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ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE

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Well, 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!¹

I was only eight years old when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came to Memphis to support sanitation workers in their fight against low wages and inhumane working conditions. Of the events at Mason Temple on the evening of April 3, 1968, when King delivered his last and often quoted speech, Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles, pastor, civil rights leader, and eyewitness to the assassination of King, has often stated, "It was on that evening, marked by active thunderstorms, that an enthusiastic, packed crowd heard Dr. King give what has come to be known as the 'Mountaintop' speech. In it, he gave an unusual glimpse into his personal fears and challenges, as well as his prophetic insights into his own fate. It's as if he preached himself through the fear of death." On the following day, Dr. King was assassinated while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel as he and his entourage were preparing to go to the home of Rev. Kyles for a home-cooked meal.

The words of Dr. King's speech the night before his death recount the experience of Moses, who climbed from the Moabite plain to the summit of Mount Nebo, at the peak of Mount Pisgah, to view the land promised to Israel. Moses, the servant of the Lord, died in the plains of Moab without ever setting a foot in the Promised Land. After directly confronting Pharaoh and navigating an exodus of God's people through uncharted territory, Moses passed the baton to Joshua, son of Nun, who would be the one to lead the Israelites into the land of promise.²

On Tuesday, January 20, 2009, the day following the national holiday honoring King, I stood in the crowd of more than one million to watch as Barack Hussein Obama took the oath of office not only as the forty-fourth president of the United States of America, but as the nation's first black president. While many have heralded this moment in time as the realization and fulfillment of King's dream, we must remember that racial equality was only one dimension of King's dream.

The country over which President Obama will preside is drowning in a sea of debt, an "economic tsunami," as so aptly described by Alan Greenspan. Voter registration, voter disenfranchisement, and voter suppression tactics still impact a disproportionate number of minorities. Nearly 36 million people live in poverty; children wake up hungry and go to bed hungry; we have two wars raging; more than 45 million are without health care; our education system needs an overhaul; we live under the threat of nuclear war; and violence, gangs, and guns claim the lives of our young at alarming rates.

While it is important not to minimize the significance of what transpired on January 20, it is also important to resist the temptation to declare that King's dream has been fulfilled.

Lest we forget, it was on April 4, 1967 (just one year prior to his death) when King delivered one of his most controversial statements at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam at the Riverside Church in New York. In his sermon entitled "A Time to Break the Silence," King denounced the American government for its addiction to violence and for its spiritual bankruptcy. He said:

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.³

The prophet Isaiah captured the essence of King's challenge to embrace a revolution of values. Isaiah envisioned a redeemed social order. He prophesied about an idyllic setting where the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the baby goat, the lion and the yearling, and the cow and the bear would live in harmony. Wild beasts and little children would play together near the hole of the cobra and the viper absolutely unafraid, and a little child will lead the beasts (11:6-8). But Isaiah's prophecy sounded unrealistic against the backdrop of exile, oppression, and alienation brought on by the chosen nation's failure to cultivate intimacy with God.

In a society like ours, where people seem bent on destruction, Isaiah's prophecy sounds as unrealistic as King's summons to a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's class, race, and political party. Our nation has not been the same since September 11 or Katrina or the war on terror. Fear of biological warfare, heightened airport security, escalating violence between Israel and Palestine, military confrontations, corrupt politics, corporate greed, mortgage meltdowns, corporate bailouts, and a recession are symptomatic of the times in which we live. More than 11 million people are out of work, and unemployment benefits have reached the highest level in more than forty years. The thought of peaceful coexistence, cooperation, and collaboration seems just as unrealistic for our times as Isaiah's.

Nevertheless, Isaiah prophesied about a societal transformation. He used the imagery of the altered temperament of the animal king-

dom to describe the transformed environment that will not be ruled by animal instinct, but by a recognition of the authority of God.

This environment of transformed relationships would be ushered in by a shoot that would come up from the stump of Jesse, a fruit-bearing branch. This fruit-bearing branch would possess impeccable credentials, because he would be filled with the Spirit of God who would administer the affairs of God's kingdom with justice and equity.

Inquiring minds want to know when Isaiah's prophecy and King's dream will be fulfilled. While Obama's presidency represents a partial fulfillment of King's dream for America, we know that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the stump of Jesse who came as a baby to usher in the kingdom of God, who by the Spirit of the Lord, ruled with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2). Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy when he gave his life for the sins of the world. Today Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, and according to the Scriptures, Jesus is coming back again.

However, until Jesus returns there will be Osama Bin Ladens and terrorist cells that threaten our safety. Until Jesus returns racism, sexism, and classism will present their own challenges. Until Jesus returns people will struggle with distorted value systems. Until Jesus returns there will be those who choose popularity over principle, image over integrity, success over significance, reputation over character, and convenience over standing by their convictions. Until Jesus returns people will kill and compete with each other. Until Jesus returns lofty ideals will be slaughtered on the battlefield of competition, self-interest, and self-indulgence. Until Jesus returns nations and tribes will continue to squabble.

Now that the euphoria of the inauguration of Obama has passed, will we open our eyes to the unfinished business that lies ahead of us? As comforting as it may be to have a "brother" in the White House, will we be among the ones who choose to sit on the sidelines of history, or will we be counted among the remnant who will help President Obama to pursue a more just and equitable

society? Will we continue to work toward creating what theologians call an eschatological present? Will we function as what Dr. Forrest Harris calls “agents of reconstruction,” architects of broken dreams who labor to construct an alternate view of reality that is influenced by the reign of God?

In order for that to happen, we must reconcile the wolf and the lamb, the predator and prey inside of us.

- There is a tiger within us that is fierce and blood thirsty for power control and domination.
- There is a wolf inside us that is crafty, covetous, and destructive.
- There is a leopard inside of us that is waiting to pounce upon anything that looks like diversity.
- There a lion in us that likes to bite and devour.
- There is a bear in us that likes to growl and intimidate others.
- There is a cobra in us that is venomous and spiteful and poisonous, calculating and waiting to strike at any moment.

For some this analogy may sound a bit disturbing, for we are not wolves and tigers, lions and bears, vipers and cobras; we are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. We are fellow citizens of the household of faith and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

That’s right. Humanity is more than a beast, but it does not take a rocket scientist to see that humanity does not always function like angels. Both the wolf and the lamb are within us. We are indeed a bundle of contrasts! What shall we do with ourselves, with this bundle of contradictions, with this combination of wolf and lamb?

It is only through yielding ourselves to Jesus Christ that we can be fundamentally changed. When we repent of sin and claim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, his Holy Spirit begins to restrain the beast within us and unleash the angel.

When the beast within is restrained, and the angel is unleashed, we become messengers who have fellowship with God and carry out God’s will. We become Jesus’ advance troops. We become mediators who proclaim God’s will and live the reign of God. We become empowered to influence the world’s transformation. We

become repairers of the breach and restorers of streets. We become trumpet blowers for justice, righteousness, equality, and inclusivity.

When the angel is released we speed up that great day Martin talked about and Isaiah dreamed about, when every valley shall be exalted and every crooked place shall be made straight and all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. The entire earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. Hallelujah! Amen!

NOTES

1. James Washington, ed., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 203.
2. See Deuteronomy 34:1-9.
3. Washington, *I Have a Dream*, 148-49.