

**“A Study of Understanding, Healing, and Hope”
A Look at the Writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches

Session 5:

“A Christmas Sermon on Peace” (pages 253 - 259)

Isaiah 2:1-5

Isaiah 11:1-9

Romans 12:17-21

Background on the Sermon:

Dr. Martin Luther King served as co-pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He delivered this sermon “A Christmas Sermon on Peace” in 1967, and it was later distributed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as part of the seventh annual Massey Lectures. This sermon was later printed in multiple forms and distributed widely after Dr. King’s death.

Questions to Reflect on as we Journey Through our Texts:

- (1) Dr. King discusses the interrelated nature of humanity. Have you ever thought about how many different cultures you many encounter by the products you use in a given day? Does that make the world seem larger or smaller to you?
- (2) Dr. King shared in his sermon that our ability to love is essential to having peace on earth and good will towards men. Have you ever faced a time in your life where you felt you lost your ability to “love” (*agape*)? What were those circumstances? Is there someone or some group that you struggle to “love” (*agape*)? How can God help you to overcome this struggle?
- (3) At the end of his sermon, Dr. King shared that his dream still lived on that he hoped that humanity would come together, value life, and live in peace. Do you think we are closer 60 years later? What work do we still have to do? What role does the Christian Church have to play in this “dream”?

Diving Into the Sermon...

Peace on Earth...

Dr. King begins his Christmas sermon addressing the “hope for peace and good will toward all men” as something that does not presently exist in the world today. However, despite the existence of war and hate, the desire for good will to all men should be the driving force that makes war and the weapons of war

obsolete. Dr. King urges humankind to see that an alternative to war is essential – that peace is essential. Nonviolence is essential. Only then can “Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men exist.”

Dr. King stresses that nonviolence extends beyond the civil rights realm to every essence of life, every part of human conflict. Nonviolence should lead on the international scale. (One thing to remember is that Dr. King was living in a time where the Vietnam War was ramping up and more soldiers were being shipped off to fight in this international conflict.) Instead of focusing on one piece or one part of a group (or people), Dr. King emphasized looking at the whole. An ecumenical approach to the world. (Maybe the Christian church could learn something from this approach – working together to build the kingdom...) We live in an interconnected world. We do not live alone. “Now the judgement of God is upon us, and we must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools.” (p. 253)

Humanity as Interrelated

Dr. King shares about his experience in India. Seeing millions of individuals going to sleep hungry on the streets, while surpluses of food get stored up at home. We are in an “inescapable network of mutuality” – if it affects one, it affect everyone. Before you leave to go to work in the morning, numerous people have indirectly (or directly) affected you across this world! Until we realize how connected we are, we cannot truly have peace on earth.

Dr. King then goes on to emphasize that the means and the ends must work hand in hand. To ignore the means to get to the ultimate result is to ignore your connection to the rest of humanity. This is the way that some individuals can justify violence to get their result. Dr. King argued that true peace could not come without recognizing that the means are directly related to the ends – the means serve as the ideal in the making. Dr. King used the example the means represents the seed while the ends represents the tree. (p. 255) Dr. King shared that all the military rulers in the past (and the present) talked about peace, yet they used destructive means to try to achieve it. “We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.” (p. 255)

Sacredness of Human Life

Dr. King went on to say to have peace on earth and good will toward men that we must see the sacredness of human life; specifically humanity must see each individual as a child of God. Human life is too valuable to take – on the battlefield or anywhere else. As made in the image of God, he or she must be respected as such. Every individual – in every nation around the world – must be seen the same way. Without this view, we will continue to fight wars. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. While we may think differently, we are all still the same in Christ. If we truly believe this, we will not exploit, take advantage, trample over, oppress, or kill anyone. Nonviolence will exist. (A Beloved Community...)

