

Arlington Street Church  
January 20, 2013

### **"Up to the Mountaintop, Down to the Water"**

"It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and [God's] children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do..."

I just want to do God's will. And [God's] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"

Now *that's* some good news.

And, I've been wondering, What did the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., see when the Lord his God took him up to the mountain and showed him the Promised Land? I imagine it was not what Moses saw eons ago, when the God of Israel and the Hebrew Bible showed him the land of Canaan as a new home for the displaced Israelite people, escaping slavery in Egypt. No, I don't think Dr. King saw a physical stretch of land.

From the crest of the African American Civil Rights Movement, I imagine that King could see all that had come before, the history of black Americans—from kidnapping and enslavement and rape, to all-but-in-name enslavement and lynching, to their mid-twentieth century struggle for true legal equality. And I imagine that when he looked out from the mountaintop in the other direction, King saw an expanse full of great change: the end of black and white water fountains and bus seats and schools, the end of redlining the housing market, the end of imperialistic war.

In that same speech, Dr. King said that if the Almighty God gave him the opportunity to travel to any time in the world, King would choose the second half of the twentieth century. In the speech, he acknowledges this is, quote, a "strange statement," because "the world is all messed up. The nation is sick... Confusion all around." But King believed humanity was at a turning point. He wanted to see,

Would we make the changes to create a beloved community, a beloved society, a beloved world? He so desperately wanted to see the continued creation of the Promised Land he dreamed of, that he didn't believe he would make it to see... And he did not live even a day after he gave that speech. There is a modern day prophet for us.

But, I don't think Dr. King would be happy to see American society even now when we're in the first half of the twenty-first century. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets were never fully satisfied with society at large or the government either. Looking at our world today we, a progressive, free community of faith, we should not be happy with the state of our world. If we are fully satisfied, it means we've lost our prophetic voice.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to heed the words and deeds of prophetic women and men who challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil. Can we look at the world with Dr. King's eyes, confronting evil and seeking the new Atlanta, the new Memphis, the new Boston?

I've been thinking about what the world looks like from mountaintops. Mountains I know come in clusters, run over huge expanses of land. I'm thinking of the rolling Appalachians, near to where I grew up in Virginia, and I'm thinking of the jagged peaks of the Himalayas, near to where I lived in India. I've been thinking about what the world looks like from those mountaintops. When I've been on mountaintops, I've seen more mountains.

This is how I visualize the trek toward the Promised Land: a series of mountaintops to summit and then descend from again, getting ever closer to the plains of the Promised Land. Imagine with me the future of our social justice, our sacred activism, as the Appalachians, the Himalayas, the Rockies, the Andes, the Alps. Beyond those mountains is the Promised Land of beloved community, a society of genuine love, compassion, and peace.

The slave spiritual "Wade in the Water" completes our geography for social justice. When we come down off a mountaintop of sacred activism achieved—like, marriage equality in Massachusetts and anti-bullying legislation across the country—we may have the tendency to feel pretty good with the new status quo. Sure, we haven't made it to the Promised Land yet, but the new valley's definitely better than the one we left over the last mountain. But "Wade in the Water" compels us to keep going toward true freedom beyond. It tells us not to stop until we've made it to the Promised Land, and that we may have to get dirty, dive into the water. With the guidance of God, the Spirit of Life and Love, we've got to

trouble the waters, shake off the drag of the status quo, and get on up the next mountain.

It's possible you may be wondering, What's so wrong with the modern-day status quo, anyway? Now, I know we don't have all day here at church. This isn't the 1800's where I'd get to talk at you all for an hour... Unfortunately!

So, with my limited time, there are three anniversaries happening in the next three days I want to talk about, three clear indicators that we have to wade back down into the water and make some trouble. I'm hoping to pique some interest in us all to become more ardent troublemakers. I'd love for all of us to walk out of church this morning with a rebellious streak in our hearts.

First one: Though the pomp and circumstance will happen tomorrow, today is Inauguration Day. Our President, Barack Obama, has supported much in public life that we Unitarian Universalists believe is essential to a beloved society: expanding affordable and accessible health care, improving alternative energy sources and reducing pollution, bolstering marriage equality... Finally. And, we can feel good about that! We're on our way to the top of those mountains.

But if we're going to be prophets, if we're going to be troublemakers, we have to recognize that neither major political party supports us on many issues crucial in our eyes, as faithful people, to the creation of beloved community.

Let's examine one such issue: our uncompassionate immigration system. Families across our country are split apart every day because of harsh deportation laws. In 2012, a record number of people were deported, and next year, immigration offices such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, has a budget larger than the FBI's and could deport another 400,000 people. This includes immigrants with no criminal record, who if "caught" without papers can find themselves indefinitely detained in for-profit prisons—yes, prisons that make a profit off of how many inmates they keep—without any rights or any safe way to be in touch with their families. We have an ICE prison here, located downtown at the Suffolk County Jail, between the Spaulding Rehab Hospital and the Museum of Science. And, few if any politicians seem to be asking, "How can we, the most powerful country in the world, help our neighboring nations reduce violence and poverty that may be the root of this undocumented immigration?"

We've got to trouble this water.

