

Matthew 4: 1-17 "Voice of Light" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/20/19

Only 2000 people showed up to hear Martin Luther King Jr.'s final speech ever in Memphis. If folks had known, there would have been a hundred times more there, just like if we had known the one of a kind Honey Run Covered Bridge wouldn't survive the Camp Fire, we would have taken more photos, crossed it a few more times, made it a priority on our bucket list. On April 3, 1968, there were ample tornado warnings and torrential rains in Memphis and despite asking Ralph Abernathy to speak in his place, at about 9:30 pm, King addressed the faithful few. He reminisced how he nearly died 10 years later when a deranged woman stabbed him in a Harlem book store. He then related how on his flight from Atlanta to Memphis that morning, a bomb scare caused the pilot to announce to the passengers that a special guard was necessary on board to protect Dr. King. Then when he arrived, he was given more information about the threats against his life from some of those sick white brothers. He didn't know what would happen, he shared. There were difficult days ahead. But it didn't matter to him now, because he had been to the mountaintop and he didn't mind. Like anybody, he would like to live – a long life – longevity has its place. But he wasn't concerned about that now; he just wanted to do God's will...So, he said, "I am happy tonight! I'm not worried about anything! I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

Jesus heads out of the waters of baptism into the wilderness. Certainly, it would have been safer for him to stay around the Jordan River, enjoy the potluck, visit with friends, but instead he moves toward the risky and treacherous desert. Just as soon as he grows hungry from fasting, when he is at his most vulnerable, the voices begin their work. The voices always come at us when we are vulnerable and exposed, when we are thinking maybe this time, the

threats we fear will become realities. The voice wants to seduce Jesus, and us, away from our God-given identity, away from the mountaintop and into the valley of the shadow of death. The voices come when we want to do our best, when we want to make it right and finish what we started. They come and endanger us. I can't name for you what form these voices will take, except to say that, without any old-fashioned devil and a pitchfork, the voices are everywhere, cunning, dangerous, and ready to take us down at an opportune time.

Rodger Nishioka tells a story of a young man who was brought to him at a youth conference he was speaking at in California. The teen was very distraught sharing that for some time he had been hearing God's call to him to end his life – that the world would be better off if he were dead. As he broke down sobbing, Rodger held on to him and prayed with and for him. After several minutes, Rodger whispered to him that while he believed the young man was hearing a voice that was telling him to end his life, it was not God's voice, it was not a voice of light but of darkness. The young man asked how Rodger knew for sure and Rodger said because of Psalm 139 where he is described as fearfully and wonderfully made and that Jesus had come at the right time to tell people that God desired humanity to have life, an abundant life. Therefore it was not in God's nature to call the boy to take his own life. In that moment of time, it was like someone had switched on a light and understanding dawned for this teenager.

At 6:01 pm on April 4, deep in the darkness of Memphis, escaped convict James Earl Ray listened to the wrong voice and assassinated Rev. King on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. The son and grandson of Baptist preachers was dead at 39 years old. On April 8, more than 300,000 people attended his funeral. Part of Rev. King's multi-faceted genius was his recognition that time is a very misunderstood concept. As David Clendenin notes, King

recognized that chronos, which is clock time, the passage of days, weeks, and years, no matter how long or short, no matter how trivial or important, is no match for kairos, that unique or opportune moment of God's visitation. Longevity, the length of days you are on this earth is a pale imitation and sad substitute for a decisive choice at a critical moment, however short one's chronological time. Being willing to both decide and act at those opportune moments is a prime calling for anyone who seeks to do God's will. Despite dying at 39 or at 33, those kairos moments filled the lives of Dr. King and Jesus. Jesus goes thru difficult days in the wilderness and emerges to start his ministry in Galilee. That was to fulfill the prophet Isaiah's prophecy that in this region where people have sat in darkness, light has dawned. From that moment, the Voice of Light speaks through Jesus proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. It is now time." Don't lose sight of this friends, this is not chronos time that Jesus is speaking of, like the time on our watch, but it is kairos time, it is crisis time, a time for response and action. Opportunity waits, seize it and make the most of it.

Some of you may have heard that old joke about the Procrastinators' Club – it boasts 500,000 members. Truth be told, however, there are only 35,000 members who have joined while the others just keep putting it off. Jesus says this is not the time to put it off but to act without delay. In 1967, Martin preached at New York Ave. Presbyterian Church in Washington DC. Whereas many preachers had been avoiding the subject, Martin broke his silence about the Vietnam war that day, as he began his message with, "There comes a time when silence is betrayal." His words still speak to us today. While the efforts to confront racism was still a huge issue, in his consciousness was the reality that unless the whole economic system was made more equitable, then poor, black, white, Latin, Asian, African, and Middle Eastern kids

would be fighting and killing primarily in the interests of the rich. The time is at hand for us to question what silences we have kept in the face of injustice, abuse, and brutality? Addictions go untreated because of a code of secrecy maintained in families, children go neglected because of an unwillingness to get involved, racism goes unrestrained because of being misinformed and complacent. We look at the news, our history, our country's history and we hear a Voice of Light speaking even now, "Sometimes silence is betrayal." It is not a voice that seeks to do us harm but instead prods us to follow God's intentions for us. We who have sat in darkness, in the region and shadow of death, are inundated with voices which vie for our attention, our allegiance, our ultimate trust. Daily temptations lead us astray and we have to decide what is worth the risk, where will we break our silence in order to both experience and bring about healing and light?

When you first learned to swim, water was something that was mysterious, risky, and unpredictable. We were taught that it was something in which you could drown. All of us swallowed and sputtered out enough water to know full well that if we went down into water deep enough, it could kill us. And so we held onto the side and looked like, for our friends or parents sake, we were swimming. Or we kept our feet on the bottom and said, "Look, I'm swimming." But we weren't kidding anyone except ourselves. Then we learned in that strange, remarkable, almost miraculous moment, that the same thing in which we could sink and die was also buoyant enough to hold us up in order to live. We reach that mountaintop understanding that what we previously feared was not that scary after all. And with that, the time for action and response has arrived. The time to sink or swim is upon us. Maybe this moment is being realized as you take on a new leadership position, a new relationship, a new

endeavor or place in life. Maybe it is a new outlook towards an old problem or taking a risk which in the past seemed impossible. Maybe it is breaking your silence on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, and downtrodden even when others will scoff. Whatever it is, let us not hold back but trust that the kingdom of heaven, the glory of the coming of the Lord, is here in our midst. The dawning of a great light is emerging and our silence, our apathy and inaction, only betray the workings of God. Friends, now is the time to turn away from the side of the pool and dive in, so that we might finally and truly live.