

“Songs of Freedom”

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First Church in Boston

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In honor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

The hymn, “Precious Lord,” was one of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s favorite songs—and one he often requested at demonstrations. Indeed, on April 4, 1968, Dr. King’s last words were to request the song be played at that night’s gathering in support of the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ strike. To the musician, Dr. King directed, “Ben, play “Precious Lord” in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty.”

As you just heard, the lyrics and tone of “Precious Lord” speak to both heartbreak and to hope. Dr. King lived in this tension every day. While clear-eyed about the reality of injustice, oppression, and hate, he nonetheless reached out again and again to grip life-saving hope in another possible future. In his acceptance speech for the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, King demonstrated this faith in the future, saying, *“I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.”*

On the eve of the presidential inauguration, there are many who fear that a certain kind of evil may be rising in this moment. An evil that manifests as hatred for those who do not conform to a certain idea of what it is to be “American.” An evil that masks its hatred behind the rhetoric of “protecting the homeland” of the “real” Americans.

Evil is not a word the I often use. For religious liberals, evil is a word that has largely fallen into disuse—abandoned to the moralistic language of religious conservatives. And yet here it is in Dr. King’s language challenging us to reconsider reality. Is there *evil* in our moment? Yes, of course, there are “cracks in everything” and there’s no doubt we live in a broken world. Speaking of evil asks us to consider not just cracks in humanity, but to also notice the chasms that destroy and remake the landscapes of lives.

King believed he was fighting evil. In his time, people were beaten, shot, and killed. They were also demeaned as less than human by the laws and culture of the Jim Crow South as well as the de facto segregation of Northern cities like Boston. So also, King knew the decades long practice of lynching and the inherited stories of enslavement. Evil was real for King.

And yet, Dr. King did not believe evil would be the “final word in reality.” Not even when it seemed evil had triumphed. Rather, King cast a vision again and again of a freer world of love and justice.

The importance of vision was a theme in a recent episode of the [“Hidden Brain” podcast \(Jan. 6, 2025\)](#). In the show, the host Shankar Vedantam interviewed psychologist Adam Galinsky about great leaders. Galinsky recounts the 2018 events of a Thai soccer team of 12 boys trapped in a flooded cave with their coach, Ekkapol Chantawong. Establishing both a plan and a structure, the coach had the boys work in shifts to dig a tunnel out of the cave. He also had them sing to lift their spirits and meditate to calm them. While the tunnel never became an actual path to freedom, the shared goal of working on the tunnel enabled them to retain a sense of cooperative purpose. *This* shared purpose sustained their hope and alleviated divisiveness. In the end, they survived two weeks underground not only because technical divers successfully located the boys, but also because their coach nurtured their hope and connection to each other through the very darkest of times.

This is the kind of leadership I understand King demonstrating. In the face of an evil that appeared undefeatable to some, Dr. King envisioned a different world, organized people into nonviolent actions, and had people sing together. Speaking in 1961 during the [Albany Movement](#), King said,

“The freedom songs are playing a strong and vital role in our struggle. They give the people new courage and a sense of unity. I think they keep alive a faith, a radiant hope, in the future, particularly in our most trying hours.”

Singing together instills hope and reinforces unity.

In embracing music as a vital part of a movement for social change, King knew that he and others were drawing upon a long legacy. Our service today only begins to point to this long history. From African American Spirituals that both nurtured hope and gave coded instructions for those seeking freedom to Civil Rights freedom songs of “Precious Lord” and “We Shall Overcome,” King was keenly aware that singing knit people together in shared purpose.

In a moment, the third section of the service recognizes today’s injustices. Including this moment, our moment, feels crucial not only because of the fears so many are holding, but also because I do not believe King ever expected the work to end with him. As poet Robert Hayden expresses in his [tribute poem to 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglass](#),

this man shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues’ rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,

but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

The fullest honor to a person working for freedom are people who can freely and fully experience their lives.

And yet in our time, freedoms are being eroded and lost for African Americans and others. Unsurprisingly, music continues to play a significant role in protest movements. In researching for this sermon, I admit that I just now learned about the wildly popular song, “Alright” by Kendrick Lamar. Now I *have* heard of Lamar, mostly because at one point my son’s Apple Music merged with my library somehow. And yet, I had not heard of his 2015 hit, “Alright.” Have you? The song’s lyrics recount both social injustices such as police violence as well as temptations to listen to “Lucy”—a name for Lucifer, that Biblical name of the prince of evil. And yet, as Lamar names the struggle within himself and with society, he also returns again and again to a 5-syllable chorus, “We go’in be alright. We go’in be alright.” During protests against police violence, this 5-syllable chorus, “We go’in be alright” emerged as a protest song-chant.

While alive to this moment, the song also emerges from awareness of history. According to a [2019 NPR story](#), Lamar biographer Henry Marshall Lewis recounts how a trip to South Africa inspired Lamar to write the song. Lamar also told NPR,

“Four hundred years ago, as slaves, we prayed and sung joyful songs to keep our heads level-headed with what was going on . . . Four hundred years later, we still need that music to heal. And I think that 'Alright' is definitely one of those records that makes you feel good no matter what the times are.”

Sustaining hope through music to keep going even in the hardest times remains a vital and important part of seeking to live in freedom.

When I thought about what to preach about today on this eve of a day that both honors the justice work of one leader and marks the presidential inauguration of another, I struggled. On the one hand, as a religious leader I do not want to reduce my preaching to recurring commentary on how the incoming administration conflicts with values that I and I know many of you hold dear. We *are* a church, not a political organization; and, I am a minister, not a pundit. On the other hand, as a religious leader I would consider it a failing of my call to not address this moment we are now in. Paying attention to how freely and fully people can live out their Holy gift of Life is a religious task. In this moment, we must ask ourselves how do we now live when power is held by those we fear may create harm—and, yes, even perhaps enact evil—upon others?

This is not a question to answer in a day, but rather the question we now turn ourselves to in the coming weeks and years. While there will be much to learn, what I do know is that music will be part of the answer. We will need music to sustain hope and to create unity. I suspect this also means opening ourselves to encounter the protest music of this moment. This does not mean you must have Kendrick Lamar on repeat, but perhaps paying attention to what is being said *and sung* on the streets can help us to better understand and respond to today's injustices.

Dr. King understood the power of music to foster hope. And he understood the need for hope to sustain an ongoing fight against injustice—especially when it seems that right has been defeated and evil is triumphant. Whether or not we share King's confidence that the end is destined to justice, history gives us plenty of examples where the fight for freedom succeeds. Or, perhaps like Coach Chantawong's example, sometimes we may only know that the best way forward through the day is to have some structure, a purpose shared with others, and to take some time to sing, meditate, and be *together* in the uncertainty of it all. Sounds a bit like church to me.

So may it be.