



“Two Prophets of Our Time”
Scripture – Amos 5:18-24 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-18
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 16, 2022

Archbishop Desmond Tutu died the day after Christmas, and on New Year’s Day, South Africa held a memorial service for this iconic figure. As per his request for the cheapest possible coffin, his body was placed in an unpainted pine box. It served as a beautiful symbol of this great man’s humble beginnings and his unpretentious character.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which makes this a fitting time to remember these two towering religious leaders who changed the laws of this country and South Africa, but whose influence was felt far beyond the shores of their two respective countries.

I have chosen two Scriptural passages which are at the heart of each man’s legacy. For the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I have selected a few verses that most people associate with him from the prophet Amos.

Amos 5:18-24

Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? ²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The passage I have selected for Archbishop Desmond Tutu – from 2nd Corinthians, reminds us of his awesome task of leading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after apartheid was abolished. Hear these words from the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth.

2 Corinthians 5:16-18

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Ancestry.com, 23andMe, and the television program *Finding Your Roots* are big business because so many of us are intrigued to discover who is hanging out on our family tree. I proudly boast that I'm related to the Protestant Reformer, John Knox, who stares down at me each Sunday from the stained glass window in the balcony. I am less inclined to share with people that I also seem to be connected to Aaron Burr. Ugh.

Who do you find on the branches of your family tree? Both the ones you are quick to share and the ones you would just as soon erase.

As people of faith, we have another set of ancestors who are not related to us biologically, yet they have – or at least, should have – a deep-rooted impact on our lives. Foremost is Jesus. However, we may be unaware of the influence of the Jewish prophets who influenced Jesus who influences us.

Both Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a robust scriptural foundation. They possessed an extensive grasp of the teachings of Jesus infused with the social conscience of the Jewish prophets – especially Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, and Micah.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that the message of the Jewish prophets was twofold – first, to speak out against the injustice of the present day, and second, to proclaim what God expects in its place.

The prophets did not mince words. Today, we would say they were neither tactful nor strategic in their thinking because their words were often abrasive. They chastised both the leaders and the people for maintaining institutions that were unjust and heartless, and they warned that God would not tolerate it. The prophets vividly understood that the world is created in such a way that injustice sows the seeds of destruction. It puts you on the wrong side of God, it pollutes your soul, and sooner or later it destroys community.

After warning of the coming destruction, the prophet fired the imagination of the people to picture the world God dreams that it can be. It can be a place where people are treated fairly and where kindness thrives; where people – in the words of Isaiah – “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” Today's Call to Confession, which is taken directly from the prophet Micah is another prime example: “What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God?”

In his Old Testament class in seminary, Martin Luther King, Jr. took a deep dive into the prophet Jeremiah. In the paper he wrote on this prophet of doom, King pointed out that Jeremiah had railed against the religion of his day. Its chief offense? It did nothing more than echo the unjust status quo. The religious leaders had become no more than spokesmen for the politically powerful. They had lost their voice as the conscience of the nation. Jeremiah chastised them for shirking their duty to point out evil and to call for a moral rebirth.

Both King and Tutu knew that the church was commissioned to be the moral conscience, not the mouthpiece, of the state. That is why each man fought vehemently against oppressive government policies. King led the fight to instill laws that supported the civil rights including the voting rights of all people regardless of color. Tutu led a similar battle in his own country.

As you know, apartheid was the South African government's policy of segregation and discrimination based on race. It was the official policy of South Africa for nearly fifty years – from 1948 to the early 1990s. In the 1980s,

when apartheid was still thriving, conservative columnist, Charles Krauthammer, wrote about the revolution that was brewing in that country. He noted that in times of upheaval, "hardness is power" and that "soft men must clear out of the way (because) revolution is not for moderates."¹

I suspect some of you remember as I do, the expectation that any day there would be a bloodbath in South Africa. Militants would push aside the peaceful protestors and they would take up whatever arms they could get their hands on and ignite a violent revolt.

Tutu was not a hardened militant, but rather, like King, a determined spiritual leader who knew in his soul that God had commissioned him for his special work. He personally rejected violence as a means to an end.