Undocumented immigrants aren't the only folks in our country who are suffering. Now I'm thinking about our second anniversary, Martin Luther King Day, and the sacred work of the Civil Rights Movement. Because of the unrelenting efforts and sacrifices of activists, we are blessed to have laws today that forbid racist activity in real estate, bank loans, hiring practices, school acceptance. That's the mountaintop Dr. King stood on.

One would hope that by now the goals of the Civil Rights Movement have been fully achieved.

But, In New York City in 2011, more black men were stopped by police officers through their "Stop and Frisk" program than there are black men living in New York City. In Meridian, Mississippi, police officers have arrested and then incarcerated students, mostly students of color, for "dress code violations, flatulence, profanity, and disrespect."

And, let's not let our own city off the hook: Boston Logan Airport's security officers are under investigation by the Transportation Security Administration for abusing their ability to "profile" passengers. Some current T.S.A. officers at Logan say that based on their own observations, people of color account for as much as 80 percent of passengers searched during certain shifts. Yet this is trivial in comparison to Boston's persistent neighborhood segregation, which would take all day to dig into.

We are not yet in a place in our culture where people are judged by the content of their character, and not the color of their skin. We've got to dive into that water, climb more mountains.

We come to our last anniversary. This Tuesday is the fortieth anniversary of Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court case that has made abortion legal throughout the country. This is a landmark case for the Women's Rights Movement because it allows women to make decisions about their bodies and about their parenthood without interference from the government, which is akin to the radical idea that women can actually make decisions on their own. This is why Roe v. Wade is still important today; it was part of scaling the initial mountain of women's equality.

In light of this, I want to read you the 1963 General Resolution for Reform of Abortion Statutes by the Unitarian Universalist Association. It's the fiftieth anniversary for that, and it is ours, and it is good:

"WHEREAS, we as Unitarian Universalists are deeply concerned for dignity and rights of human beings; and

WHEREAS, the laws which narrowly circumscribe or completely prohibit termination of pregnancy by qualified medical practitioners are an affront to human life and dignity; and

WHEREAS, these statutes drive many women in the United States and Canada to seek illegal abortions with increased risk of death, while others must travel to distant lands for lawful relief;

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED: That the Unitarian Universalist Association support enactment of a uniform statute making abortion legal if:

- There would be grave impairment of the physical or mental health of the mother;
- The child would be born with a serious physical or mental defect;
- Pregnancy resulted from rape or incest;
- Or, There exists some other compelling reason — physical, psychological, mental, spiritual, or economic.”

That really covers just about everything, doesn't it?

You've probably caught on to how this sermon goes by now, though. There's your good news, now here's the bad news: sexism, the old fashioned idea that women really shouldn't make decisions on their own and shouldn't be valued as equal to men, is still alive and well.

The American Civil Liberties Union has recently won a discrimination case on behalf of Don't Ask, Don't Tell victims, and showed that though women were only 15 percent of the armed forces in 2008, they comprised 34 percent of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell discharges. Congress recently declined to renew the Violence Against Women Act, which provides funding for domestic abuse survivors and public campaigns against sexual assault, because certain members of the House did not approve of services being extended to GLBTQ people, Native Americans, and undocumented immigrants. I want to note in particular here that tribal courts cannot prosecute non-Native men who assault indigenous women on reservations. The latest Violence Against Women Act was going to give them the power to do so. Women are still, on average, paid less than their male counterparts.

Do we have a sense now for the terrain ahead of us? The waters we need to trouble, the mountains we still need to climb? Because truly, this is an incomplete roadmap. Gun violence, transphobia, failing schools... Our trek goes on.

Now, I don't know what you all are feeling right now, but I do hope some feelings are happening. I hope that in listening to the geography of sacred activism we have between us and the Promised Land, I hope that you all are feeling something: fired up, called, angry, saddened, chastened... As for me, I feel my love for this city, this country, this world, is too great, to just let things lie.

But there are times that I've felt despair. Sometimes we look at the waters we need to wade into, look at the mountains we need to summit, and we think, "Oh gosh, how am I supposed to traverse this landscape? I don't think I can." I've been there.

Here's what Unitarian Universalist ethicist Sharon Welch says on the matter of despair: "[There's] a popular mood of seasoned cynicism, well aware of the problems facing all of us, but also aware of the faults and limitations of attempts to address those problems. The immensity of the dilemma has destroyed hope. For not only is there awareness of the complexity and scale of the social problems and the limitations of the attempts to resolve them, an awareness essential for radical change, but this complexity has resulted in a failure of nerve." She goes on to write, Don't let it happen. Don't succumb to despair.

I say that, instead, let's make some trouble together.

How can we do this? Let's start during our silent reflection this morning. Take that time to consider what social justice mountaintop is one you hope to climb or keeping climbing. What really fires you up, calls to you? Where can your creative energies help stir up some trouble? Who can you build relationships with to achieve the dream of beloved community? Then we can continue the conversation relationally during our fellowship with members of the beloved community here. The Social Action table's not a bad place to drop by either.

Because, social justice, sacred activism, is how we honor our spiritual ancestors; it's how we pay goodness forward to our descendents; it's how we walk the walk of our free faith. "God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and [God's] children who can't eat three square meals a day." Sacred activism is how we honor Dr. King's legacy, climbing up to the mountain, and then beginning again, down in the water.

May it be so that through our efforts as a people of faith, we will indeed, all together, get to the Promised Land. Blessed be, and amen.