

It's interesting: this week I've been wrestling over how to deal with a bible story that bears witness to a follower of Jesus who was put to death because the religious and political authorities were threatened by his message. I'm squirming over talking about the stoning of Stephen - and yet what happened to Stephen was EXACTLY the same as what happened to the very one about whom the apostle was preaching - Jesus. The only difference was the method of execution. And we openly talk about Jesus' death every year.

In fact, Stephen is such a faithful witness to the Way of Jesus that even as he is being killed, he offers a prayer of forgiveness! "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Reflecting his Savior, Stephen doesn't fight back, he simply prays for them. In his nonviolent response, Stephen exposes the profound brokenness that led his assailants to believe that it was okay to break one of the primary laws of God - you shall not murder. Why did they do it? Because no one enjoys having one's moral convictions called to the carpet; and no one wants that which has led them into positions of power and privilege to be questioned ... especially when one knows deep within their heart that they have forsaken the law in order to get there.

This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout human history, men (and sadly it does seem to be men) have been willing to kill others in order to keep what they want. The story is so ingrained in the human experience that even one of the earliest stories in the bible speaks to it.

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In the world-building myth of Cain and Abel – the first human children of the created world – the brothers come at odds with one another over the responses they receive from offerings they each made to the Creator. For whatever reason, the Holy One spoke kindly of Abel's, and said nothing about Cain's. It is based on that lack of favor, that the story tells us Cain killed Abel out in a field. The story is silent about WHY Cain did it. However, there is a telling dialogue between God and Cain before the murder occurs. (Genesis 4:5b-7)

So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. 6 *Adonai* said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Was the whole thing a test by the Divine One to see how these new beings created by the flesh of the earth would respond to their anger? With the hypothesis being that humans could master it? If so, God was shown of what we are capable - and unfortunately the propensity for those who choose violence over peace has been the bane of the earth's existence. And Cain's notorious question – "Am I my brother's keeper?" – has echoed throughout the millennia. The tragic irony is that the quest for God's favor has been pursued with violence and subjugation against the Earth and all of its creatures.

May I remind you that the murder of Stephen was performed by those who were the keepers of God's law. It was those who should have known best how to fulfill the law, who broke it in the worst possible way. Sin was not only lurking at the

door, it opened it up and led them out of the city's gates so they could dispose of the one who told them a truth they didn't want to hear.

And yet, even when he knew that his life was ending, Stephen offered his prayer of forgiveness hoping that his steadfastness to peace would appeal to the hearts of any of the individuals who were caught up in the frenzy of the mob – perhaps later, any one of them would have been privately moved by Stephen's witness and questioned their own actions.

We know it is possible - because as the Acts of the Apostles unfolds, one of the men present at the execution of Stephen was a young, zealous religious apprentice named Saul. In fact, in a highly symbolic act, those who did the stoning laid their cloaks at young Saul's feet – metaphorically passing their corrupt and violent mantle to him. Saul would go on to wreak plenty of havoc against followers of Jesus, until the day the Risen Christ summoned from the heavens and asked why Saul was persecuting Christ? Saul was struck blind, was nursed to health for three days, giving him plenty of time to rethink his actions, remember the grace and peace of Christ-followers like Stephen, and to repent. This is the origin story of the Apostle Paul who would spread the Good News of God's love through Christ throughout the Mediterranean world.

Just as men of violence have torn the earth asunder throughout history, so have there been people of grace and peace – many of them martyrs – who have been a light of morality which exposes a prevailing culture of darkness.

Sometimes our witness, borne out of our belief in the gospel of Jesus, is enough to make others think of living in a different way. Sometimes, like with Saul/Paul,

God is required to intervene and do the changing. And when a heart of stone is 3 turned into a heart full of grace, people are motivated to do amazing things, and offer a life-changing witness for others.

Flash forward some 1900 years and half a world away, and you will find yourself in the United States of the 1950's and 60's. It is a country still trying to find its legs of justice not quite a century removed from the war that broke the yoke of chattel slavery. But the legacy of that institution still remained - injustice and inequities reigned supreme through the Southern United States through Jim Crow laws as well as in the redlining of ghettos in the North. In 1955 a young preacher stood before a crowd in a Montgomery church ready to do something in the wake of the arrest of Rosa Parks when she wouldn't move from the back of the bus. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood before them saying, "And you know my friends there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled by the iron feet of oppression." And indeed the people knew what time it was; it was time to move. It was time to move in protest, but not violently. Already King was promoting non-violence: "Now let me say," he said, channeling the Apostle Stephen, "that we are not here advocating violence. We have overcome that. I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are a Christian people ... We believe in the teachings of Jesus."

