opportunity to retell those stories. To decide what to teach our children. The choices we make are important ones, as they will help mold the images of future generations. In repeating these stories and molding these images, we are standing in a long and sacred tradition of retelling the propelling events of the past. The Israelites, before they had even reached the Promised Land, were already telling the stories of their escape from Egypt and their journey in the wilderness of Sinai. They were engaged in the sacred task of forming a new generation ready to enter the Promised Land. And though *our* lives and *our* stories may not seem so momentous, they too are readying a new generation to enter a Promised Future--one that Martin so eloquently described.

And in the telling of these stories, we have to make choices--about what to include, and what to leave out. In this we also stand in a long and sacred tradition. The Gospel writers, confronted by the life of Jesus, had to decide what to keep--and what to

relinquish. The Gospel of John concludes with this sobering warning: “There were many other things that Jesus did; if all were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the books that would have to be written.” It makes you wonder how much we really know about Jesus. We can be grateful, at least, that there were four gospel writers, each giving us somewhat different images of Jesus. We see Jesus from various angles, and we have faith that the most important angles were preserved.

What will be retained of Martin’s legacy? Which of his stories will fashion the next generations of those marching on to fulfill his dream?

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We’ve been watching some black & white newsreels of the civil rights era. Let’s change the channel for a minute. You reach for the remote--but, alas, it hasn’t been invented yet. You’ll have to get up and change the channel by hand. How did we ever manage? No channel surfing--imagine! Not only that, but there are only three channels on this set. Now who’s talking about the good old days? Only *three* channels? Well, let’s see what else is on.

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Another channel is showing an old Western. A B-grade Western from the same era. It’s in black & white too--though sometimes they’ve colorized them for modern viewing pleasure. It’s the good guys against the bad guys. You can tell, because the good guys are wearing the white hats, and the bad guys are wearing the black hats. Now, tell me, what racist came up with that? Anyway, it’s easy to tell who to root for.

Recall a scene with me. The bank’s just been robbed, and they took ol’ Betsy hostage. We’ve got to fight back. Nail up the poster: “Wanted: Dead or Alive.” Now let’s round up a posse--put John Wayne in charge (or is it Ronald Reagan?). We’re gonna hunt ’em down and make ’em pay. We’ll smoke ’em out, if we have to, to get our revenge. Who’s got the rifles? Let’s go! And off they charge on their white horses. We don’t really need to watch the end--we all know how it’ll come out.

How deeply this story has impressed itself on our memories. It’s an old story, that’s been told over and over again. We don’t need a *Cowboy* History Month to remind us. We can’t get it out of our minds, even if we want to. And it’s not only *history* for us. We play it out every chance we get--stamping it more deeply into the minds of the next generations--of those who hope to take the dream by storm. The leader of the posse is now George W. Bush. But Democrats are in the posse too. And so are *we*. As Martin said in one of his sermons:

“The eye-for-an-eye philosophy, the impulse to defend oneself when attacked, has always been held as the highest measure of American manhood. We are a nation that worships the frontier tradition, and our heroes are those who champion justice through violent retaliation against injustice.”

And I don't know that it is limited to *men*. How many *women* scheme for a way to get back at some lyin' cheatin' son-of-a-gun or another?

What are we to make of this legacy? Is *it* the legacy that makes America great? Isn't our great nation called to stamp out evil in the world--to make the world safe for people of good will?

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Let's change the channel once more. There's only one channel left--what's on it? It's night--a mob scene. The angry crowd includes soldiers and police as well as townspeople--carrying lanterns and torches, many have weapons. The crowd closes in on a small group of men huddled together--one from the small group steps forward to talk with someone from the crowd. The crowd shrinks back, but then surges forward again. Where's the posse when you need them? Who will protect this group? A scuffle breaks out--another from the small group has pulled out a sword and struck at the mob. He draws blood. But then we hear the powerful voice: "Peter, put away your sword!"

Ah, it's Jesus. We know how this story ends as well.

But can we accept his words? "Put away your sword!" The words are shocking. They carry us back to other scenes in Jesus' life--on a sunny mountainside, with a peaceful crowd gathered round: "Bless those who persecute you; bless them and do not curse them....Do not repay evil for evil....Beloved, never avenge yourselves....Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Hard, shocking words. Familiar, but hard. "Put away your sword."

We get up and turn off the TV--there's nothing on tonight we really want to watch.

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Martin left us two gifts. The gift of a dream. And the gift of a *way* to that dream.

Most everyone has accepted the first gift--Martin's dream of a land of racial equality, the peaceable kingdom. All schools celebrate it, and politicians fall all over one another to be the first and loudest to praise it. It wasn't always that way--but it is now. It's worth pausing and thanking God for the enormity of that transformation.

The second gift is still waiting to be received. That is the part of Martin's image that is still in question. Will it be retained and retold by us--passed down as part of the story to form the next generations? Or will it be relinquished--floating past and receding into the distant and forgotten waters of time? For Martin was not only a poet of racial equality--he was a prophet of pacifism. Not of passivism, but of pacifism--non-violent resistance, the acceptance of suffering. That is a harder gift to receive. "Put away your sword."

