

Resting On Our Laurels (Amos 5.21-24)
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When he stepped to the lectern in Oslo just over a month ago, I couldn't help but think of Dr. King. There were a number of reasons for this, the first of which was rather obvious. Like so many Americans, I have relished the election of our first African American president. Many times over the course of the past year, I have wondered what Martin Luther King, Jr. might have said had he lived to see it. Yet I was also thinking of King as I listened to Barack Obama because he, too, had stepped to the lectern in Oslo so many years earlier. This fact was not lost on Obama, who mentioned it at the beginning of his Nobel Lecture, "A Just and Lasting Peace."¹ "Compared to some of the giants of history who have received this prize," Obama began, "Schweitzer and King; Marshall and Mandela—my accomplishments are slight." I couldn't help but agree with the president on that score, but I also couldn't help but think of Dr. King over and over again. I thought of his struggle for racial equality in the civil rights movement. I thought of his conscientious objection to the war in Vietnam. I thought of his radical concern with economic injustice and the plight of the poor. And I thought of the ways that, toward the end of his life, King began to connect all of these things—racism, militarism, and poverty—as he sought to upend the status quo in favor of what he called the beloved community. So I was listening to Obama through the filter of King's life and work, and what I heard was both confounding and uplifting.

If you read the press clippings that followed Barack Obama's Nobel Lecture, or if you caught a sound bite or two on the radio or the news shows, then you might have heard

¹ See http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html

that the president's address was, in many ways, an awkward one. No sooner had he begun speaking to a roomful of Norwegian diplomats and peaceniks than he began to offer a defense of just war theory, the idea that violent conflict is sometimes necessary, morally justifiable in light of certain circumstances and conditions. With a somber expression, Obama acknowledged his role as Commander in Chief of the armed forces of a nation currently waging war on multiple fronts. Much hay was made of this in the press, and I think most of us felt the tension inherent in a Nobel Laureate offering a lengthy defense of the need to wage war. I'll admit that my own heart sank a bit as I listened, wondering all the while about what King might have made of it.

Yet our president actually said much more than the 24 hour news cycle managed to report. For, after the initial awkwardness, he plunged deep into a kind of moral ambiguity that is so often lacking from our public conversation. After acknowledging the reality of war, Obama noted the failure that such violence represented. "I make this statement," he said, "mindful of what Martin Luther King, Jr. said in this same ceremony years ago: 'Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones.' As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's life's work, I am living testimony to the moral force of nonviolence. I know there's nothing weak—nothing passive—nothing naïve—in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King." It was a curious moment, a series of sentences that held on to both the real and the ideal at once, refusing to let either one go. Pressing the point a bit further, Obama continued, "So part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths—that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly."

What struck me as I listened to Obama was the way he seemed so grounded in the complexity and nuance of competing claims. Standing in front of the Nobel Committee, he began to name the ambiguity with which we all live, and his address raised powerful questions about what it might mean to live moral lives in the face of uncertainty. To be sure, I heard strains of William James' pragmatism and Reinhold Niebuhr's realism in Obama's remarks, but, as he continued, I began to hear more and more of Dr. King. After laying out where we are now in terms of the wars we're engaged in, the president began to talk about the things that would make for a lasting peace. He spoke of the need for strong international law, the cause of advancing human rights, and the necessity of providing material and economic security for people around the world. "True peace is not just freedom from fear," he said, "but freedom from want." Afterwards, he called for the "continued expansion of our moral imagination," invoking the idea that there is something that binds us together as human beings, a capacity to envision what might be and work to make it so. Drawing very close to the idea of beloved community, Obama ended as he began, with an acknowledgement of King. "As Dr. King said at this occasion so many years ago, 'I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of [our] present condition makes [us] morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts [us].'" Then Obama added his own lofty rhetoric. "Let us reach for the world that ought to be," he said, "that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls." It was a beautiful closing comment, nearly the perfect complement to the opening Dr. King had offered in 1964.

45 years earlier, in his Nobel Lecture, “The Quest for Peace and Justice,” Martin Luther King, Jr. had begun by noting that each of us lives in two worlds: the internal and the external.² His worry was that the cultivation of our internal lives had fallen victim to a near obsession with externalities. Material technology and culture were outpacing our spiritual development and imperiling our whole selves in the process. We had become fragmented people, King observed, too often unable to find that divine light in ourselves or each other. What we needed was a return to this resource, a reclamation of our souls, if we were to address the three interconnected challenges that threatened humanity: racism, poverty, and war. These three challenges still plague us, and King’s remarks seem as prescient now as they did then. The remainder of his lecture strung the challenges together, pulling the cord tightly at the end to cinch racism, poverty, and war as the interrelated pieces that they are.