Their Christian beliefs compelled them to disobey on a civil level, and the democracy written within the Constitution made it possible for them to protest. King called for unity among all ranks because "we the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long are tired of going through the long night of

captivity ... and ... are reaching for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality.”

This sermon kicked off the Montgomery Bus Boycott which was the catalyst for getting the Civil Rights Movement underway. Ten years later, one of the “crown jewels” of the Movement was the passage of the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. When President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, he remarked that it was “a triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that has ever been won on any battlefield.” Why? Here was a hinge point in US history – a declaration in law that the promise of one person, one vote and equal protection under law would finally be made real through elections that allowed all Americans to be represented in their government.

Less than six months earlier, Johnson had addressed a joint session of Congress to call for voting rights legislation after Americans witnessed nonviolent marchers attacked by mounted police at the end of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The Voting Rights Act did not become law in 1965 because Congress had argued its way to embracing a multiethnic democracy. Just as the Apostle Stephen showed a light on the darkness of the hearts of the religious leaders of his time, thus appealing to their sense of morality, the nonviolent moral movement for civil rights exposed the violence of voter suppression. The blood of Selma’s martyrs cried out, and the people demanded voting rights protection.

This week, on April 29th, a majority of the Supreme Court of the United States

voted to strip away a significant portion of those protections. Under the guise of

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colorblindness, district lines are now enabled to be drawn to deny Black and Brown voters the possibility of electing representatives of their choice. It is an attempted return to the past that will harm most people, including the poor and low-income white people who have benefited from legislation passed by more diverse legislatures over the past sixty years.

The vote by the Supreme Court has sought to counterbalance the moral authority of those who put their bodies in the way of violent injustice in order for a more perfect union to be created; people like Amelia Boynton and John Lewis, Diane Nash and James Reeb, Jimmy Lee Jackson and Viola Liuzzo. Brave women and men who aren't all as well-known as Dr. King, who himself was eventually martyred for the cause of righteousness. But the actions of the court are wrong. The blood, sweat, and tears that were poured out in the Southern Freedom Movement's nonviolent struggle for voting rights speak to a higher calling.

Dr. King punctuated his early sermon with a warning to those in power who believe they can sidestep justice when he prophesied,

(t)he Almighty God is not ... just standing out saying (using contemporary language), "Behold Thee, I love you (Black, Indigenous and People of Color)." (God is) also the God that standeth before the nations and says; "Be still and know that I am God, that if you don't obey me I'm gonna break the backbone of your power, and cast you out of the arms of your national *and international* relationships." Standing beside love is always just. And we are only using the tools of justice.

As our nation's relationships with others fall apart, it would seem that King's words were prescient. The ideal of the "United States of America" is fracturing before our eyes. And it can be depressing to live under this spectre. However, if we are to honor Stephen and Dr. King and all the other martyrs who have stood up against those who seek to trample righteousness, we must be willing to pick up their mantles of morality and resist.

When we are deluged with gloom and doom daily, we can easily become numb to the constant stream of bad news. We can succumb to learned helplessness and think that all our efforts to resist won't do any good, so why even try? That takes me back to what *Adonai* said to Cain, if we stop trying to act justly then we "do not do well, (and) sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." No! We can not look away. For we know the truth, just as Cain did deep inside, that we are indeed our brothers' and sisters' keeper – all of them. We must steadfastly contribute towards the long journey of justice.

We cannot do everything, but we all must do something. So, keep your ears and eyes and hearts open, for the Spirit of the Living and Loving God will invite us into works of righteousness – some that will be easy, and some that will be hard; and that's just the life our Savior leads us into.

When we use the tools of justice, we have no idea who might be inspired by what we do; and because of us, they may just go out and change the world!

Credits:

Transcription of the address of MLK, Jr at the Holt Street Church, 12/5/55, as referenced in my senior Independent Study at the College of Wooster, “Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Portrait of a Prophet”

William J. Barber, II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Why Authoritarians Fear Moral Resistance: Where to look for hope as the legal victories of America’s moral movements are dismantled (<https://ourmoralmoment.substack.com/p/why-authoritarians-fear-moral-resistance>)

Jemar Tisby, The Supreme Court and the Slow Death of the Voting Rights Act (<https://jemartisby.substack.com/p/the-supreme-court-and-the-slow-death>)