Dr. King continues by talking about the three New Testament words for love – *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. *Agape* love is the love we as Christians are striving for when we value the sacredness of human life. *Agape* love is the love you feel for others because God loves them. “Love your enemies” love. Not “like your enemies”. Liking someone who tries to bomb you, hurt you, or kill you may seem like too much. “But Jesus reminds us that love is greater than liking. Love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will toward men.” (p. 256) Dr. King said no matter what we might face – hatred, discrimination, etc. – we must never give up our ability to love.

Dr. King shared the power of hate and the burden that it carries. The only way to stare down hate is with love. Love will wear you down and eventually we will not only win freedom but we will win you over as well.

The Universe is On Our Side

Dr. King reminded the congregation that the universe has moral foundations. He reminded us that Christmas and Easter work hand in hand! Just as Christ rose again, light overcame the darkness and the light of hope in a better will overcome the darkness of injustice in the world tomorrow. Our companion in this journey is Christ.

Dr. King then referenced his “I Have a Dream” speech he delivered in Washington, D.C. in 1963 in front of the Lincoln Memorial. However, soon afterwards, he experienced the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where four girls were killed; he saw poverty in the midst of a prosperous nation; he saw African Americans turning to rioting instead of

nonviolent protest; and he saw escalating tension and war in Vietnam. Despite these “nightmares”, Dr. King shared that he had not given up hope or given up on that dream.

The Dream Lives On

Dr. King closes his sermon by sharing the hopes and dreams that he carried about peace on earth and good will towards men. A hope that their character will be judged by all men, not their skin tone. A dream that every person will be seen with value and worth. A dream that sees economic growth for the oppressed and food for the hungry. A dream that sees a united community and brotherhood at the forefront. A dream where justice prevails and leaders walk humbly with their God. A dream that weapons are no longer needed and war is a forgotten term. A dream where all are brought together and God’s presence can be clearly and easily seen. Dr. King prayed that this day would come soon, where there will be peace on earth and good will toward men. “It will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the sons of God will shout for joy.” (p. 258)

Scriptural Foundations for the Text...

Isaiah 2:1-5...

Dr. King uses Isaiah frequently in his writings, speeches, and sermons. In this sermon on peace, he draws from Isaiah 2 toward the end of his sermon where he talks about a time where his “dream” is fulfilled, all value life, brotherhood is embraced, war is an afterthought, and the world lives in peace. In Isaiah 2, the prophet is describing a time in the future, “in the last days”, where the nation of Judah and Jerusalem will follow the laws of God and the people will walk in His ways. No longer will weapons be needed, because this will be a time of peace. Instruments of war will be converted to instruments of farming. While Isaiah is describing a time in the future, why can’t we begin to obey Him right now? While our eternal reward awaits us, we can enjoy the benefits of obedience – peace on earth and good will towards men – now. The world can too. What role are we playing in this happening now?

Isaiah 11:1-9...

Dr. King uses the imagery in his sermon of a peaceful time where the “lion and the lamb” will lie down together. This is a popular image from the Old Testament that is drawn from Isaiah chapter 11. Isaiah’s passage is a direct foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus (“stem of Jesse”, “a little boy will lead them”). The idea of leadership and peace is an important point to follow. What role do you play in ushering in peace? What role does the church play in ushering in peace? Going in a different direction, are there some polarizing factors in the world today that need to “come together” to usher in peace?

Romans 12:17-21...

Dr. King addresses the approach to evil in the midst of his discussion about love in his sermon. Referencing Paul’s letter to the Romans, specifically chapter 12, Dr. King emphasizes facing evil with love. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” In the characteristics of the nonviolent movement, this is an example of bringing “moral shame” to an opponent. Have you ever had to face down evil with love? Do you find it easy to love others you disagree with? How can you both “show love” and disagree with someone at the same time? How can the church overcome evil with good?

Next Week – Thursday, August 6 6:30 PM

“An Address Before the National Press Club” (pages 99 – 105)

Isaiah 43:18-19

James 1:2-4

1 John 3:11-24