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Essay: A prophetic legacy awaits fulfillment

Pat Marrin | Dec. 31, 2008

When President Barack Obama stands on the west front of the U.S. Capitol to deliver his inaugural address Jan. 20, another voice, silenced 40 years ago on a motel balcony in Memphis, Tenn., will resonate with profound historical significance in a moment that even 18 months ago was still unimaginable.

The slow, rolling baritone of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. will echo in the first official message of the first African-American president to a nation probing its way into the future.

Though President-elect Obama was only 6 years old when King was assassinated in 1968, what seems sure is that his presidency could not have happened without the hard-won victories of the civil rights movement and the rhetorical power that flowed from pulpit to podium, from religion to politics through the life and death of King.

In assessing King's influence today, it is important to recall that during his life he never held political office or exercised power beyond moral persuasion. King was first and foremost a preacher. From his early faith formation in the black Baptist church and his education in New England, to his role as a high-profile leader in the civil rights movement, King never strayed far from the pulpit. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., and later Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta were where he renewed his vocation. His phenomenal success in other, larger preaching venues, on the road across the South and before audiences in the North, served as an evolving public dialogue about the biblical and legal basis for voting rights and economic fairness, and for his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

A review of King's many recorded speeches and sermons reveals a man imbued with the scriptures. King's powerful voice and cadenced delivery brought to life many familiar biblical passages and lines from hymns: "Justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." "Every valley will be exalted, and every hill and mountain will be made low." "There is a balm in Gilead, to make the body whole; there is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul." "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Jonathan Rieder, in his recent book *The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2008), explores King's identity and accomplishments as both preacher and social activist. Part biography, part analysis of King's multiple rhetorical worlds, the book examines the power of oratory itself to shape history.

For Rieder, King's "righteous performance" was to weave seamlessly into his sermons the American promise of equality, freedom and self-determination for all its citizens. By connecting Bible and Constitution, the two deepest sources of the American identity, King pressed a reluctant, largely white Christian America to reject segregation and accept in principle full equality for its non-white citizens not as a concession but as a matter of national integrity. The biblical mandate and the national ideal were rooted in the same American soil.

King brilliantly identified nonviolence as the essence of democracy -- social and political change brought about not by force but by the vote, every vote as a little act of nonviolence. His unwavering commitment to nonviolent protest, even during the waves of bombings and murders across the South and verbal assaults from rivals in and out of the civil rights movement, was in order to demonstrate the power of nonviolence as both the end and the means of a campaign to achieve not just legal justice but actual reconciliation between the races.

Ironically, King was opposed especially by many church leaders for taking his pulpit into the streets, pushing spiritual and pastoral concern toward social activism, and for indicting "11 a.m. Sunday morning as the most segregated hour in America."

By any earthly measure, King died a failure, the civil rights movement staggered by internal conflicts and sidelined by the collapse of democratic discourse in a season of riots and assassinations.

Despite his well-publicized personal weaknesses, King put his short life on the path of history in the service of a cause much larger than himself. It didn't matter that he was, in the words of his closest colleagues, "no saint." It was better, they said, that he not be idolized if this excused anyone from doing their own part to promote justice.

Forty years later, the rhetorical power of King's righteous performance continues to confront us because it has

entered the larger culture; it is now part of the national lexicon every politician and preacher turns to when they mean to inspire people or connect present problems to past lessons, testing ideas to find the motive to act.

That this rhetorical trajectory is present and active as a source of idealism is a given. The question is whether this rhetorical force has lost its power to mandate real change.

King gave substance to his words by embodying the cause of justice he preached. His death empowered his memory and authenticated his message in blood. As an American icon, he can still be co-opted, but not ignored.

On the threshold of a fresh season of change and even hope, the question is whether Martin Luther King Jr. has completed his historic legacy or whether it has just begun.

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