January 21, 2018 **Isaiah 40: 4-5**

Prayer: Dear God, Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

'I Have a Dream'

Two weeks ago, I talked about two of our men -- one black, one white -- who had gotten off the streets.

I tell stories like that to encourage others. To let people know that by working with our social workers and rehab folks, this time next year they could be sober, housed, employed. Life could be different.

Well, Shorty Powell was here and stood up. But Sippio Wardlaw, who *never* misses a Sunday, wasn't here. My family said, "He probably knew what you were going to say and was too embarrassed to come."

I said, "No, I don't think so. He helped me write it."

I was worried about Sippio. So I called him that afternoon and said, "We missed you at church this morning." And he said, "What are you talking about? Isn't today Saturday?"

I explain that so that 1) you aren't worried about Sippio. He's fine. And no more embarrassed than anyone else I brag on.

And 2) to point out that I believe that preaching in this place cannot be interchangeable with preaching in Seattle or Oklahoma City or even in a little country church in Pickens.

I think our worship services must grow out of this place in which we find ourselves.

A place where housed and homeless worship together.

A place where rich and poor and in between have said, “I believe this is what the kingdom of God looks like.”

A place where black and white and occasionally Hispanic and Asian worship together.

Part of what being an integrated church means is perhaps taking Martin Luther King Day a little more seriously than a lot of churches. Of singing “Up to the Mountain.”

This morning, I’m going to call on our friend Melvin Watts to do something that I cannot authentically do – to recite Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

Melvin grew up in Greenville. He lives at the Salvation Army and works at the thrift store across the street. And he has memorized Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

I imagine he has *lived* Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream’’ speech.

But before Melvin comes up, let me re-introduce you to the speech’s context and setting.

It was late August of 1963. John F. Kennedy was president. And the Baptist preacher Martin Luther King Jr. had become the face and voice of the Civil Rights Movement.

A few months earlier, in the spring of 1963, he had been jailed in Birmingham for protesting in that city after a court ordered him not to. During that confinement, he wrote his famous Letter from the Birmingham Jail that took aim at people who were telling him to slow down, to wait, it just wasn’t the right time. He took aim at what he called the “appalling silence of good people.”

Well, when he was released, he undertook a grueling schedule of speeches that summer. He received invitations to support marches and protests and rallies in every community, as well as in other countries. He was flying and speaking and preaching continuously, often many times in a single day.

As any public speaker does, Dr. King had his standard stump speeches, favorite stories, sound bites. Words and phrases and messages that he used often. And one of his favorites was a rhythmic "I have a dream" litany.

In churches and rallies all around the country, he'd pull out his dream for the future, a dream of racial and economic equality.

But in late August of 1963, he was to be the last speaker at the long-awaited March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This was too important, he decided, to use his standard rhetoric. Everybody'd heard it, he thought.

He'd write something new. And he did. He wrote a speech surrounding the imagery of a bad check written to black people in America. A check that came back marked "insufficient funds."

Nowhere in that original March on Washington script were the words "I have a dream."

But on that hot summer day on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, with a quarter million people present and TV covering it, Dr. King got near the end of his speech and wasn't satisfied.

According to some biographers, it was because people were bored and not responding.

According to others, it was because they *were* responding, and he was energized to engage with them on a more familiar level. With the more familiar style of the black Baptist preacher who quoted the prophet Isaiah:

4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

So now Melvin is going to tell us what Dr. King said that day when he quoted Isaiah's call for justice and veered off script.

Melvin recites "I Have a Dream" in its entirety.

On Friday, I sat next to speaker Nontombi Naomi Tutu at an MLK breakfast at Furman. Naomi Tutu is the daughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, one of the heroes of South Africa's ending of apartheid.

As South Africa struggled to get over the ugly legacy of apartheid, the country held hearings by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In those hearings stories came out about

brutality and murder, about child killings and burnings. And stories came out about survival and courage, about generosity and forgiveness.

But one of the things Ms. Tutu found most telling was a letter from a young white man, who wrote that he had not known what was happening in his homeland.

Did not know that black children were starving.

Did not know that families were ripped apart to work migrant labor.

Did not know that police tortured and murdered people.

Did not know that child protesters were killed.

This young man was raised by a domestic worker who left her own children alone in order to work for his family. "I now realize," he wrote, "that I chose not to know."

I chose not to know.

America in 1963. South Africa in 1993. South Carolina in 2018.

What do we choose not to know? What are we appallingly silent about?

In every culture, in every era, people have called for justice. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, prophets have been calling for justice, calling for a reversal of mountains and valleys and rough places, since the beginning of prophecy.

19th century preacher and abolitionist Theodore Parker said: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

Those of us who believe in a just God believe it must be so.

Let us choose to know what is happening around us. Amen.