

“Do Something about It Today”

Psalm 118:19-26a

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There is a lot going on this weekend. It is a holiday weekend to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Some have taken advantage of that and you have been to a breakfast or a dinner honoring the memory of the great Civil Rights leader. I doubt if Dr. King ever thought about the year 2016. He was very much in the moment. He was concerned about what was happening in 1955 and 1965 and so on. He did talk about the future from time to time. How he wanted a better future for his children and grandchildren and your children and my grandchildren. He talk about that better day down the road when all people of color, economic status, gender and lifestyle orientation would see a better day.

It is hard for many of us to think about 2016. You have unfinished business from the past you are dealing with. Some have worries they have carried over into the New Year, we have issues we wish would go away by turning the calendar but they don't. Will I find something new and exciting in the New Year?

The Psalmist gives us a good reason to be excited! Did you catch the opening words of the psalm? I know they go by so quickly. And sometimes they so surprise or startle us that we wonder if we heard it correctly. Let me try it again: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel (or all the people) say, ‘His steadfast love endures forever.’”

There, you may have been wondering what was going to happen next, some sitting with glum faces and thinking about balancing our check book or setting an alarm on our watch to see when this was going to be over—and now comes this bright psalm. What goes on here? And then a couple verses later he writes, “This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

First, “Let's give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever”, and then second, “This is the day the Lord has made.” Isn't that a reason for rejoicing?

It's a Sunday, the Lord's Day, your day, my day, God's day, a day to step aside from the daily routines, and to bow down to say, “Thank you Lord, for this day.” We did nothing to deserve it; you cannot earn a new day, or command it to appear! You just receive it, a gift. There might be plenty of tomorrows but there is only one today, this day.

This is the day the Lord has made. The Day, I said, meaning it is not the night. Today's night-time is gone, over and done, ended kaput! That's the way the Bible says it in

Genesis, right from the beginning. We refer to the days and nights as if the day came first: from morning to evening. The Bible reverses it, "There was evening then there was morning, one day." Oh Lord please get me through the night, until morning comes. It came.

Imagine how much more fearful was the darkness of the night to the ancient Israelites, with no electricity, no cities, nothing but a camp and a tent in the wilderness.

But for us the night is over. It's daytime. This is the day the Lord has made. Did you hear that, the emphasis I mean? The Day the Lord has made. If the Lord has made the day, for us and all God's children everywhere, then anything, everything that comes within it, falls within God's loving care and purpose. It's the Lord's Day. But, God gives it to each of us, to use as best we can, to live it one day at a time. God does not want us to live as if it were yesterday or worse tomorrow. God want you to live today, today.

Living one day at a time rings with a familiar air. It sounds so casual, so predictable, to some of you it is old hat indeed! Those associated with a twelve step program know that conquering addictions begin by living one day at a time. One does not begin with forever in mind: "Let today's own worry be sufficient for the day." (Matt. 6:34)

Those of you, who have successfully negotiated through the morass of unexpected tragedy and grief, know what it means to live one day at a time. Make today count. Those of you who have in the past or are presently experiencing a bewildering illness that will not go away, to end you know not where; well you know what it means to live one day at a time.

Others, sadly, have not learned it yet. They live in the past or in the future, or sadder still they often fail to really live at all. Some of you will think you do not need so obvious a reminder. But wherever you are, whatever you think, let's start our new day together to find the power and peace of Christ. That begins with something so elementary but so essential: living one day at a time. There are many tomorrows but there is only one today.

To live today one day at a time means you must surrender the past. My observation is that most of us are not willing or able to give up the past. Some people retain it because the past is all they ever had. A friend of mine said it this way, "Some people peek too early and all they ever have is that memory of what once was. You know them, the high school athlete who played his/her best ball at 16, the young person he became a CEO at 27 and then wondered at 30 what they were going to do with the rest of their life? I know a preacher he became hugely successful at 28 and by 35 he was caught in a rut from which he never recovered. When Jim Herriot wrote the book, All Things Bright and Beautiful, he caught the image of Mr. Pickersgill, the mature old farmer who as a young man had attended a scholarship summer term up at Oxford, where he was instructed as to what farming was supposed to be. Every spring and every fall and every summer and every winter ever after, for 53 years, to any child and every neighbor, to any guest in the entire house, his conversation began: "When I was up at Oxford, thus and so happened." The way it used to be.

