



WEEK ONE

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: Proverbs 13: 12

Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: Romans 5: 1-5

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Context for the Contemporary Wisdom

A Baptist minister from Atlanta, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a leader in the civil rights movement in the United States from the mid-1950s until his death by assassination in 1968. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, his leadership was vital to the success of ending legal segregation in the American South and other parts of the U.S.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in the summer of 1963 was not a new concept; three threatened/actual civil rights marches in 1941, 1957, and 1958 preceded this event. Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech occurred at the end of the day and was shown live on television across the country. After the March, civil rights leaders met with the White House to discuss the civil rights legislation that ultimately became part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Dr. King's Christmas Eve sermon in 1967 unfortunately bookended his speech on dreams as it was his last Christmas sermon before his death four months later in Memphis. It was the fifth of a five-lecture series called the Massey Lectures, which

were produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Company. Each lecture had a distinct theme regarding the African American civil rights struggle; this sermon's title, "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," delved into Dr. King's dream of nonviolence, reviewed the setbacks the civil rights movement had along the way, and concluded that deferred hopes could still be dreams.

A Reading from Contemporary Wisdom

Excerpt from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's "A Christmas Sermon on Peace" (12/24/1967)

- <https://onbeing.org/blog/martin-luther-kings-last-christmas-sermon/> (Full text of his sermon)
- <https://youtu.be/1jeylAH3bUI> (Audio of his sermon; the whole sermon is fantastic, but 22:50 onward is where to focus your Advent meditation this week.)

"...1963, on a sweltering August afternoon, we stood in Washington, D.C., and talked to the nation about many things. Toward the end of that afternoon, I tried to talk to the nation about a dream that I had had, and I must confess to you today that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare. I remember the first time I saw that dream turn into a nightmare, just a few weeks after I had talked about it. It was when four beautiful, unoffending, innocent Negro girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham, Alabama. I watched that dream turn into a nightmare as I moved through the ghettos of the nation and saw my black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity, and saw the nation really doing nothing to grapple with the Negroes' problem of poverty. I saw that dream turn into a nightmare as I watched my black brothers and sisters in the midst of anger and understandable outrage, in the midst of their hurt, in the midst of their disappointment, turn to misguided riots to try to solve that problem. I saw that dream turn into a nightmare as I watched the war in Vietnam escalating, and as I saw so-called military advisors, 16,000 strong, turn into fighting soldiers until today some 500,000 American boys are fighting on Asian soil.

"Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today by saying I still have a dream, because, you know, you can't give up

in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of all. And so today I still have a dream.

"I have a dream that one day men will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as brothers. I still have a dream this morning that one day every Negro in this country, every colored person in the world, will be judged on the basis of the content of his character rather than the color of his skin, and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. I still have a dream that one day the idle industries of Appalachia will be revitalized, and the empty stomachs of Mississippi will be filled, and brotherhood will be more than a few words at the end of a prayer, but rather the first order of business on every legislative agenda.

"I still have a dream today that one day justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. I still have a dream today that in all of our state houses and city halls men will be elected to go there who will do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with their God. I still have a dream today that one day war will come to an end, that men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, that nations will no longer rise up against nations, neither will they study war any more. I still have a dream today that one day the lamb and the lion will lie down together and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid. I still have a dream today that one day every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill will be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

"I still have a dream that with this faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when there will be peace on earth and goodwill toward men. It will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the sons of God will shout for joy."

Questions for Reflection

Because we live in the United States, the American dream is omnipresent in our lives. Dr. King's dream speech uses that as a starting point for how hopes of Black

Americans could be fulfilled and used to create a beloved community. Dr. King talks specifically of being “the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes” yet he continues to hope in his dreams, which are many. As he describes his dreams, they come through his faith in God’s infinite grace, which is for everyone.

1. What are your hopes and dreams regarding racial justice today where you live? In what ways are these hopes becoming reality?
2. Imagine a time when you hoped for something to happen in your life and it became true. How was God present during your deferment period? What sustained you in the waiting?
3. Dr. King’s faith sustains him despite the terribleness surrounding him in the world, but he does mention the pessimism that is alive and breeding despair. How do we get through the rough times?
4. How long will hope continued to be deferred in terms of racial justice? What roadblocks exist? What are some ways we can work for change together despite not knowing how things will turn out in the end?

Closing Prayer

Most gracious God, I know not all dreams are possible in the way I imagine them to be, but I also know that I am not alone in hoping for a more racially just and beloved community. Show me how to stand with my neighbors using my faith that comes through suffering, perseverance, character, and finally, hope. Amen.