

UNFULFILLED DREAMS



LATE IN HIS SHORT LIFE, Martin Luther King Jr. came to the tragic understanding that “life is a continual story of shattered dreams.” This remark comes from one of his last sermons, entitled “Unfulfilled Dreams.” Delivered in front of his family and friends at Ebenezer Baptist Church only a month before his assassination, the sermon provides a poignant counterpoint to “I Have a Dream.” It speaks of failed dreams, both political and personal.

King takes as his text verses in 1 Kings 8 about David’s failure to build a temple: “And it was in the heart of David my father to build an house for the name of the Lord God of Israel. And the Lord said unto David my father, Whereas it was in thine heart to build an house unto my name, thou didst well that it was within thine heart” (1 Kings 8:17–18).

King hopes that God will judge well of him too, based on his desire to erect “temples of justice,” even though he will likely not live to fulfill this dream. King anticipates that he will die like Gandhi, who “died with a broken heart, because that nation that he wanted to unite ended up being divided.” This melancholy thought leads King to lament, “Life is a long, continual story of setting out to build a great temple and not being able to finish it.”¹⁰ Throughout the sermon King sounds this elegiac note.

The sermon strikes a confessional note as well. It speaks of shattered private dreams, dreams that remain unfulfilled

owing to the “tension” between good and evil in his heart. According to his friend and biographer Vincent Harding, King was trying to confess. With his father sitting behind the pulpit and his mother at the organ, King “needed to say something to this community of love about ... the ‘civil war’ going on in his heart, about his own troubling connection to the poet’s words: ‘I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do.’ ... He needed to confess how deeply he had failed himself and his own best possibilities.”¹¹

Hence he warned the congregation, “You don’t need to go out this morning saying that Martin Luther King is a saint. Oh, no.... I want you to know this morning that I am a sinner like all of God’s children. But I want to be a good man. And I want to hear a voice saying to me one day, ‘...I bless you, because you try. It is well that it was within thine heart.’”¹²

Harding explains that this “confession was not primarily to us, his friends, or to his congregation.... Ultimately our brother was reaching out through us, beyond us, to his God, seeking to believe that in the ultimate divine encounter he would be received with love, not as a failure but as one whose heart was right, one who carried the intention of righteousness at the center of his being.”¹³

It has been said that there are two kinds of preachers: those who speak to the congregation for God, and those who speak for the congregation to God. The former, like Jeremiah or Amos, tend to denounce sin and injustice. This is the rhetorical posture King characteristically adopts in the pulpit. The latter, like David, tend to cry for mercy for themselves and for all us sinners. This is the posture King adopts in “Unfulfilled Dreams.” In this sermon, evil does not lie simply “out there” in the world’s social injustice but inside every human heart, including the preacher’s own. Although for me King’s confession is marred by traces of self-pity, it is poignant nonetheless.

And potentially palliative for those who regard King as a flawed national icon. For some in our community, Martin Luther King Day is tainted by King’s private life. I

understand this. I too struggle with King's infidelities, as do many of my Mormon family and friends. We are a moral, not to say moralistic, lot. But it is past time to let this go. King may have been flawed, but "he carried the intention of righteousness at the center of his being." He hoped that God would judge him as he preached that we should judge each other, not by the "separate mistakes we make, but by the total bent of our lives."¹⁴

Harding recounts a dream suggesting that God has now so judged King. He writes: "I am convinced that Martin's faith in the precious ... love of God was rewarded. For it was several years after his death that I saw my friend in a dream. And it was indeed amazing: All the tension, all the dividedness that had been in his face, in his eyes, during those last months of life were now gone.... And in the dream, as he looked at me, and even though he did not say it, I somehow knew he was saying ... 'It is well with my soul.'"¹⁵ I hope so. I hope Martin Luther King Jr. has finally heard the voice of heavenly approbation he longed to hear, echoing the voice of a grateful nation, saying, "I bless you for the total bent of your life."