

The Urgency of Now...
Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

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Preached at Glenview UCC
MLK Sunday 2008

Barrack Obama has reclaimed the phrase we use today as the sermon title. As Obama makes a serious bid for the White House, the whole phrase he uses is, "*The Fierce Urgency of Now.*" It is as potent a point today as it was when Martin Luther King Jr., first uttered the words. In times such as these, the words seem even more poignant as we survey our world and lament its failings.

On this holiday weekend, we are encouraged to understand that this should be a day on, rather than a day off. Dr. King sought to convince the nation that sitting back and waiting for justice only produces more injustice. Martin understood that inequality breeds and festers. He was clear that to truly be first, servant-hood would be required. He profoundly understood that the last must be cared for and seriously considered in our society. How he would have wept *still*, with the victims of Katrina. He went so far as to say that blacks and other disadvantaged American should be compensated for historic wrongs. He was a crusader for justice. King was a man not so much ahead of his time, but one who embraced the challenges of the time he was in. He made a choice to support the least, the lost and the left out in our society. He chose life.

Dr. King's words just had a truthful ring. "*The fierce urgency of now*" was words filled with vision. The words were real and farsighted; they were authentic and timely. The Nobel Peace Prize winner proclaimed that character and integrity, that faith and fundamental fairness was the best medicine available for what ailed the nation. In the restless fifties and turbulent sixties, as Martin daringly walked the streets of Cicero, as he wrote passionately from a Birmingham jail, stood and gazed across the reflecting pool, asking America to look at itself from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he offered a choice that hung like a scaffold, balancing between life and death.

It was a time filled with electricity yet each day was filled with danger. He fearlessly offered hope as he pricked the conscious of the nation. Even as he peered across the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, perhaps contemplating his work with garbage workers in Memphis and at that very moment when a bullet pierced his skin and violently ended his earthly life, a fierce urgency was truly apparent. As it was in those tumultuous days, we too have that same kind of urgency, now in 2008.

Maybe that's why we saw Benazir Bhutto return to her native land, risk her own personnel safety, accept inadequate security, give up a comfortable and lavish life and ultimately give her life. She saw and was compelled by the urgency! That's why Harriet Tubman started a railroad to freedom. One of our founding fathers, George Washington, saw the urgency. He left his comfortable home, his rich wife, gave up safety and risked his life. The call of the nation was urgent. Perhaps that's why my hometown of Greensboro, NC is noted for a department store lunch counter and young black students who sat down, becoming students who were really standing up for justice. It is why so many marched in Jena Louisiana last fall, or why others defied the water cannons and tear gas in Selma and now in Kenya. It has been the fierce urgency of now. The racial wall of apartheid in South Africa tumbled; the Berlin wall fell. We all remember the student in Tiananmen Square, standing boldly before the tank. That's why young people in this nation have been voting in record numbers this primary season...all of it...urgency! These vivid moments in our time, teach us the fierce urgency of now.

In early 2007, I was privileged to travel to Germany as part of a delegation to celebrate our historic United Church of Christ partnership with the Protestant Churches in Germany. The event

was held in Berlin, a wonderful city, but also a city and European nation with a difficult and deeply tragic history given the rise of Hitler and the Nazi's brutality that followed. ... Well, in downtown Berlin they now have a rather new museum, not far from the place where the bunker holding the remains of Hitler is entombed in concrete, near the Humboldt University Square where banned books were burned, not far from where Bonhoeffer died in jail protesting to his end the injustices of the Nazi regime. It was also, incidentally, near the place where Michael Jackson dangled his own son, his baby over the balcony to the dismay of fans below and before the eyes of the world.

The museum begins above ground with row after row of concrete blocks that appeared to be the size and shape of granite crypts, row after row of symbolic yet sobering grey concrete simulated graves, a vast burial ground as far as the eye can see. The museum's message was clear – death was the result of indifference. One was struck by how much it appeared that apathy won.

When one entered the museum, the person would have to descend a flight of stairs, go underground, further driving home the eerie point. As you walk through the exhibit, you are drawn into seeing and witnessing the horror and dreadfulness of the period.

As one walked through, one could hear the simulated screams and the agony of blood being shed underneath one's feet. The further into the museum one traveled, the walls would literally narrow, dirt overhead, as the walls surrounding you told the story and painted a gruesome picture of the historic period. Soon you found yourself walking almost single file, as if being led to your own chamber of death. The point of the museum was to remember that in that period of history there was a real urgency; an urgency unmet. In that period the urgent signs were ignored and can not be forgotten.

