

The Authority of G-d?
Sources of a Prophet's Courage
January 19, 2014
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
after a week of gray, gray, gray,
with a few quick rays of sunlight,
to worship, to welcome challenge and joy,
to find healing and harbingers of hope
amid the realities of life,
and to let the light of love be our guide.

And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart

Singing #118 This Little Light of Mine

Ingathering:

Eighty-five years ago, a baby was born in a house on Auburn Ave in Atlanta, Georgia. His parents gave him the name Michael, and he had an older sister named Winnie. Atlanta, where Michael was born, is pretty far from here. If you and your family got into your car and drove there it would take over eight hours to get there. It's warmer there, because it's 500 miles south of here. And, eighty five years ago, things were different down in Atlanta than they are now. When Michael was four and five-years-old, he had many friends that he played with. Some had pale skin, like I do, and some had darker skin, like Michael did. But when it was time to go to school, Michael was sent to one school with his black friends, and his white friends were sent to another school, and were not allowed to come play with him after that. His mother, Alberta, told him, "Some people will treat you different, but you are as good as anybody else...you remember that."

But Michael still played. He played football and baseball, and he took piano lessons too, and learned to play the keyboard. He wanted to be a fireman when he grew up, cause he loved seeing the red lights on the trucks go past when they were moving to put out a fire.

His father James, and his grandfather, William, both worked as ministers in a local church with beautiful green windows that made the whole inside look as if you were swimming in a fish bowl. One day, they made a trip to a church convention that was being held all the way over in Berlin, Germany. There, they visited places associated with a famous church reformer that you

will learn about in school, Martin Luther. Michael's father James was so impressed with the idea that protest was part of what it means to be a church that he changed his own name from James to Martin Luther, and he changed Michael's name to Martin Luther too, so from that time on, everyone called him Martin, even at school.

When he went to Sunday school at the church with the green windows, he had questions. The church in which he was raised told him that 2000 years ago, a famous teacher named Jesus had been killed by the government, but that a few days later his body came back to life. Young Martin said, "I don't think that is true." And he questioned other things the church said as well.

Eventually, Martin grew up and went to high school. He joined a club there where he was allowed to give speeches. He was so good at giving speeches that he competed at other schools. But because he was black and other kids were white, he had to stand up in the back of the bus so white kids could sit down. This made him unhappy, and he went to his mother, Alberta. She explained to him about American history, and how his people had once been slaves, and that, though they were not slaves any more, the rules of the state of Georgia were still very unfair, but "Remember," she said, "you are as good as anyone else. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Martin was so smart, that he graduated two years early, and started going to college when he was only 16; and eventually, he became a famous man, whose birthday we celebrate every year at this time of the year. We know him by his full changed name, Martin Luther King, Jr. and he became famous because he believed his mother, that he was as good as anyone else, and he worked so that people of different colors can all ride the same busses and trains and planes, and go to the same schools. He called the world where everything was fair for everyone, "the dream," and we still talk about what he said to this very day.

Greeting

Justice Action Ministry Presentation

Good Morning! On the third Sunday morning of each month, our congregation's Justice Action Ministry has the opportunity to share with you news of the organizations we support through your generous contributions to our congregation's Annual Operating Fund. Through our Justice Action Ministry, our church provides funding to the Naral Pro-Choice Ohio Foundation and the Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. As you know, a lot is happening in Reproductive Justice around the nation.

What better way to celebrate the 41st anniversary of Roe v. Wade than with Freedom of Choice Ohio, the coalition that NARAL and Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice collaborate and organized for reproductive justice? Mark your calendars for the annual Roe v. Wade event Tuesday evening, January 28, at the Gateway Film Center on High Street across from the OSU campus. The evening features keynote speaker Robin Marty. Robin is coauthor of the 2013 book, *Crow After Roe: How "Separate But Equal" Has Become the New Standard in Women's Health and How We Can Change That*. The book chronicles the recent legislative attacks on access to abortion, contraception, and basic women's health care across the United States. New laws deny women, especially those who are marginalized, access to making decisions about their own health. We hope you can join us for an inspirational evening as we look *back* at the challenges we have successfully met, and look *forward* to the challenges we

now face to protect safe, legal, and accessible reproductive health care.

