

“Not Alone”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
Epiphany 2 – January 14, 2024
1 Samuel 3:1-20, Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17, John 1:43-51

It was January 27, 1956. A cold night in Alabama a little over a month after the Montgomery bus boycott had begun, following Rosa Parks’ arrest for not giving up her seat on a bus. As one of the leaders of the boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been receiving death threats by mail and phone, often at night. He was usually able to hang up the phone and go back to sleep, but on that night, while his wife and 7-week old daughter slept nearby, a particularly ugly call came, the voice on the other end threatening that if he didn’t leave Montgomery in three days, they would blow up his house and blow his brains out.

In his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, King describes what happened next, “I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’

“At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”

Three nights later, while King was at the First Baptist Church, word came that his house had been bombed. His wife and daughter were not hurt. He writes,

“Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it. I interrupted the collection and asked all present to give me their undivided attention. After telling them why I had to leave, I urged each person to go straight home after the meeting and adhere strictly to our philosophy of nonviolence. I admonished them not to become panicky and lose their heads. ‘Let us keep moving,’ I urged them, ‘with the faith that what we are doing is right, and with the even greater faith that God is with us in the struggle.’”

When a crowd formed outside his damaged home later that night clamoring for revenge, King stood on the porch and said, "We must meet hate with love. Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop because God is with this movement. Go home with this glorious faith and radiant assurance."

If he had lived, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would have turned 95 tomorrow. Instead, he continued standing up for righteousness, continued standing up for truth, and continued knowing God was with him until he was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

While in Memphis, supporting the striking sanitation workers, on the night before he died, King gave what would be his final speech. He finished with the words, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

“I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man.” It sounds like King may have had a sense of what was about to happen, and he knew God would be at his side through it. When he was at one of his lowest points, exhausted and afraid and ready to give up, he turned to God. That’s how he had the strength and the courage to do the things he did. That’s how he faced dogs and fire hoses and jail time. That’s how he stood up again and again to march against injustice and how he kept his commitment to nonviolence even in the face of violence used against him and his followers. He was a modern-day prophet, and like the ancient prophets, he spoke God’s word, even when it was dangerous for him to do so.

That’s what people can do when they know God and are known by God, when they listen to God and they act on what they hear, when they put their faith in God even when they are afraid.

Prophets like Samuel also put themselves in God's hands. Samuel was only a boy when he heard God calling his name. The very first message he received was a hard one. God told him that his mentor Eli's sons were going to die for their blasphemy and that Eli's descendants would be punished forever because he didn't stop his sons from their wrongdoing. Imagine having to share that message! But with a little encouragement from Eli, Samuel gave him the bad news, and he did so again and again throughout his life, warning the Israelites when they were straying from the will of God, cautioning them against their desire to forsake God in favor of a king, admonishing Saul when he stopped obeying God, finding a replacement and anointing David king when Saul failed to follow God's commands.

The Bible is full of stories about people whom God calls to do hard things both large and small. Not everyone is called to be a prophet or martyr or to do mighty deeds. But God does call each of us to listen, to stand up for righteousness and truth, to say and do hard things, with God's help. Martin Luther King didn't do what he did alone. Samuel didn't do what he did alone. Jesus didn't do what he did alone.

In Psalm 139 we hear, "LORD, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar."

God knows us, inside and out.

God knows when we're worried and exhausted and afraid.

God knows us when we're sitting under the fig tree alone.

God knows us when we're standing up for what we believe is right.

God knows us when we're being honest.

God knows us when we're skeptical and full of doubt.

God is with us when the threats come at midnight.

God is with us when we despair.

God is with us when we win the day.

God is with us when we lose.

God is with us in our living.

God is with us in our dying.

God is with us.

The question for us is: Are we with God?