To live one day at a time you must eliminate your past, give up your private pet peeves and categories, and open up to the new surprises of God. "Resentment" AA calls it, the hidden name for what can drive a person to drink. It drives us to a lot of other things. The number one offender of them all is resentment. My resentments, my hidden anger, my fears, they all belong to the past. That's why one of the important steps in recovery is the listing of those angers and resentments and the hurts. To live free you must be free from the past taped-in little voices.

When St. Paul says, "Forgetting what lies behind," that's what he means. His list of what lies behind would have been as long, or longer than anyone you know. He had persecuted Christ's followers. He had authorized murder. He had been a scoundrel, a heretic. He had a long, embarrassing list of things to answer for. He had disappointed himself. He was often on the edge of fury. But he said that God had forgiven all that in Christ, he (Paul) must forgive and forget it to.

I know that this is deep and confusing. But you must say it too, my friend. You must find the reasons why the past continues to dwell in your soul and hopes. Or you will never be free to leave it behind and live this day. You must first forget the past . . . give it up.

Of course you have to learn to give up the future also. Trying to live in tomorrow is as bad as living in yesterday. But, time constrains makes it impossible to deal with that this morning.

I can hear the voices of the Apostle Paul and Dr. King saying it to, "Do something about it today—both men of faith, both executed/assassinated for what they believed and the lives they were leading, both strong men of courage, both with a vision for tomorrow rooted in the past but living life as God gave it to them, one day at a time. Do something today!

Back in 1985 I was asked by a good friend to take part in a Martin Luther King Day service. I was asked to do the closing prayer. We were all seated on the stage. There were people on the program who had known Dr. King personally and others who had read his writing. There were people of all races and ages. It looked to me like everyone up there had some part in the service.

So, we started and we had singers and preachers and poets and historical moments and pretty soon two and a half hours had slipped by and I was thinking, surely the "closing prayer" will be coming soon. Then the last preacher of the day finished up and began looking around and said, "Now, is there anyone else who would like to say a word before the closing prayer?" His eyes began to fall down the row of speakers and settled on George who was seated close to me and I thought, "Please don't call on George." George was a student at the university and was president of the African American student group. He was a studious looking young man, well dressed, wearing thick glasses. The preacher said, "George, do you want to say something?" Well, George had been just sitting there listening and maybe allowing his mind to wander a bit when out of nowhere

he heard his name called. He looked like a deer caught in a pair of headlights. Not expecting to be called on and now hearing his name called, he jumped to his feet but looked very lost.

He stumbled to the podium and said, "Hello, my name is George Jones. I can't praise Dr. King today because I never knew Dr. King. I was just 3 years old when Dr. King died.

My grandmother use to tell me stories about how there were two drinking fountains in all the public places with a sign above them, one for blacks and one for whites, and that Dr. King was responsible for changing all of that. My grandmother can praise Dr. King, I never knew Dr. King.

Others told me stories about restaurant counters that had a section for black folks and another section for white folks and public buses where the black folks had to sit in the back of the bus and how Dr. King ended all of that. They can praise Dr. King. But I have always been able to sit anywhere I wanted in a restaurant and on public buses. I can't praise Dr. King. I never knew Dr. King.

I am a sophomore here at the university and one day I will graduate in economics. I will get a great job and make lots of money and my children will grow up in a prosperous community and they will one day attend this university and get a great education. All of this, I guess, because of what Dr. King started and why we are here today remembering and honoring his memory. But I can't praise Dr. King because I never knew Dr. King. By this time everyone in the audience had woken up and were on their feet stomping and clapping and helping George finish his speech. George had reminded all of us why we were there in that service: that Dr. King had rekindled hope in all of us, when the world looked pretty bleak and hopeless.

Remember the words of the Psalmist: the little couplet:

*This is the day that the Lord has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

It is the only day we have at the moment. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. What we have is the present, the NOW! What are we going to do with it? With the day, each day that the Lord has given us. You have made pretty good use of today already by showing up in worship and maybe even Sunday school class. The Lord calls us to make something of each day, especially on this weekend of service.

Isaac Watt the eighteen century composer took these words ... This is the day... and reminds us of God's intentions,

*This is the day the Lord hath made;
The hours are all God's own;
Let heaven rejoice, let earth be glad,
And praise surround the throne.*