

The (Traumatized) Body of God
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Psalm 139:1-18. A Psalm of Being Known.

It is late January, 1956. Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a White rider, as the law requires.

Four days later, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr, then pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, becomes the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, playing a pivotal role in the boycott that follows.

Immediately, the threatening phone calls commence.

One in particular, shakes King to his core: "If you aren't out of this town in three days," the caller says, "we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house."

At the time, Martin Luther King, Jr. is new to all of this. Not long out of seminary. Still in his mid-twenties. Shaking uncontrollably, King paces the kitchen, considers his family, revisits his theological education for wisdom, wonders what his parents would say, and eventually surrenders to the uncontrollable shaking.

His brain cannot save him. His body cannot save him. His parents cannot save him. Only "that power that can make a way out of no way," he realizes in that moment, can save him.

"I discovered then," King says of the experience, "that religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself."

O God, you have searched me and known me, the psalmist sings. You know my path and my lying down. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me when none of them as yet existed.

"And it seemed at that moment," King says of the experience, "that I could hear an inner voice saying, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth.'"

Even before a word is on my tongue, O God, the psalmist says, you know it completely.

"And lo I will be with you," King hears that inner voice saying, "even until the end of the world."

Twelve long years the promise of the presence of a power "to make a way out of no way" remains with Martin Luther King, Jr. Through the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Through his rise to national leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. Through the bombing of his home. Through jail cell after jail cell after jail cell. Through the March on Washington. Through the march from Selma to Montgomery. Through the expansion of his activism into militarism and economic injustice and the Poor Peoples' Campaign he was organizing at the moment of his murder.

Twelve long years he promised of the presence of a power "to make a way out of no way" remains with King. As he puts it, that night in January 1956, "Jesus promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."

If I ascend to heaven you are there, the psalmist says, if I descend to the grave you are there.

It puts the psalm in perspective, when we sing it through the story of Martin Luther King, Jr, whose birthday we celebrate this weekend. To sing this psalm as an act of defiance against despair. As “bread for the journey” toward becoming the Beloved Community we say we want to be. To sing this psalm as prayer to assuage a very real *physical* fear.

And we are all living in physical fear today.

Shaking uncontrollably, some of us more than others. Triggered in our trauma, some of us more than others. Our beautiful bodies are so broken, so beaten, so bruised, so abused. Literally for some of us. By association for all of us. And, as the research of Dr. Bessel van der Kolk has shown, “the body keeps the score.”

Indeed, the autopsy of Martin Luther King, Jr revealed that his thirty nine year old heart was so stressed by his prophetic witness, that it resembled the condition of a sixty year old man. In our own time, Erica Garner, who became an activist after her father’s death, died from cardiac arrest at age 27.

The Body does, indeed, keep the score. Some would even argue, passed on through future generations.

So what does that mean for us, Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church, eastern panhandle of West Virginia, in this season of reclaiming the grace of our baptismal covenant, on this Martin Luther King birthday weekend, in the surge of a global pandemic, fearing for the body politic (literally and metaphysically), one of many members of The Body of Christ?

In his moment of trembling, shaking uncontrollably, pacing the kitchen, considering his family, revisiting his theological education for wisdom, wondering what his parents would say, our great hero - Martin Luther King, Jr - turns finally and forever to the presence of the power of God.

The brilliant theologian has to admit his brain cannot save him. The young man in his prime has to admit his body cannot save him. The beloved child of Godly parents has to admit they cannot save him. The powerful pulpit preacher who proclaims the gospel so boldly to others, must finally and forever turn to “that power that can make a way out of no way,” Only that power, King realizes, can save him.

Friends, we are very smart people here at SPC. Full of PhDs and brains that “get things done.” We are accustomed to success in all of its forms. I am no Martin Luther King, but I went to a pretty fancy seminary and can put together a decent sermon.

But I have to tell you, I honestly do not know how we will make it through. In the fullness of time, of course, I know and trust we will. But right here, right now, as we move through the darkest days of this pandemic, as we face the worst division in our nation since the beginning of the Civil War, I do not know how we will make it through.

What I do know is this.

The power of the presence of God that propelled our great hero, Martin Luther King, Jr. to figure out a way to make a way out of what seems like no way, that power is here for us, too. Right here. Right now. Forming and re-forming us from the earth and the waters of the baptismal covenant. Flowing through us in the very breath

we share with the Holy Spirit. Riding along when we take the wings of the morning to the furthest limit of the sea. And when we make our bed in this hell we have created on earth, and then have to lie in it.

What I do know for sure is that the power of the presence of God to make a way out of what seems like no way is right here, right now, here for us, too. Loving us with a steadfast love that is from everlasting to everlasting. Calling us to the better angels of our nature, *for just such a time as this*.

And that power really can save us.

Amen.