

Building the Beloved Community

A Responsive Reading

Beloved

Reader: On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his “I have a Dream” speech on the steps at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. He juxtaposed the dream set forth in the Emancipation Proclamation, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence with the conditions faced by African Americans throughout the nation. Please join me in remembering his dream, reflecting on the meaning of his words for us today, and giving God thanks for his life.

All: We give thanks for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. — his life, his words and his guidance for our lives.

Reader: Dr. King lifted up those who “live on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity... those who are still languishing in the corners of American society.”

All: Today, we recognize that there are still many among us living on islands of poverty. As the nation has gotten richer, the disparities have increased.

Reader: “In a sense we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.

All: This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Reader: “It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’ But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bank-

rupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check – a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

All: “Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God’s children.”

Reader: We claim these open doors of opportunity for those on welfare, for immigrants, and for those struggling in sweatshop industries like poultry plants, laundries, catfish farms, and even some nursing homes. “Their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.”

All: “And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back.” When people ask us, “When will you be satisfied?”

Reader: “We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.”

All: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men (and women) are created equal.”

Community

Reader: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood."

All: "I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice."

Reader: "I have a dream that" all our "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."

All: "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 plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

Reader: "This is our hope." This is the faith which we share with Dr. King. "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 pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

All: "This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, 'My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee

I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

Reader: "And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!"

All: "Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado!"

Reader: "Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!"

All: "But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!"

Reader: "Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring."

All: "When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

All excerpts from "I have a Dream" speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr., Civil Rights and Worker Justice

Since the early 1900s, there have been strong ties between the civil rights movement and the labor movement. Labor unions participated in the March on Washington in 1963, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed while in Memphis helping striking sanitation workers. The King holiday is an opportunity to honor this rich legacy of cooperation and struggle for the common goals of dignity and respect. Dr. King communicated to and about the labor movement and the need for unity between the two movements on many occasions. Below are several quotes from Dr. King's addresses to and about labor unions.

"Our needs are identical with labor's needs – decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community. That is why Negroes support labor's demands and fight laws which curb labor. That is why the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth.

AFL-CIO Convention, December 1961

"I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness as Negroes, Jews, Italians or any other distinctions. This will be the day when we bring into full realization the American dream – a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality. That is the dream."

AFL-CIO Convention, December 1961

"It is in this area [politics] of American life that labor and the Negro have identical interests. Labor has grave problems today of employment, shorter hours, old age security, housing and retraining against the impact of automation. The Congress and the Administration are almost as indifferent to labor's program as they are toward that of the Negro."

UAW District 65 Convention, September 1962

"In the days to come, organized labor will increase its importance in the destinies of Negroes. Automation is imperceptibly but inexorably producing dislocations, skimming off unskilled labor from the industrial force. The displaced are flowing into proliferating service occupations. These enterprises are traditionally unorganized and provide low wage scales with longer hours. The Negroes pressed into these services need union protection, and the union movement needs their membership to maintain its relative strength in the whole society."

Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?, 1967

"When there is massive unemployment in the black community, it is called a social problem. But when there is massive unemployment in the white community, it is called a Depression. We look around every day and we see thousands and millions of people making inadequate wages. Not only do they work in our hospitals, they work in our hotels, they work in our laundries, they work in domestic service, they find themselves under-

employed. You see, no labor is really menial unless you're not getting adequate wages. People are always talking about menial labor. But if you're getting a good (wage) as I know that through some unions they've brought it up...that isn't menial labor. What makes it menial is the income, the wages."

Local 1199 Salute to Freedom, March 1968

"You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity and it has worth."

AFSCME Memphis Sanitation Strike, April 3, 1968

"...whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity and it has worth."

Source: Martin Luther King, Jr.: Living the Dream, AFL-CIO, 1985

**For more information, visit the AFL-CIO website at:
<http://www.aflcio.org/About/Our-History/Labor-and-Civil-Rights>**