Both King and Tutu possessed extraordinary courage in the face of constant danger. King was beaten, thrown into prison, and endured constant threats on his life. Krauthammer noted that on at least two occasions, Tutu "risked his life to save a suspected informer from a murderous mob. Further, on one occasion he stood alone between a crowd of black demonstrators and heavily armored South African troops and negotiated a solution that averted certain violence."²

Tutu said, "I am the marginal man between two forces, and possibly I will be crushed. But that is where God has placed me, and I have accepted the vocation."³

Both Tutu and King faced wave after wave of challenges. They were not always victorious in the day to day skirmishes. What gave them the energy to keep getting back up after being knocked down, was their deeply held conviction that each person is created in the image of God.

Tutu said that apartheid tried to mislead people into believing that skin color and ethnicity is what gives people value. However, the scriptures are clear that what gives people their intrinsic worth is that we are created in God's image.

When Tutu was a bishop, he had a small parish in Soweto. Most of the women in his congregation were domestic workers. Their white employers did not call them by their given names. They called all black women "Annie." They called most black men "Boy."

Tutu said to them, "When your white employer asks who you are, say, 'I'm a God-carrier. I'm God's partner. I'm created in the image of God.'" And when those women walked out of church after hearing his words, they walked with their backs straighter.⁴

In an interview with Krista Tippett in 2010, Tutu talked about how he had underestimated the damage that apartheid inflicted on his people's psyches. He was working for the World Council of Churches and he had gone to Nigeria. He was to take a flight from Lagos to another city in Nigeria and, as he boarded the plane, he noticed that the two pilots in the cockpit were both Black. Tutu was so proud he said he grew inches. He said, "It was fantastic, because we had been told that Blacks can't do this. They had a smooth takeoff, and then they hit an enormous amount of turbulence. (Tutu said) it was awful; scary. (Then, he said) I can't believe it, but the first thought that came to my mind was, Hey, there are no White men in that cockpit. Are those Blacks going to be able to make it?...White people had kept drumming into blacks that they were inferior and incapable, and Tutu realized that it had lodged somewhere deep in him."⁵

Since both Tutu and King firmly believed that each person is created in the image of God they would not advocate violence against those who oppressed them. If everyone is created in the image of God, then no one is totally evil. For sure, some are hellbent on violence and oppression, yet each person has within her/him the divine spark no matter how much they have smothered it by choosing immoral actions. Thus, neither King nor Tutu could simply advocate destroying their enemies. They believed that no matter how twisted a person's beliefs and no matter how evil a person's actions, they were still a child of God.

King and Tutu recognized the humanity of their opponents. They did not advocate crushing their opponents, but rather transforming them. They did what they could to hold up a mirror so that their opponents might see the error of their ways and choose a life-affirming path.

In his eulogy for Tutu, South Africa's President pointed out that in our day, the term "global icon" is usually applied to people of social media fame. Yet, this title applies best to a man like Tutu, someone "of great moral stature, of exceptional qualities, and of service to humanity."

I remember being surprised when I heard Tutu speak in Atlanta. He had a high squeaky voice, and despite the many struggles he had endured, he had an unwavering spirit of joy and loved to laugh. He laughed at himself and the circumstances of life. He will also be remembered for his enormous courage in standing with the oppressed, resisting injustice, speaking truth to power, and promoting reconciliation among enemies.

South Africa's President said, "How fitting it is that his parents named him Mpilo (m peelo) which means "life." In his life, he enriched the lives of all he met and all those who were blessed to know him."

The President remembered two photos of Tutu that captured much of his essence. One was a photo from a protest march in Cape Town. It shows Tutu "glaring defiantly at a cordon of police armed to the teeth, just inches away. Their mission was to stop the march from proceeding. It is a striking photograph that captures the steely determination of Tutu to challenge the authority of an unjust, illegitimate, and repressive regime...That photograph brings to mind the words he spoke following his arrest in 1988 during a clergy-led protest against the crackdown on anti-apartheid groups. With his Bible in hand he told a news conference he would continue with his defiance, saying, 'We are not defying the law, we are obeying God.'"

