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Dreams of Freedom

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60 years ago tomorrow the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to an audience of approximately 250,000 during the March on Washington. At that point it was the single largest protest in American history.

On August 28, 1963, more than 2,000 chartered buses, 21 chartered trains, 10 chartered airliners, and countless cars converged on Washington. All regularly scheduled planes, trains, and buses were also filled to capacity.



There was a full 3-hour program including ten speakers. Dr. King agreed to speak last, as all the other presenters wanted to speak earlier. It was felt that the crowd and the media would lose interest the farther along the program went. John Lewis was the first speaker. Dr. King's speech was scheduled to be four minutes long ... he ended up speaking for 17 minutes! And it became one of the most famous speeches in history.

I recommend you google and listen to the speech, either for the first time or again. It's worth hearing. Dr. King took them from the time of émanicipation 100 years before in 1863 and the hope that was given when slavery was abolished. He compared that hope to a cheque that was handed out to African Americans but then defaulted on — that the hope and the promise of émanicipation was not realized and instead **racism, poverty, segregation and brutal police oppression** were more evident than equality in 1963.

He ends the speech jumping off the anthem "**My Country 'Tis of Thee**" with the image of freedom ringing from the mountaintops to the valleys. There is a movement of freedom — a movement from the past to their present, but also a sense of movement from that time and place back out to the north and south of the country and into the future. Take a listen:https://youtu.be/flshl_qxxew?si=Yw70PjHKc7WIKu2w (starting at minute 16:50 to the end).



Mahalia Jackson, the "Queen of Gospel", sings at the 1963 March on Washington in front of the Lincoln Memorial

Now what became the most famous part of the speech was not in Dr. King's written notes. About halfway through his message as he was gaining momentum, the famous gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who performed a couple of songs at the rally, shouted out: **"Tell them about the dream!"**

At that point King improvised and left his prepared text: ***"And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!"*** It was a refrain and theme he had used in other previous speeches.

But this speech had by far the largest audience, including being broadcast live on television and radio. His speech was hailed a masterpiece. In the wake of the speech and march, Dr. King was named Man of the Year by *TIME* magazine for 1963. "I have a dream" became the title of the speech and it became the slogan of the Civil Rights movement. But I love that Mahalia Jackson helped to bring that about by shouting out: ***"Tell them about the dream!"***

The successful march and Dr. King's speech is credited for giving the political momentum needed to have the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965. That march and that speech made a difference. There is so much about the story of the march that is fascinating to me. I'm struck by the great frustration and the hope present that day. Dr. King looked back 100 years to the hope and then the following disappointment and sorrow as slavery was abolished, but racism and segregation were not. You can hear the message or the collective feeling *that it was supposed to be different. It wasn't supposed to be like this 100 years later.*

Today, 60 years later, segregation has ended but racism still permeates, particularly in systems. That was the largest protest in US history at that time. It's number 19 now. The largest protest currently was after the killing of **George Floyd** at the hands (or rather the knees) of police in 2020. Racism in the US and in Canada is painfully evident in the massive poverty and in the prison systems. Racialized people look back at the hope that came out of the Civil Rights movement of 1963 and today say **"It was supposed to be different by now."** Hope and frustration!

Where in your life (or as you look at the world around you) did you have hope but now have frustration? Where are you saying "It wasn't supposed to be like this? It was supposed to be better?"

The Hebrew people left the land of Cana because of widespread famine. They were welcomed to Egypt by Joseph who had become the second in command to the

Pharaoh. Joseph was greatly respected in Egypt. The story of Joseph arriving in Egypt is one giant miracle of God taking evil and transforming it into a great good. Such an amazing hope! They were safe and welcomed and in a place of refuge. The decades go by, and they are flourishing. But verse 8 of Exodus 1 marks a shift. **“Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph.”** This new king, this new pharaoh, does not like the Hebrew people, he is afraid of them because they are now many, and he turns the Hebrew people into slaves for heavy labour and mandates a brutal treatment for them. And then to further crush and reduce them in power and number, the Pharaoh orders the killing of the Hebrew baby boys. It is at this time that a baby boy is born who will bring hope.

Frustration, injustice and then hope. His name is Moses. What chance does a baby have?

Not much. Except, it’s not just a baby, but also 5 courageous women. The first two women are the midwives. The Pharaoh calls the midwives and gives them the order to kill the male baby boys. Notice that we don’t know the Pharaoh’s name, but we do know the names of the two midwives: Shiphrah and Puah. That’s upside down. Normally we know the names of kings, but don’t know the names of these unseen women. The women dare to disobey.

“Now the two midwives respected God, so they didn’t obey the Egyptian king’s order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.”

They respected God. They had a king higher than the Pharaoh and so they chose to obey and serve their God over the wishes of the earthly king. The women engage in creative disobedience. They let the babies live but they tell the Pharaoh a half truth. **“Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and are delivered before the midwife comes to them.”** That word **“vigorous”** means that they are full of life and health — full of life because of the life that God gives to them. From there the Pharaoh orders all baby boys to be thrown in the Nile River. The river which should provide water and life becomes a place of death, despair and hopelessness.

The next two brave women are the mother of Moses and Moses’ sister, Miriam. They hide the newborn baby until they can’t ... and then they carefully put him in a basket and dare to **float him in that river of death to see if life might come.** So they place him tenderly in the basket near to where the Pharaoh’s daughter was bathing in the river. She’s the fifth woman. Pharaoh’s daughter dares to take this child into her care and into her palace-home, right under the nose of her father.

This is not the end of the struggle. It’s just the beginning. There will be many more fights and frustrations and there will be movements of hope, faith and freedom. That was true in the time of Moses. That was true in 1863, in 1963 and it’s true in 2023.

Until God's kingdom comes in fullness there will be frustrations and there will be times of faith and freedom and hope. I don't know what troubles you now in the world or in your own life, but this is a pattern that is present.

I remember someone telling me about a sermon they heard where the preacher repeated over and over "battles and blessings, battles and blessings, battles and blessings!" (Probably a week he'd struggled to find something to preach on — I get that!)

Are you in a season of disappointment? Are you are looking at how far we've come in equality, in prosperity, in peace, in environmental action or in something in your own life, but then you look at the world or your life today and shake your head and think: "**What the hell?**" Because it is hell, there is hell around us, and it just makes us want to despair and give up. **Don't give up! It's not over.**

Even though things are not as they *should* be or as you thought they *would* be, you cannot lose hope! God is not finished yet! And if God is not finished that means that we are not finished yet!

God is in the business of bringing healing. God is in the business of freedom. God is in the business of restoration and freedom and justice and life and peace. And I'll remind you of something you already know but it's easy to forget.

God's plans and actions always looks too small:

- one woman shouting to a stage filled with men: "Tell them about the dream!"
- Two midwives against the pharaoh.
- one small baby not meant to survive,
- and thousands of years later another baby born in an obscure place to obscure parents. This baby —they called him Jesus— would grow up to heal and lead many more to freedom and life— after he went through the ultimate frustration of the cross.

Jesus is not just history. He is alive today; he is here and calling you to take one small action of hope. One small step toward life, towards peace.

One day the frustrations and the injustice and the disappointments will be over. One day. *Earth has no sorrow that heaven can't heal.* Believe it siblings!

The movement of freedom, the current of life in here. A current of life that will meet with resistance and frustrations but will keep flowing and growing. You can be part of it. You might be a Moses or a Martin Luther, you might be a Miriam or a midwife or Mahalia.

Your name doesn't even have to start with the letter M! You are part of the hope ... part of the movement of God's glorious hope.

Thanks be to God.

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