And, speaking of health care, the *Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice* is working to prepare a kit called *Healing the Sick*, designed to give us the knowledge we need to REFER and CONNECT those in need to the right people, including phone numbers, paperwork, and websites so that they can sign up for health insurance and access the high-quality health care now available through the Affordable Care Act. You can find a link to *Healing the Sick* on the Ohio RCRC website.

"Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling" is the Unitarian Universalist Association's four-year Congregational Study/Action Issue. A dedicated group of volunteers is presenting a Reproductive Justice Adult Education Program right here at First UU! We will be using our UUA curriculum on Reproductive Justice.

Explore this subject through six sessions designed to deepen the compassionate Unitarian Universalist understanding of the personal decisions made by women and their families, whatever their race, religion, culture, gender identity or orientation, *and* the impact of society on these decisions. These sessions begin *today* at one o'clock with the topic *What is Reproductive Justice?* Future topics include *Sacred Sexuality*; *Inherent Worth and Dignity for All*; *Reverence for Life*; the *Right of Conscience*; and to conclude, a session on *Moving Forward*. Our comments and conclusions will be forwarded to the Unitarian Universalist Association, to help improve this developing curriculum. Child care is available for each session. For more information and to sign up, please come to the Adult Education Programs' table in Fellowship Hall today after the service. This is our spiritual work, based on our principles calling us to lives of informed conscience, equity, justice for all, and the responsible search for truth.

Affirmation (*these words are from the Portuguese poet with the unlikely name of Alexandre O'Neill.*)

The history of morality: the horse thinks one way, while striding along, thoughts quite different from the one who rides. O where is Love sublime? It brings from the night the first fingers of dream; your dream, our dream, kept.

Singing: #146 Soon the Day Will Arrive v 2 only

Communing: The Sequence

I live, you live, in the United States of America. We celebrate the life of Martin Luther King Jr. on this weekend.

In Taipei, Taiwan, however, a hospital physician named Yeh Po Lun, who also treats patients with Bach Flower Remedies, is readying his apartment for the lengthy New Year's Festival at the end of the month. He strings lanterns across his living room, and unrolls bedding for the coming onslaught of guests.

In Bucuresti, Rumania, a 24-year-old biology student named Ionut Stefan Paun, practices his kickboxing at the gym, where his skills and speed have earned respect. Afterward, he reads English poetry. He dreams of visiting the States one day.

In Melbourne, Australia, Gretchen Thomas is taking the tram down Bourke St. to try out that new café. Fewer are riding the tram today. She figures that it's because so many are packing the venues of the Australian Open at the edge of town. She's so glad it's cooled down so much after that heat wave.

In Calgary, Canada, Rev. Debra Faulk is about to preach a sermon with her Religious Education Director, Ashley Cole. They both know of Martin Luther King, but they tend to mention Canadian civil rights workers more often. Today the title of their sermon is *Faith Beyond Sunday*.

Love, how blest I am to share the breath of life with all the people on the planet, and the silence that embraces us all, all beginnings, all endings, all things.

silence

Love, how blest I am to have a heart that feels. Love and grief, tenderness and resistance, gratitude and grace. Seeing in my mind's eye the faces of those who embody my love and my grief, who call out my tenderness or resistance, I put names to their faces in silence, or spoken softly aloud, to engage the grace of gratitude for them all in this common house of praise.

naming

Love, I live, we live, in the embrace of music that stitches together the generations and memories of our nation, and for this grace, more gratitude.

Choir Anthems

The First Reading *dates from 40 years ago, but I still think that what Peter Riga says has a lot of truth in it. Even though both clergy and congregations have documentably less respect in the world these days than in those. I think the ideal is well stated in this book Give unto Caesar What are God's, a clear reference in the title to the famous riddle of Jesus of Galilee: "Give back to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, and give back to God that which belongs to God."*

The world today expects more of the church than mere expressions of love, or general principles. It asks for tangible and concrete proof of this love. The church must take a stand, clearly and courageously, in favor of the poor, and victims of injustice. This implies a more forceful stand on racial discrimination, medical aid, and the aged in all of its forms. The church must rebuke public authorities when they fail to take measures to alleviate the most urgent social problems of the day. In such protest, the church reminds us that we are responsible for each other.

The Second Reading is from Barbara Holmes's fine 2002 book *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to See the World Differently*. Holmes is both a lawyer and Associate Professor of Ethics and African American Religious Studies at Memphis Theological Seminary.