It begs the question of us as faithful people. Why are we so tentative these days, so unsure, even hesitant in our collective justice work and our attempts at community service and actions? It just seems that those we elect are so careful, rather than courageous. Our own activism seems muted. The charitable impulse is far too selective, far too much focus on our own self interest. Denominations like ours live too often on the generosity of past generations, than the urgency of now. The haunting question is how will we be judged when our great grandchildren look back at us? What will they say when they read the record of our service? As a decade in Iraq seems possible and a second war in Afghanistan rages on, as Pakistan's nuclear arsenal makes us anxious and Iran's taunting concerns us, what will they say about our church's resolve for peace? Will they call us "the occupiers" in years to come, and say that our leaders were simply obsessed with empire? How will we explain, that we fought a war over oil; that thousands died because of American greed? Will they say that we failed at the art of finding resolution and blindly barreled ahead with a national resolve to democratize the world? These were Martin's questions. As we survey our world, is that our understanding of what Jesus would do?

When they ask us in the future about the justice choices we have made, will the history we write be a vote for justice and peace? Will we chose life, work for understanding in matters of race, gender and sexual orientation. Will future generations have our concerns pushed off to them? Or is the urgency we feel, just an obsession with picking the next American Idol!

My friends these times are urgent and we know it. As children's health care gets vetoed and 47 million people in this nation use the emergency room as their sole health care provider, it's an urgent time. We will be judged by our willingness to incarcerate rather than educate, our national willingness to guzzle gas, rather than build and use light rail across the country.

Last summer my wife and I went to Alaska and saw the melting icebergs. We better understood Al Gore's urgency. In so many ways we have fallen hook, line, and sinker, that is, in the notion that things are just fine, that homeland security for example, is achieved by building fences rather than building community. The irony, according to a prominent Hispanic leader in North

Carolina, is that the proposed fence is really not designed to keep people out, but really designed to keep people in. Faith should not mean silence, inaction, avoidance, as we face the urgency of now.

This urgency is not about Obama's attendance at a Muslim school as a child; Hillary's laugh or even her tears. It's not about Edward's haircuts, as expensive as they may be. It's not even about Rudy mistress then wife or whether Huckabee is a good Christian. It's not about Romney somehow passing a religious litmus test, or McCain's age. There is urgency, but it is not about those things, but the urgency for us, is about what we do as heavenly citizens living in this global community. Will we help the least, the lost and the left out is our urgent call.

The tragedy is the way we have allowed 9/11 to change us. So many want to enshrine 9/11, as *if* it equates to the horror of slavery or the holocaust, or see the incident as America's mortal failure. The event has been used to isolate us, and for some in high places to spy upon each other. As terrible as the day was, it is not the event that should define us. We do have a choice. We can reach for a greater good, climb to higher ground. Just as Martin stood in the pulpit of Riverside UCC in New York, speaking out against the Vietnam War, he was declaring the urgency then, that same kind of urgency that faces us now.

...The same urgent and sage advice also flows from the text. The appeal is clear and decisive. Renewal for Israel was a genuine possibility. They had to want it though, and work for it. The still speaking God revealed the urgency, but they had to see it. It suggests that we still have choices; that we need not walk single file into a dismal future. This urgency suggests that the unspoken thoughts of despair and the people's secret fears would not overcome them. Bitter lemons present in the day could still become refreshing lemonade. There was hope. But to stand up and to be counted is seldom easy. This scripture is reminding us that standing for right is always faithfully required. Martin said it this way, "We should stand for something or we will fall for anything." Hesitation wasn't a viable option. The scripture teaches us that genuine religion is urgent religion. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death." The passage proclaims that we do have a choice. Faith calls forth choices. Through faithful choices, comes meaningful life, the idols are dismissed and God is embraced.

My friends, the urgency now is about serving God with all our hearts, with our minds clear, and with all the soulful spirit we can muster. It's about setting aside the hype – embracing the harsh truth. It's about loving our neighbors with respect, without condition and serving others. Choose life; declare that gives life, is God's intent, God's call to us. Know that God is still speaking in these times, is still engaged in our present reality, still calling us to make choices that lift humanity, which lifts our communities to better places.

Please be reminded on this holiday weekend that God still speaks, still calls us to confront every system of evil that impedes freedom and prevents humanity's ability to soar. The choice is clear, our call is still to offer bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, make a way for the lost, the least and the left out. While we celebrate Martin's life today, he too was serving Jesus, anchored by the one whose name is sovereign and whom we serve. It is Christ who can still change lives and still change hearts. It's still the Holy Spirit who can change situations and change habits. God gives us human yet holy work to do. Martin came our way to remind us of this work in his time. He left a word with us, an urgent word. In the United Church of Christ we say, "God is still speaking!" Martin's story is not complete without us. We say it is in the work of welcoming all to our table. We say it as we include all, especially the least, and the marginalized. We say it is in our service. The question for us on this special Sunday is, as God speaks, are we listening? It is a fiercely urgent question of our faith.