Of racism, Dr. King said, “The deep rumbling of discontent that we hear today is the thunder of disinherited masses, rising from dungeons of oppression to the bright hills of freedom, in one majestic chorus the rising masses singing, in the words of our freedom song, ‘Ain’t gonna let nobody turn us around.’” He spoke of the yearning for freedom as a universal human longing shared by everyone from black folk in the American South to Jews in the land of Egypt. Of poverty, Dr. King observed, “Like a monstrous octopus, it projects its nagging, prehensile tentacles in lands and villages all over the world. Almost two-thirds of the peoples of the world go to bed hungry at night. They are undernourished, ill-housed, and shabbily clad...[and] this problem of poverty is not only seen in the class division between the highly developed industrial nations and the so-

² See http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html

called underdeveloped nations; it is seen in the great economic gaps within the rich nations themselves.” King then noted the millions in America, the world’s richest nation, who lived in poverty without access to quality education, proper nutrition, and comprehensive health care. “The time has come,” he said, 45 years ago, “for an all-out war against poverty. The rich nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled, and feed the unfed. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for ‘the least of these.’” Of war, King charged that, in the age of nuclear weapons, we are living in a state of deep denial. We do not think of the possibility of our destruction as it is too painful for us to contemplate, but such intellectual flight does not alter the structure of reality. Only once we truly face reality, King advised, will we begin to embrace the truth that disarmament is the only path forward. “Therefore,” King continued, “I venture to suggest to all of you and all who hear and may eventually read these words, that the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence become immediately a subject for study and for serious experimentation in every field of human conflict, by no means excluding the relations among nations.” And if Obama, so many years later, had some difficulty selling the idea of just war to the Nobel audience, then King had his own time persuading a similar audience to lay down its swords. “I do not wish to minimize the complexity of the problems that need to be faced in achieving disarmament and peace,” he said. “But I think it is a fact that we shall not have the will, the courage, and the insight to deal with such matters unless in this field we are prepared to undergo a mental and spiritual reevaluation...” With that, King returned to his opening observation that there is something internal that is missing from us. Yet his hope was that we might

still reclaim it. “In a dark and confused world,” he closed, “the kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of [people].”

It seems to me that if we look closely at these two Nobel Laureates, we find each of them grappling with the problem of the world as it is when held up to the dream of the world as it still might be. Each man was propelled to prominence by a movement much larger than himself, each man was a gifted orator, and each tapped in to some collective vision of progress that we can only make together. Yet King remains a fundamentally different figure. For his vision was, at its heart, a religious one. And while Barack Obama may well be a religious man in his own right, he is first and foremost a head of state. King was rather more a follower of Rabbi Jesus. I say this because the themes of his Nobel Lecture nearly echo Jesus’ major themes, albeit in the contemporary language of the 1960s. For Jesus was quite consistent in his teaching about racism, poverty, and war. With regard to racism, Jesus intentionally crossed boundaries between ethnic groups like Jews and Samaritans, making a point of inviting everyone to his table. Concerning the poor, Jesus constantly taught his followers to remember “the least of these,” calling them his brothers and sisters and saying that whatever we had done for them, we had done for him as well. On the matter of war, Jesus simply refused to participate in violence, counseling turning the other cheek and laying down the sword. Like so many of us, King was raised on these teachings. But unlike so many, he followed them to their most radical conclusion: a life lived in the service of justice and peace. It brings us to a final orator, someone who no doubt never went to Oslo or spoke to an esteemed crowd, but someone whose word the rabbi himself likely grew up hearing.

In this morning's reading from the Book of Amos, the prophet speaks on behalf of the divine, saying that what is required of us is not the putting on of airs, the holding of elaborate festivals, or even the presentation of prestigious awards. Rather, Amos' God would simply have justice that rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Speaking to Middle Eastern hearers who were accustomed to wadis that often ran dry, the prophet's "ever-flowing" imagery would have surely made an impression.³ Justice was related to having enough for everyone, it was the provision of everyone's basic needs. According to the prophet, this was what was required to honor the divine—that justice must roll down, the stream must not run dry, there must be enough for everyone to come and find what they need. This is, of course, only a dream, but the prophet implies that the way to love God is to work to make the dream a reality. So then, we might wonder, how are we to do that?

Some of us may follow President Obama's lead and commit ourselves to politics and the struggle to expand economic opportunity for people around the world. Some of us may try the path that Dr. King showed by creatively engaging the challenges of our time through nonviolent means. Some of us may exercise the even more radical faith of Rabbi Jesus by reaching out to the poor, the outcast, and the marginalized. Some of us may simply pare it all down as the prophet Amos did by seeking to live justly as our way of being religious. Some of us will undoubtedly do other things as well, taking the words of our presidents, priests, and prophets and putting them into practice with our lives. But what binds all of these responses together is the responsiveness itself. What holds us in

³ Donald Gowan, "Commentary on Amos 5:21-27," *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. VII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 394.

beloved community is the commitment to broadening that community. What unites us is the belief that we cannot rest on our laurels and wait for a better world, but rather we are impelled to act for it, to play our part in the creation of that world here and now. Even though the struggle is long and may never end. Even though the world is ambiguous and we cannot always be certain. Even though our lives are brief and our labors small. We take the risk of believing in the beloved community and giving ourselves to its cause.

I still wonder what Dr. King would say if he had heard President Obama's speech, if he could see us now. For we have made so much progress. Yet racism, poverty, and war still reign. I suspect that King might simply tell us the truth—that we have so much still to do—and then encourage us to rise with people of good faith everywhere and continue our work.

May it be so.