Fortunately or not, dreaming is a solitary endeavor. "We cannot dream together." However, we can share visions, which are the collective expressions of individual dreams, revelations, and insights.

Martin Luther King had a dream, but he was not alone. Many visions of equality and justice merged during his famous speech. He brought the vision to our attention as a good prophet should, and then began to demonstrate the avenues of possible fulfillment. We were expecting a straight path to unity; instead, like the chaotic movements of subatomic particles, many options erupted out of nowhere. According to King, the beloved community presupposed empowerment of the poor, the cessation of wars, a more egalitarian economy, and an end to polite deceptions about systemic abuse.

When a bullet finally silenced him, we mourned, but also relaxed, nodding off to a less intense version of the dream. This beloved community, that we envisioned in the aftermath of the assassination, differed from King's vision, as it was primarily rhetorical and utopian. But most importantly it did not require our muscle, or risk. During slavery, those who dreamed and ran for freedom paid a high price.

Slaves saw dreams as gift from God that placed one outside of time for the purpose of turning the universe, oneself and one's fellow human beings into objects for contemplation.

Preaching

"In our theological grammar," writes my friend and colleague Jane Rzepka, "we have no passive voice."

I remember thinking, "passive voice?" I have to call Jane up and tell her that, when I read that, I thought "*No one* is going to understand what you mean, since few schools stress grammar anymore." Grammar: you know...adverbs, tenses, pronouns, clauses, gerunds...etc. Even as far back as 20 years ago, I worked with a seminary student who had no idea what *passive voice* meant. She sported two Master's Degrees, experienced living in five different countries, and served as personal assistant to the famous physicist David Bohm. Yet despite her vast education, she crammed her sermons with passive voice:

"It has been said that..."

"I was invited by Dr. Bohm to consider..."

"I am made a better person by the very idea of freedom..."

All passive voice. No active voice, ever.

But in the end, I think Jane is right, whether it's easy to understand her grammatical metaphor or not. In our tradition, we are not chosen, we *choose*.

In our tradition, decisions are not made for us theologically, we decide. And you will never hear me asking you to accomplish G-d's will, since I cannot speak for G-d; and that is true no matter what I believe or disbelieve about G-d.

However, this is exactly one of the reasons that Dr. Martin Luther King decided back in the 60s that he could not become a Unitarian Universalist. He noticed that we tend to avoid certain words a lot, certain texts a lot, and he wasn't sure if such avoidance would play in Peoria...or more precisely, Atlanta or Selma. Now mind you, he and Coretta thought deeply about becoming Unitarian Universalists. They liked us. He befriended many, many of my older colleagues. He and Coretta attended the Arlington Street Church when they lived in Boston, and it was the minister there, Dana Greeley, a former President of the Association, who introduced him when he gave the esteemed Ware Lecture at our General Assembly in Hollywood Florida in 1966, entitled "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution." My internship supervisor was one of his classmates at Boston University. My friend Farley scheduled him to preach his Installation Sermon in Cleveland.

But, in the end, Dr. King decided that becoming Unitarian Universalist would not help him to accomplish the Civil Rights work he felt called to do. Yes, called. By G-d.

Now please, when King said G-d, he was saying that word in the context of his doubts, his skepticism and his liberal university education. Remember? He courageously questioned the bodily resurrection of Christ even while in his Baptist Sunday School. When asked about things like family planning, a controversial idea in many church circles, then as now, he was *totally* in support of it, and shared his views with women and men in no uncertain terms. His Doctoral Dissertation even explored G-d as understood by two radical theologians...Paulus Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman. Tillich defined G-d as "the ground of all being" or even "Being itself." And Wieman spoke of G-d as "creative interchange," where the voices of the oppressed, the persecuted and suffering shared *equal* authority with the voices of the great prophets and philosophers. He felt that all human beings...the powerful and the powerless... had to talk and work together... creatively...all voices heard at last....to solve the problems of humanity.

Some critics will surely say, "Well, neither of these two supposed theologians is talking about God at all. Everyone knows God is a super-being above and beyond creation, who made the universe, has all power and knowledge, and who has no beginning and no end. Many will go even further and say: And of course, such a being doesn't exist in any way. And Tillich's 'Being itself' means nothing at all, it's a cold abstraction; and Wieman, for goodness sake, should just have stopped talking about G-d and just gone on talking about human community."

