

## Rideau Park United Church

### Sermon: Martin Luther King Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968)

Rev. Jim Baldwin – Sunday, February 1, 2026

A couple of weeks ago, I prepared a service and a sermon that celebrated the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. That sermon got sidelined, when I felt the need to address the events that were going on in our world at the time. While I did incorporate some information about Dr. King's belief in non-violent resistance...I still felt called to honour his life and his work...and there is no better day than the first Sunday of Black History Month.

**Who was Martin Luther King?** He was an American Christian minister and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the Civil Rights Movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968.

He was best known for advancing civil rights through nonviolence and civil disobedience, and he was inspired by the teachings of Christ and the nonviolent activism of Mahatma Gandhi.

The list of Dr. King's actions is extensive:

**In 1955**, he led the Montgomery bus boycott.

**In 1957** he became the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

**In 1962** he led an unsuccessful struggle against segregation in Albany, Georgia.

**In 1963** he helped organize nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama, aimed at desegregating downtown stores, public spaces, and achieve fair hiring practices.

**That same year** he helped organize the March on Washington, where more than 250 thousand people gathered to hear him speak about civil and economic rights. It was here that he delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech.

**In 1964** he won the Nobel Peace Prize for combating racial inequality through nonviolent resistance.

**In 1965** he helped organize the Selma to Montgomery marches, aimed at securing Black voting rights.

**In 1966** he took the movement North to Chicago to work on segregated housing.

**In 1967**, he expanded his focus to include opposition towards the Vietnam war.

J. Edgar Hoover considered him a radical and FBI agents investigated him for possible communist ties.

**In 1968** Dr. King was planning a national occupation of Washington, D.C., to be called the Poor People's Campaign, when he was assassinated on April 4<sup>th</sup> in Memphis, Tennessee. He was just 39 years old when he died...

Dr. King's death was followed by riots in many U.S. cities, and allegations that the man convicted of killing him had been framed or acted with government agents, persisted for decades. Nonetheless, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal...and in 1971, Martin Luther King Jr. Day was established as a holiday in the United States.

Today, hundreds of streets have been named in his honour and in 2011, a memorial was dedicated on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. There is no question that he is one of the most highly respected citizens of the United States today...but it wasn't always like that. Surely, he knew that his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement would put his life at risk. Many would have considered his actions to be foolish.

In a sermon entitled "Dream and Reality" Michael D. Wuchter asks the questions ***"How can one best understand Dr. King?"*** and ***"What was it that formed and empowered him?"***

He says, "To understand the primary influences in his life, one must begin on the western shores of Africa before the birth of this country, when the Portuguese first abducted a few black people for slavery in Europe. To understand King, one must remember and feel the injustice and pain of millions of Africans forcibly transported from Africa to America." Then he says:

"At the age of six, (young Martin) was told that he could no longer play with a white boy because he was black. Shocked and hurt, he ran home. At the dinner table, his parents recounted the history of Black people from Africa up to that particular Atlanta, Georgia, moment.

His mother then told him something that every African-American parent says to his/her children, "Don't let this thing impress you or depress you. You are as good as anyone else, and don't you ever forget it. You are an equal child of God."

To understand the primary influences in Martin's life, you also need to know that he was the third generation of ministers in his family.

King's maternal grandfather was A. D. Williams, who served as pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He told Martin's father that ministry not only involved the making of theological affirmations about God - as defined by Jesus Christ - but that ministry also means (applying) the gospel to the context and environment in which one finds oneself.

When an Atlanta newspaper made racist comments in its editorial. Martin's grandfather had some comments of his own to make from the pulpit. On one day, 6,000 Atlanta Black people decided not to buy that newspaper ever again, and the paper shut down.

In 1931, Martin's father became the new senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist. He proclaimed the gospel and led a protest in Atlanta on behalf of the equalization of pay for Black and White schoolteachers. It took eleven years, but he won the battle.

Martin King Jr. was ordained while still a student at Morehouse College. He continued his studies at Crozer Theological Seminary and graduated first in his class. He earned his Ph.D. at Boston University, with a doctoral dissertation that analyzed Paul Tillich's concept of God. For a young, popular, brilliant, black Ph.D. who could speak the language of European theology, there were some very nice teaching jobs in the Northeast universities and seminaries waiting for his decision.

The “smart” thing to do, by the world’s standards, would have been to become a professor. But at the age of 25, he decided instead, to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather before him, who worked for the liberation of the oppressed, and he accepted a call to Dexter Avenue, Baptist Church.

Soon after he started preaching, he became the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott protesting the indignity of segregated seating. During one of his first sermons he said, “If we protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, 'There lived a race of people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization.' ”

It was just the start of many sermons and many protests in his work for civil rights. Toward the end of his career, King wrote the following:

*Due to my involvement in the struggle for the freedom of my people, I have known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been arrested five times and put in Alabama jails. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near-fatal stabbing. So, in a real sense I have been battered by storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden, and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appeared, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination.*

*There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others who consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So, like the Apostle Paul, I can now humbly yet proudly say, "I wear on my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."*

Paul was dealing with power struggles and divisions in the church at Corinth. Essentially, the members of the new Christian church were still holding onto the ideas and practices of their society. They declared their faith in Christ, but they were still caught up in hierarchies of importance and status, and it was creating dissension in the church. They simply couldn't see how the values and priorities of God's reign contradicted the world around them.

And so, in chapter one, verse 18 of I Corinthians, Paul transitions from his call for unity, to challenging the values of Corinthian society, saying, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed, but it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved."

This was a message that Dr. King lived by. At its core was his belief in a community of all people, committed to an ethic of love that was inclusive of friend and foe. This is a love that does not discriminate between worthy and unworthy people. It is a selfless love that seeks to create a community that is founded in the gospel Christ proclaims, and the call to love one another as Christ loves us.

It was a message that Dr. King worked tirelessly to advance for fourteen years, and it was a message that he – like Christ - was willing to live and die for.

On April 3, 1968, Dr. King spoke at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, in support of the striking sanitation workers. Little did he know that his words foreshadowed what would happen in the next 24 hours...but they speak to a hope that

transcends this earthly life and faith in God that is eternal. We still have a long way to go, but his words are as true today as they were then; calling us to work for justice and peace, and inspiring us to believe that God's will...will be done:

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.

*Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So, I'm 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.*

*I have a dream this afternoon that the brotherhood of man will become a reality. With this faith, we will be able to achieve this new 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 the ... spiritual of old, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*

At five minutes after six on the very next evening, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated." But his legacy, his prophecy and his discipleship could not be destroyed. The life and teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. represent a human archetype of the radical gospel of love, and his prophetic voice reverberates to this day with the sacred call of "liberty and justice for all." He never stopped believing that unconditional love will have the final word, and neither should we. Amen