

Standing in the Bright Light
We Are Always Just Catching Up
Isaiah 49:6-7

Call to Worship

We seek God's presence in our lives so that we might see differently. We have heard of, seen glimpses of, a faith that can stare into the darkest shadows and see even there the form of hope. A faith that can look straight into the unknown and fear-full places, and see goodness and newness—not above the darkness, but in it.

But *unfaith* also calls to us. It seems so much more 'realistic'. It invests itself only in the safest, most reasonable possibilities. *Unfaith* puts a cap on our reaching, our hoping, our daring to risk disappointment.

I invite you, in this moment of silence, to tell the truth about your life at this moment. Is there a shadow so dark that you see no light at all? A section of your life where *unfaith* has limited your vision?

We honor this weekend a man who—no matter how dark things got for him and for the people who filled his heart—never gave up on this country.

A man of faith, who dared to speak his dream out loud:

"I have a dream," he said.

"I have a dream that one day 'every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.'"

To a people who had no reason to believe this country would change, people who had never seen much reason for faith in the government or fairness or common human kindness, Dr. King said,

"This is our hope... With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to struggle together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

The God of *that* faith is the same God who gathers us today.

Sermon

I visited South Africa a few years ago. One of the lasting memories of my time there was how much the memory of Nelson Mandela was still inspiring people in that country. Mandela had been dead for about ten years, and still his picture and his words were on billboards, in store windows, in songs. He was everywhere, still reminding people why it matters to keep working

on that country's experiment in democracy that already looked like it was failing. Giving them hope that Mandela's vision of equality for everyone might still be possible.

In many ways the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. in this country is similar. Fifty years after his death, we will close businesses tomorrow to mark his birthday. His memory still inspires a day of service for many people. And I would bet that most of us know by heart at least one or two quotes from his speeches.

I have a dream.

The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

But I wonder if you know this one. It's from a speech Dr. King made in January 1968, just a few months before he died. He was at the Santa Rita Jail in Alameda County visiting Joan Baez, who had been jailed (with her mother) for protesting in Oakland against the draft for the Vietnam War. In his speech, King noted that some people had been surprised he was out supporting protests against the war, that he had added peace to the list of causes he was working on. He repeated something he had said many times before, that 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Even some of his partners in the movement had said to him, 'But don't you think it will hurt your cause, dilute your effectiveness, if you try to protest *both* the war and discrimination against black people in this country? Shouldn't you stay in your lane, keep your focus on civil rights?' And this is what King told the group that had assembled at the Santa Rita Jail: "I said to one of those men, '*I'm sorry, sir, but you don't know me.*'" The reason I stand against the war isn't because that position is safe, or politic, or popular. It's because it's right.

'*I'm sorry, sir, but you don't know me.*' In other words, you have imagined me smaller than I am. You don't know that what I care about isn't only for 'my people'; it's for all people. You have misunderstood, narrowed, the vision of the God I serve, the God who has given me this passion, this work.

I wonder if it isn't God's most regular frustration with humans: this tendency we have to take God's vision and shrink it down into something manageable, politic, contained. I wonder if '*I'm sorry, sir, but you don't know me*' isn't what God was thinking in that text we read a few moments ago; when God said to his people through Isaiah, 'Did you think all this love and grace was only for you? I'm not here to bring light to only a few of you. My hope is much bigger than that. I've chosen you, come to you, so that your lives will demonstrate for the whole world the fullness of life I want for all of creation. I need you to live facing out. I want other people to see so much goodness, so much belovedness, in your life, that when they look at you, they see what I want to do for them too.'

I wonder about the look on Isaiah's face as he wrestled with what that meant. *Had* he and his church misunderstood God? Had they taken that big, warm beam of light that they'd felt shining down on them and narrowed it down into something too small, too personal? What was God asking them to do here? I wonder if when Isaiah repeated God's words, good, careful people

didn't say things like, 'Slow down. Shouldn't we take care of our own first? Let's take this one step at a time, not bite off more than we can chew. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.' All those prudent things we know how to ask.

How do we know when we are being wise, careful, strategic; and when we are making our God too small?

The start of the movie class this last Wednesday reminded me of one of my favorite films, now thirty years old, but maybe a classic. It's *Dead Poets' Society*. Robin Williams plays John Keating, an English teacher at a very traditional boys' school. His job is to teach poetry. This is the scene of the first day of class with him, as they open the textbook that has been assigned for the course.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXSs3OX6aVs>

At the end of every movie class we ask who was the Christ figure in the film we're discussing. It's not hard to figure it out in this movie. From the beginning Mr. Keating does what Jesus did: tears a page out of the manual we thought we had to read first; questions what we thought were the right answers; takes us out of the classroom and into the world. Just like those boys, we barely know how to follow. We're tentative, unsure of what is being asked of us. We're intrigued by the freedom being offered to us, but reluctant to let go of what we know: the controlled, safe, measured-out ways we have learned so well to live.

Ultimately in the movie, Mr. Keating is too edgy for the school's administration. He's a little bit dangerous to its traditions, the *status quo*, what has always worked before. He gets out of his lane; the freedom he opens up for his students is much bigger than poetry or English literature. And so he is fired, blamed for something that was not his fault. The school's headmaster steps in to teach the rest of the semester of poetry class. This is the final scene from the movie.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j64SctPKmqk>

The whole story in the Bible is about a God who keeps getting out of his lane and keeps asking us to come along. The struggle you just saw on those boys' faces is what happens inside of people who take seriously a God who is much bigger than we have imagined, a God who will always have a bigger vision than we know how to manage, what to do with. We will always be just catching up. That's how it's supposed to feel. May it be so for us.