The second photograph was taken after apartheid had been dismantled and Tutu was leading the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It shows "his head bent over folded arms, his shoulders weighed down by the deep tragedy and the unspeakable cruelty carried out during apartheid. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had just heard heart-rending testimony from a veteran activist on how he was tortured by the security police, so brutally that he was now confined to a wheelchair. Overcome with emotion at what he had heard, Archbishop Tutu dropped his head in his hands and wept. Together, these photographs speak not only to the strength of his convictions, but to how deeply he felt the anguish and the suffering inflicted on others."⁶

Near the end of Martin Luther King Jr.'s paper on Jeremiah when he was a young man in seminary, King noted the reaction to Jeremiah by the people of his time. He wrote, "What is society's reaction to such men? It has reacted, and always will react, in the only way open to it. It destroys such men. Jeremiah died a martyr."⁷ Twenty years after penning those words, King himself became a vivid example.

Though it very easily could have been otherwise, Tutu was not murdered by the people who opposed him. He lived to be 90 and he never stopped pointing out injustice and oppression wherever he saw it. He called out the

Israeli government for their oppression of Palestinians, he spoke out against the invasion of Iraq, and he called out his church – the Anglican Church – for their treatment of people in the LGBTQ community.

Finally, we cannot end without naming the chief driving force of each man's faith – HOPE. In a sermon preached at the Washington National Cathedral shortly before he was assassinated, King said, "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."⁸

Tutu said, "If you are devoid of hope, then roll over and disappear quietly. Hope says, things can, things will, be better, because God has intended for it to be so. At no point will evil and injustice and oppression and all of the negative things have the last word...(because) at the center of this existence is a heart beating with love."⁹

In 1986, 18 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., America celebrated its first national holiday named for the slain Civil Rights leader. Religious and political leaders gathered in Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta to honor King and to award the Martin Luther King, Jr. peace prize. I'm sure you can guess the name of the first recipient of this prize. Who else, but the man who, like King, was a modern day prophet: Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

We are fortunate to have lived in the same era as these two striking examples of Christ-centered lives. May the example of these two men inspire each of us to live a more Christ-like life.

NOTES

1. Charles Krauthammer, "Tutu and King," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 1986.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Krista Tippett, "Interview with Desmond Tutu," *onbeing.org*, April 29, 2010.
5. Ibid.
6. President Cyril Ramaphosa's eulogy at the funeral service of Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu.
7. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought," September 14, 1948.
8. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," March 31, 1968.
9. Krista Tippett, "Interview with Desmond Tutu," *onbeing.org*, April 29, 2010.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, you create us in your image and you urge us to live in rich and abundant ways by following Jesus. Grab our attention and fill us with your Spirit of love that we may use what limited days we have to bring healing to our hurting world.

Holy God, tomorrow our nation will celebrate the life of your servant and powerful prophet of our time, Martin Luther King, Jr. Help us to embrace the inspiring words he uttered as he labored to be faithful to your will.

He insisted that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere (because) we are tied together in a single garment of destiny."

Dr. King promised us that we will never be disappointed if we take up a righteous cause "because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

He recalled your truth that "darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can drive out darkness; and hate cannot drive out hate, only love can drive out hate."

Following the example of Jesus, who remained courageous when threatened by the religious and political leaders of his day, Dr. King taught that we are "measured not by where we stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but by where we stand at times of challenge and controversy."

And in light of his recent death, we also remember King's brother prophet, Desmond Tutu, who reminded us that "If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

Pointing to the spirit of Jesus, the Archbishop taught that "we are made for goodness, love and compassion and *our* lives are transformed as much as the world is when we live with these truths."

In these dark and divisive times that lead many to despair, we cling to his keen insight that "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." Lord, help us to spot the light.

Everlasting God, if we have become complacent and simply accept things as they are, we pray that you will instill within each of us a passion to find a just cause – be it racism, violence, affordable housing, or political oppression so that we may help others live in dignity and in hope. Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.