

John 1:29-42  
 I Corinthians 1:1-9  
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### Strength for the Journey

A young boy had just gotten his driving permit. He asked his father who was a minister, if they could discuss the use of the car. His father took him to his study and said to him, "I'll make a deal with you. You bring your grades up, study your Bible a little and get your hair cut and we'll talk about it." After about a month the boy came back and again asked his father if they could discuss use of the car.

"Son, I've been real proud of you. You have brought your grades up, you've studied your bible diligently, but you didn't get your hair cut!" The young man waited a moment and replied, "You know Dad, I've been thinking about that. You know, Samson had long hair, Moses had long hair, Noah had long hair, and even Jesus had long hair!"

To which his father replied... "Yes, you're right... and they also WALKED everywhere they went!"

The apostle Paul was nothing if not a great encourager. His letters to the church in Corinth among others reminded people what God had done for them and often gave them – and us – a prod in the conscience as to how to live faithfully. Paul goes to extremes at times – probably why he found himself in prison so often where he wrote those prolific letters of which I'm sure we only have a few. How did he keep the faith? Jailed, beaten, ostracized - how does anyone keep the faith in horrible conditions?

There is no simple answer. It has been said in many ways that our bodies can be imprisoned but no one can quench our spirit. Jesus knew this. The gospel calls him the "lamb of God" who became a liberating sacrifice – just as the Passover lamb signaled protection and deliverance for Israel. He knew his body was transient. His Spirit, we know, would be eternal.

Paul knew this. He was grounded in scripture and community and conviction even though his physical freedom was curtailed. Which is why he could write from prison words that come down to us even today. You have been given the grace of God! You have the strength that Jesus gives! You have spiritual gifts...each and every one of you! Don't let them go to waste. Never forget - "God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (I Cor 1:9)

Keeping the faith is up to our spirits – in our spirit is our strength, perhaps because in some inexplicable way that is how we are linked to the Divine.

On this weekend that we remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. we recognize a man who kept the faith – even though he was beaten and imprisoned. A man whose spirit could not be quenched who was a truth-teller and an encourager. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

The question of keeping the faith is an eternal one – and it was on my mind knowing some of the losses we have faced as a community and knowing of the challenges we have to meet. So it is fitting to look at bit at some of what inspired Dr. King and at what he had to say – to encourage us, too, in our own wrestling and struggles. It begins with spirituality.

"The spirituality of Martin King . . . was the spirituality of wrestling with the angels, the angels within and the angels around. The demonic angels and the divine angels. No spirituality without wrestling—that's where King was coming from. That spirituality came directly out of the gospel of Luke: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me." [to quote Dr. King] And what is the spirit upon me for? So I can jump and scream and shout and sing? Yes,

maybe that. But right then, in Montgomery, Alabama, the spirituality began, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me" so that I can go and stand with the poor, with the messed up, with the beaten up, with the downtrodden.'

'That was King's spirituality. A spirituality that makes it impossible for you to avoid the folks in trouble. A spirituality to work with the poor, to be with the prisoners, to stay close to the brokenhearted . . . ' (Harding)

Dr. King was inspired by Howard Thurman and embodied this belief: "If you are living the spirit of Jesus, then you cannot live in the spirit of fear, you cannot live in the spirit of deception, even for good causes; you cannot live in the spirit of hatred. None of those is the way of Jesus." (Harding)

It is Jesus who showed us the way and today gives us strength for the journey ahead, whatever we may face. We have come together in the past with purpose. What next will God have us do and be? Dr. King wrote a very long letter from Birmingham Jail and this one paragraph teaches and challenges . . .

(Letter from Birmingham Jail)

"There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment.

They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are."

Maybe the question ought to be: "What is so important to stand up for that our faith will need to give us strength?"

Howard Thurman wrote about life in this country and the kind of spirituality needed to live it. From *The Luminous Darkness* (Harding)

"It may be, I don't know, that to experience oneself as a human being is one with experiencing one's fellows as human beings. It means that the individual must have a sense of kinship to life that transcends and goes beyond the immediate kinship of family or the organic kinship that binds him [or her] ethnically or "racially" or nationally . . . As a human being, then, he belongs to life and the whole kingdom of life that includes all that lives and perhaps, also, all that has ever lived. In other words, he sees himself as a part of a continuing, breathing, living existence. To be a human being, then, is to be essentially alive in a living world."

Alive with God's life in the world...that is what Jesus showed us. That is what these men of deep faith and conviction showed us. Now it's our turn. What will we show the world about who we are and what we believe?

"Even though we must face difficulties to today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed — we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women] are created equal."

“This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning—‘my country, ’tis of thee; sweet land of liberty; of thee I sing; land where my fathers died; land of the pilgrim’s pride; from every mountainside, let freedom ring.’” (I Have A Dream speech)

Dangerous Spirituality, by Vincent Harding | January-February 1999 Sojourners