Dr. King, although he had his own criticisms of the two theologians, did not agree that the word "G-d" could only have the one meaning, a meaning to be either denied or praised, a word to be spoken or avoided. He felt that the voices of individual experiences about this word... especially the experiences of those who have been systematically bullied by Jim Crow laws, had to be lifted up. The nightmare of racialized poverty and segregation, he felt, had to be supplanted by *a dream*, a *dream* inspired by the G-d who IS Truth, as the gospel puts it, and the Love who is G-d, as Gandhi put it...the very G-d-given luminous reality in narratives that encouraged the runaway slaves....stories of Exodus from slavery in Egypt, stories of finding manna in the wilderness,

stories of prophets courageously confronting the very authorities who had the power to kill them. King finally decided that the *stories* of G-d, regardless whether they were historical or not, whether they thrilled Tillich or not, vibrated with more liberating power, inspired more courage, admitted the reality of evil in the world, and lit a brighter light than even those sincere Unitarian Universalists in the burbs who found such stories largely outside their understanding of religious life and who spoke a different jargon.

Oh now, please do not imagine that he thought less of Unitarian Universalists because he did not join us. Not at all. He highly praised Unitarian Universalists like James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, who stood by him in hard times, and risked and lost their lives. He welcomed all to the cause as a truly interfaith person. He held a deep understanding of Buddhism and Judaism, for example, and a deep gratefulness for such religious traditions, even though Buddhists don't really speak about G-d at all, and even though...especially in that barely post-Auschwitz era, many Jews were strong atheists..."What kind of Omnipotence would allow such a catastrophe?"

No, King never dissed people who did not use the same words and metaphors as he did. But he just wasn't convinced that folks like us would find it easy or even possible to confront the powers and principalities that often left us alone, privileged as most of us are, but diminished so many other lives.

He personally favored diversity in church styles and theologies...but he also knew he needed to work first and foremost with those who, like Peter Riga, wanted a church that took "a stand, clearly and courageously, *in favor* of the poor, and victims of injustice. The church must rebuke public authorities..."

He felt that many of us would find the "rebuking" of authorities troublesome, or rude. And sometimes, I know, even our own local interfaith group BREAD has discomforted people...not always because of theological differences, but because of the whole notion of standing up to public authorities, and having clear expectations of them, even though these expectations have always been presented to them, clearly, before our meetings. The expressions of discomfort about making demands of public authorities to support moral action, sadly, were mostly found among white attendees, not people of color.

But, personally, I think that King would find the Unitarian Universalist congregations of the present era doing a lot more of what he wanted churches to do...justice action, not justice discussion. After all, 250 people from this congregation at a BREAD meeting is an astonishing expression of "active voice," is it not? And active voice not just out there in the world....but in also our own hearts. More and more often we have been acknowledging that we are not perfect ourselves, and that we are not separated from the world, but part of the world, and have to keep close watch both on the world AND on *our* assumptions and attitudes, which are often unconsciously shaped by that world. I have often observed with my colleagues that we look in the mirror a lot more these days, and ask ourselves the harder questions.

But our nation, the US of A itself, has not moved on to look in the mirror. At least, not as much as some people would like to think. In his Ware Lecture, King made three statements, the last of which addressed exactly this claim. First, he anticipated what Peter Riga would write a few years

later (King's words from the lecture): *It has always been the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break the mores* (that is, the customs and conventions of a community) *if necessary*. Wow! Strong words! *Break* the mores, not nudge them along.

Secondly, he said, *it is necessary for the church to reaffirm over and over again the essential immorality of racial segregation*. Yes, exactly...like our Portuguese poet framed it in the affirmation...too much of the "history of morality" in our world has been one group of people simply anointing themselves as riders, and others, as beasts to ride. I'm talking the slavery era, yes, certainly, but today's Bernie Madoff et al as well. Segregation can be by color, by class, by spurious claims of entitlement.

But third, King concluded his lecture by saying that we had *to deal with the myth of exaggerated progress*. *The plant of freedom*, he said, *is only a bud and not yet a flower*.