Or rather, *how* hard it is to receive, depends on which side of the fire hose you are on. White racists accepted Martin's second gift very well, thank you, during the Fifties and Sixties--much more easily than they accepted his dream of equality. It is fine when *other* people are going to accept suffering and not respond with violence. As Malcolm X said, in 1964: when "the Black Muslims came along...the whites thanked the Lord for Martin Luther King."

The ultimate effectiveness of King's pacifism came from the fact that it appealed to the best in White America. It worked on the conscience of white people, allowing us to come to a different place--not forcing us there. In a way that Mahatma Gandhi proved in India, and King exploited in America, unearned suffering is redemptive to the one who suffers, and transformative to the one who inflicts it. It is the way to convert, rather than defeat, an oppressor. As Martin said, in a sermon: "We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity." White America owes Martin a debt of gratitude for allowing it the feeling of having *changed itself*. We don't have to get into a battle over who can take credit for the transformation. In a sense, and with the help of God, all of us can. That's not what matters. What matters is that we got somewhere that we likely couldn't have gotten to any other way.

Of course the burden of getting there was borne by the many black and some white people who suffered with Martin. As Martin said, in a sermon: "It is not simple to adopt the credo that moral force has as much strength and virtue as the capacity to return a physical blow; or that to refrain from hitting back requires more will and bravery than the automatic reflexes of defense." "Put away the sword," is hard to hear.

The difficulty of accepting Martin's second gift--the way of suffering and non-violence--comes from living it, rather than just witnessing it or talking about it. Are we able and ready to *live* the second gift--to put away the sword, when that means suffering *ourselves*--unavenged? That is the only way it can really be accepted.

I fear that Martin's legacy will be--is being--whitewashed. The part we can't accept--the second gift--will eventually be forgotten. Or worse, it will be put on a pedestal but then ignored.

This was its fate in Washington, D.C., in recent weeks, in which President Bush, in a ceremony with the King family at the White House on King Day, could honor King's memory, recalling that Martin "refused to answer hatred with hatred, or meet violence with violence." Yet in other speeches within days of that one, threaten to hunt down our enemies and make them pay. And this is its fate if we celebrate Martin Luther King Day in our families, and then tell our children to fight back if they're called "nigger", or if they are bullied.

It is so *hard* to stay away from that Western we were watching on Channel 2. As Martin said, once, in a sermon: "Violence often brings about momentary results. But in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social

problems; it merely creates new and more complicated ones.” If only we could have heard that before the Gulf War ten years ago. If only President George Herbert Walker Bush could have heard that--if only *we* could have heard that--perhaps we wouldn't be where we are now. But it seems the tunnel vision of the father is genetic. What seeds are we sowing now, only to be harvested ten months or ten years from now? We don't know. And we won't know until it is too late to go back.

By the way, that Western movie ended with the good guys riding off happily into the sunset, while the credits rolled. But in God's good creation the credits aren't rolling yet, and we can't afford to trust that everyone will live happily ever after. We live with the consequences of our actions. Our best hope is to love our enemies, and repay evil with good--as hard as that is. Our hope is to put away our swords.

What from Martin Luther King, Jr., do we want to pass on to the next generations? Both of his gifts? Or just the first? The first alone is a great gift. But the second gift is part of his life and legacy as well--certainly the harder part. Perhaps the best question is: Can we afford to leave that out? Can we afford not to live that gift from him? It goes so strongly against the grain. Yet that is precisely where its mysterious and miraculous effectiveness resides. No psychologist can explain it. No psychiatrist will prescribe it. No military strategist will recommend it. But it is the way, and likely the only way, to the reconciled world that all people of good will seek.

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Andrew Young was one of Martin's associates during the civil rights era. Though he was with him at many points, he did not really become involved in direct action until a protest in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964. Thru circumstances that he did not choose, Young became the leader of the movement there, even though it was small, and white resistance was rabid. King called St. Augustine the "most lawless" community the movement had ever worked in. Young's first experience of danger was there in May, at the head of a march to the so-called Slave Market that he thought was ill-advised. He persisted because his people were ready and willing--only his *own* spirit was weak.

As the march reached an angry mob of Klansmen he feared what would happen, but he felt responsible to press on. Klansmen poured out of the market and fell on the demonstrators with bicycle chains and iron pipes. Police looked on passively. A thug knocked Young unconscious and others kicked and beat him while he lay in the street. Yet he got up again, and they pressed on. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Finally the cops stopped the violence, and the marchers returned to their little church.

Desegregation was not ordered in St. Augustine until July, after a hard battle. And even then there was continued resistance. But Young stayed on in town for awhile with his people. One afternoon he went into a coffee shop--a shop that was segregated

only days before--and sat at the counter. The white waitress nervously made small talk with him while she set his place. He ordered coffee and she poured it--so full that it ran over the brim and spilled into the saucer. As she offered to get him another cup, he thought: "Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

Martin's first gift of the dream of the peaceful kingdom will live on as long as there are people of good will. But his second gift of the willingness to get there through suffering and self-sacrifice is a flame that flickers and may fail. It is only if we can shield and fan that flame that we can know that: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Amen.

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