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 Arlington Street Church
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Dr. King was Discouraged

In response to his inconsolable grief at the loss of his wife and infant son in childbirth, the great Thomas A. Dorsey — blues singer, pianist, and father of gospel music — wrote “Precious Lord, Take My Hand:” Dr King’s favorite hymn. He often invited Mahalia Jackson to sing it at civil rights rallies, and I am told that in the middle of the darkest nights, he would call her on the phone, asking her to sing

Precious Lord, take my hand,
 Lead me on, let me stand,
 I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
 Through the storm, through the night,
 Lead me on through the light,
 Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

When my way grows drear
 Precious Lord, linger near near
 When my life is almost gone
 Hear my cry, hear my call,
 Hold my hand lest I fall,
 Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

When the darkness appears
 And the night draws near
 And the day is past and gone
 At the river I stand
 Guide my feet, hold my hand
 Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

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I've been reflecting on how discouraged Dr. King was, at times — how deeply disappointed and dispirited he had every right to be — and wanting to understand what he did to turn it around, and so guide us through these disappointing and dispiriting times.

At the heart of the word “discouraged” is “coeur,” the French word for heart. To be discouraged is to be disheartened: to lose heart. I am discouraged that, on this weekend when we should be celebrating the extraordinary legacy of the great civil rights leader, we are frightened by the prospect of more violence in our country — the threat of mobs of armed, white rioters in every state capital.

I am discouraged that the dazzling Tiffany stained glass windows of our beloved sanctuary are boarded up, that the doors and windows of our church are boarded up, against their fury. I know we're all discouraged; we're discouraged by the scourge of racism and fascism; discouraged by the hundreds of thousands of needless deaths and the destruction of livelihoods in a pandemic that could have been otherwise; discouraged at being forced into isolation, apart from the care and comfort of loved ones.

At the close of his sermon on August 27th, 1967, Dr. King said, “... I don't mind telling you this morning that sometimes I feel discouraged. I felt discouraged in Chicago. As I move through Mississippi and Georgia and Alabama, I feel discouraged. Living every day under the threat of death, I feel discouraged sometimes. Living every day under extensive criticisms, ... I feel discouraged sometimes. Yes,

‘Sometimes I feel discouraged and feel my work's in vain.

But then the holy spirit revives my soul again.

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”¹

Dr. King was a man of deep and towering faith. Inspired by Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and Mahatma Gandhi's implementation of those teachings — Dr. King said, “Christ gave us the goals and Mahatma Gandhi provided the tactics” — he taught that, “at the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love.

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool,” a sermon delivered at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago, IL, 8/27/67. Please see kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/why-jesus-called-man-fool-sermon-delivered-mount-pisgah-missionary-baptist

“The nonviolent resister,” he said, “would contend that in the struggle for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter or indulging in hate campaigns. To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.”

Dr. King lived his life on the front line of the resistance. How could he not have been discouraged when everywhere he turned, his unarmed army of love was met with deadly instruments of hatred?

“We all face this temptation in our day-to-day work;” he said, “there are those moments when we almost feel like giving up. We have all been seared in the flames of withering disappointment....

“The only healthy answer is one’s honest recognition of disappointment, even as [we cling] to fragments of hope: the acceptance of finite disappointment while clinging to infinite hope....

“In any social revolution,” he continued, “there are times when the tailwinds of triumph and fulfillment favor us, and other times when strong headwinds of disappointment and setbacks beat against us relentlessly. We must not permit adverse winds to overwhelm us.... We must be sustained by ... engines of courage, in spite of the winds.

“This refusal to be stopped, this courage to be, this determination to go on ... is the hallmark of great movements.... Our most fruitful course is to stand firm, move forward with aggressive nonviolence, accept disappointments, and cling to hope....”

That was his prescription, and he lived it every day of his brief, exalted life. When we are discouraged, dispirited, disappointed, here are Dr. King’s marching orders for us:

When expectations and reality are very far apart, reaffirm your vision.
Take the long view — the big picture.
See it clearly.

Remember your purpose. Be unambiguous.

Focus, too, on the short view —
the smallest details of what lies immediately before us.
Solve a small challenge.

In the face of setbacks, sort it out.
Failure is education.
What did you learn?
Keep going.

Anger devolves into discouragement. Let it go!

Stop trying to control what cannot be controlled. Let it go!

Remember, this too shall pass.
As the old spiritual says,
“I’m so glad that trouble don’t last always.
By and by, by and by, I’m going to lay down my heavy load.”²

Redirect your energy from yourself to others.
Find someone who needs help and help them.
Love and serve.³

Get some rest.

Be with friends.

Do something fun.⁴

And finally,

Get your heart right. Honor who and what you love.

² from “Unfulfilled Dreams,” a sermon delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA
3/3/68

³ inspired by lifehack.org/articles/communication/12-things-when-get-discouraged.html

⁴ inspired by leadershipfreak.blog/2011/06/02/22-powerful-ways-to-overcome-discouragement/

In April of 1963, Dr. King penned his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, in which he expressed his disappointment with the white moderate; his fellow clergymen and the white church; and with being categorized as an extremist. But, he concluded,

“There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”

Our disappointment — our discouragement — signals our deep love. Honor who and what you love.

Beloved spiritual companions, let's close with these words from Dr. King's speech at the end of the march in Selma, Alabama in March of 1965.

“I know that you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ ... I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour,

It will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow.

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long
but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, 'cause

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,
He [is] trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword,
His truth is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpets that shall never call retreat,
He is lifting up the hearts of man before his judgment seat,
O, be swift, my soul, to answer Him,
Be jubilant, my feet,
Our G*d is marching on.