Perhaps you will counter by saying, "But that was 1966. It's now 2014. There *has* been more progress. Our younger generations show far fewer hang-ups about everything, race, same-gender love, etc." Yeah, certainly that has to be noted, but note this as well. A 2012 study by sociologists at Rice and Notre Dame universities discovered realities I personally found deeply disturbing. The study was conducted multi-racially, multi-ethnically, multi-religiously, and multi-geographically. Very thorough. They discovered that six in ten whites say that the best way to improve race relationships is to stop talking about it. Six out of ten.

Black Americans are five times more likely to think about race than white Americans. The percentage of folks who think that "separate but equal" is a good idea has risen almost a hundred percent from 2006, when the last such survey was taken. And sadly, this last was shown to be true among both people of African AND European origins.

So we still live in a *very* divided country. Not just the 1% and the 99%, not just political parties, but we are still divided as to whether or not to even talk about racial realities. This, even though study after study has shown that openly talking about race with our children and with each other ...without tiptoeing up to it...is one of the most powerful ways to effect change, both in ourselves and in society. It's the best way to claim power... to hone our capacity to love. But it still absolutely frightens many progressives, who tell themselves, perhaps, they might say something "wrong." So conversation about real issues like race is often pushed to the edge, not greeted with gladness. It's much easier to dream our own dreams, than to dream with each other, apparently.

But Barbara Holmes agrees with that. Remember? She said, "We *cannot* dream together." However, she asserts, we *can* share visions, which are the collective expressions of individual dreams...

"King...brought" such a "vision to our attention as a good prophet should," she said. According to King, "the beloved community *presupposed* empowerment of the poor, the cessation of wars, a more egalitarian economy, and an end to polite deceptions about systemic abuse."

"When a bullet finally silenced him," she continues, "we mourned...but also *relaxed*, nodding off to a less intense version of the dream." One that "did not require our muscle, or risk. During slavery," she reminds us, "those who dreamed...and ran...for freedom, *paid a high price*. Slaves," she said, "saw dreams as a gift from God that placed them, outside of time," so they could "contemplate" their place in the universe...so they could see what they saw, feel what they felt, not what the ruffians riding their backs told them to see, told them to feel. So they could actually embrace a future, not just suffer the past.

That courageous truthfulness to self is G-d, according to King. That "truthfulness" and its companion, "Love," were the sources of his courage as a prophet to announce a dream that pronounced segregation as an immoral practice. He wasn't interested in intellectual or philosophical debate about G-d. He gave up writing essays on Buddhism, and dissertations on liberal theology, and started to march, boycott, and draw the line with skillful organization. He was interested in what could give people the authority to move forward and risk claiming their freedom, powerfully...yet without violence, and, at the same time, risking violence against their own person.

I want to be clear – for King the voice of G-d, as he saw G-d, was a source of his strength. He was in NO WAY like Pat Robertson, or Rod Parsley, who claim to listen to "God" daily and speak for him. King never did any such thing. About such a God, I can only count myself an atheist, especially if I am to aim for any kind of moral life. If I place myself above everyone else, and claim a special post from G-d, I don't see how I could possibly live a moral life.

But, I also want to be clear that I take seriously the stories I hear of folks who "keep on keeping on," because they really do have faith in a G-d whose temple is truthfulness and whose only presence is love, love that can even empower the human heart to overcome self-delusion. People who use their own dreams of beloved community, like sails, sails to get them moving forward to a place that actually feels like home. With the wind...the spirit...blowing them in the right direction. Now I could not become a Baptist any more than King could become a Unitarian Universalist. I am wary about a great deal of theological language, which I think assumes too much. But the longer I am alive, I also find that I find that philosophizing about G-d one way or the other, feeds me less than spiritual and powerful engagement with the "principalities and powers" of this world, who have the gall to divide the world into haves and have-nots, the in and the out crowds.

So I might have to say to Jane...although I am not fond of passive voice any more that you are, in grammar or theology, I'm not sure that this kind of authority, from this kind of G-d, King's G-d, the G-d of many radical religious revolutionaries, is an example of passive voice at all. It seems to me, this is a very excellent example of active voice indeed.

Offering

Returning Reality precedes dreams. And then dreams upturn reality...I dare to dream.

Kim Sung Hui

Then these words from the top of
the page: "The reason civil rights

marchers had moral authority is that they were willing to suffer for what they believed in. They were tear-gassed, knocked over by fire hoses...but they kept singing, "Oh deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome some day." That kind of moral authority changed a nation.

Singing #169 We Shall Overcome

Blessing