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Church

St. John's Episcopal

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Sunday

Martin Luther King, Jr.

GOD ON THE LEVEL

"Christ has no body now but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which

Christ's compassion must look out on the world.

Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless us now."

(A prayer attributed to Theresa of Avila forwarded by Herb Prem)

Today's gospel from Luke is sometimes referred to as the "Sermon on the Plain". It is the scriptural sister of Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount". Matthew's version occurs on a high place and addresses profound spiritual questions. He writes, "Blessed are the poor *in spirit* for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke's Jesus imparts a similar but different teaching not high up on sacred mountains but in the valley where dark shadows fall.

Jesus chooses the twelve on high ground and then descends onto a level place. Crowds come from all over; from Judea and Jerusalem, and from the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon as well. They represent *all* humanity. They do not live in lofty and transcendental places. They are honest, oppressed and needy. They come to Jesus on *the plain* where the struggle for survival is intense and sometimes desperate.

The crowds are enormous. They come to hear, to be healed, to be cleansed of unclean spirits. Maybe they don't know why they have come, but they are drawn there. They try to touch Jesus to receive his healing power. Then Jesus speaks to the newly recruited disciples and to the multitude. In straight talk, he says, "Blessed are *you* who are poor." Consistent with his prophetic embrace of justice, Luke's Jesus is literally and metaphorically "on the level". He meets people where they are in their struggles. And they are poor. And they are hungry. And they are weeping. Can you relate to this scene? Jesus names their needs and offers strength and comfort. He says that the poor belong to the kingdom of God; that the hungry will be filled; and that those who weep will laugh.

During the last five days, images of death and unbelievable suffering in Haiti have entered our hearts and minds. We have seen poverty, hunger and unbridled grief. We have seen anger, frustration and chaos. We have also seen an almost unprecedented outpouring of compassion, prayer and material generosity from individuals and nations around the world. Port au Prince is now "the level place". In fact, much of it is only a few feet above sea level.

Historically designed for several hundred thousand city dwellers, two million people have emigrated there as refugees from rural poverty only to encounter favela poverty. Haiti is the poorest nation in the western hemisphere. Much of Port au Prince and surrounding towns have been destroyed by the earthquake on Tuesday. There is no more level place on earth at this moment. Can we make a connection between the people Jesus encounters on the plain and the profound dislocation and sadness, the chaos and desperation found in Port au Prince today? Can we make a connection between the love that Jesus extends to those who come to him on the plain and those right now in Haiti who are striving mightily day and night to bring food, water, medicine, comfort, order and long term support for rebuilding? What is the connection here? What is it about human catastrophes that bring us close to God in ourselves and in our neighbors? Living *on the level* implies a willingness to enter into the pain of others, and to re-discover our own common, suffering humanity. Leaving behind self-interest even for a moment, we move towards empathy and compassion and the spirit of God. The psalmist writes, "Mercy and truth have met together." (*Psalms 85*) There is a sacred crossroads where reality and compassion meet. Some wonder, where is God in Port au Prince? But the real question is ... where is God *not* in Port au Prince?

Regarding the meeting between hopeless nation and a hope-filled God, the prophet Isaiah says,

“Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and *all* people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the lord has spoken.”

For two thousand and five hundred years, these inspiring words have planted themselves in the souls of countless generations of the faithful as well as in the hearts of the downtrodden and the despondent. Their transformative power was cherished by Martin Luther King, Jr. whom we remember with gratitude today. King saw the brutal legacy and consequences of slavery and racism and strove to make gains towards equality and justice.

He was like the watchman in *Habakkuk* who stood at his watch-post to see what God would show him. The watchman waited for the Lord and he answered, “Write the vision; make it plain on the tablets...For there is still a vision for the appointed time.” Martin showed us the vision and the dream. We have made a little progress ... but not much. We have bought a little time ... but not much. We have seen a little of the glory of God and of the compassion of humankind, but not enough.

Why do we need King? Not for sentimental recollection or politically correct canonization; but we need Martin as a shining example of great courage and clear vision who still calls forth in us something that says ... we have not come far enough, we can do better, we have more to learn about freedom and

the work it takes; more to sacrifice in letting go of a tenacious world-view that puts ourselves at the center, and much more to receive in the blessings that come from disarming ourselves and being open and generous.

King's most famous speech was delivered on a level place, the mall in Washington DC, with pools of water reflecting the Lincoln Memorial. It was a sermon on the plain given to hundreds of thousands of people many of whom had traveled hundreds or thousands of miles to be there, people who hungered for an overthrow of the old and familiar way of seeing things and who longed for a new highway from God that would lead them ahead to a new land with liberty and justice for all.

We still need King. We still need his bright star of hope. We still need to love what he loved. We still need his embrace of non-violence and courageous engagement with those we see as personal or political enemies.

The following excerpts from his acceptance speech of the Noble Peace Prize in Oslo remind us of some gains that have been made but, more importantly, like the vision of Isaiah, they call us still to fulfill the promises of the dream.

"I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history...

I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events that surround him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality...

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. ... I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme

among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits... I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land.

"And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid." I still believe that *We Shall overcome!*"

Luke 6:17 ff Sermon on the Plain

¹⁷He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²²"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophet.