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## **The Last 31 Hours of a Contemporary Prophet**

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In 2018, Beacon Press, our UU publishing house, published a book in memory of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Dr. King titled Redemption: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Last 31 Hours by Joseph Rosenbloom. I had originally planned to preach a sermon inspired by that book two years ago for that fiftieth anniversary, but a confluence of scheduling complications prevented it. I am, however, grateful for the opportunity on this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend to revisit this significant topic.

Why thirty-one hours? That is the length of time from when Dr. King's plane landed in Memphis, Tennessee around 9:00 a.m. on April 3 until the moment of his assassination at 6:01 p.m. on April 4, 1968 (x).

Compared to his final days, most people are much more familiar with the earlier years of Dr. King's career. In 1955, he was twenty-six years old with a newly minted Ph.D. from Boston University, and had only recently been called to serve as the minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He quickly rose to national attention through his leadership in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began that December (1). Thirteen years later, in 1968, King was building up to the toughest challenge of his life: the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C..

But the Poor People's Campaign wasn't scheduled to start until May, and King was in Memphis for a Sanitation Workers' Strike. The strike had begun on February 12, prior to Dr. King's involvement (3). King arrived in Memphis for the first of three times on March 18, more than a month into the strike. He had been invited to speak at a rally in support of the strikers (viii).

Another ten days later, on March 28, he flew back to Memphis for a second time to lead a nonviolent march in support of the strike, but the march ignited into a violent uprising almost as soon as it began. “Windows were smashed, many downtown stores looted” (2). “Police responded with clubs, tear gas, and guns. Four looters were shot, one fatally. Five police officers were hospitalized, and about sixty other people received medical care for their injuries” (4).

King was devastated, and his reputation was at risk. He had developed a track record as a leader who could maintain a nonviolent approach to Civil Disobedience. If he became unable to control the crowds, his plans would be in jeopardy for the Poor People’s Campaign, which was the next key part of his plan for moving this world closer to beloved community. Many of his advisors urged him to cut his losses in Memphis and focus fully on the Poor People’s Campaign, but King insisted on returning to Memphis on April 3 to hold another march and do everything in his power to maintain nonviolence (viii).

It can be difficult today to appreciate how dire King’s situation was fifty years ago. Here in our time, we know that there is a statue of Dr. King on the national mall, his birthday is a federal holiday, and many people—well, at least many white people—look back nostalgically on a selective memory of King that primarily centers on the final section of his 1963 “I Have a Dream Speech.” This perspective obscures the much more radical King present all along, that King was revealing much more publicly in his final years.

Five years after his “I Have a Dream” speech, three years after his last major success with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, here’s a little more about the actual situation on the ground in April 1968: “The book King published six months earlier, *Where do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, sold poorly, and many reviewers panned it. For the first time in a decade [his name] did not appear on the Gallup Poll annual list of the ten most admired Americans” (6). Following the riots in Memphis, his name was back in the spotlight, but the publicity was extremely negative (7).

In response, for a brief period, King sank into a depression that was worse than any he had previously experienced (7). And relatedly it is worth recalling how hard he

had been pushing himself and for how long. At least once annually for the past four years, King's doctors had ordered him to days of bed rest for extreme exhaustion (5).

To give you an example of why, I will limit myself to the week preceding his first speech in Memphis on March 18. In that week alone, King

barnstormed from one small airport to another in a chartered, twin-engine Cessna 40...delivering thirty-five speeches at stops from Michigan to California. The schedule for a single day, March 19, sounds like the booking of a week or two for [a musician on tour]. Starting in the early morning, he crisscrossed a large swatch of Mississippi. He spoke at small African American churches in Batesville, Marks, Clarksdale, Greenwood, Grenada, and Laurel, finally reaching Hattiesburg and a bed close to midnight.... (12)

On many days he hardly slept (82).

King could've skipped the struggle in Memphis, but he felt that the sanitation workers's strike was too connected to the heart of the Poor People's Campaign. The plight of the 1,300 Memphis sanitation workers's was at the intersection of race and class: *systemic racism* was at the root of a conflict in which all the street-level workers were black, and the supervisors (who worked in offices) were all white—and *classism* allowed a situation to continue in which the workers did not earn a "living wage" sufficient to support their families.

As King would emphasize in his March 18th speech on their behalf, "**It is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages**" (37). Or to quote another of King's favorite sayings, "What does it profit a man to be able to sit at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee" (85).

Just as the Civil Rights Movement had helped catalyze the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, King's dream was that the Poor People's Campaign would help create the political will for a "federal antipoverty budget of ten or twelve billion dollars. By contrast, President Johnson's 'war on poverty,' which he had launched in 1965, cost \$2.4 billion a year (pared to \$1.8 billion in later years owing to the fiscal drain of the Vietnam War) (86). And here we can see why King used

to speak of racism, materialism, and militarism as the “triple threats” that most consistently hold us back from building a beloved community.

King’s plan for the Poor People’s Campaign was to set up tent cities on the national mall, filled up with poor people from all over the country, and to use those tent cities as staging grounds for sending nonviolent protesters into the streets, parks, and office building of our nation’s capital. In his words, they would “plague” Washington as long as it took to convince our nation’s leaders to prioritize antipoverty legislation (11).

The truth is, however, that King did not expect either Congress or the President to relent. He confided in those closest to him that, “He expected the powers that be to come down heavily on him in Washington. He expected that his civil disobedience would land him in jail yet again.” King was told, “If we get locked up in jail, it’s not going to be any thirty or sixty days. You’re going to get three to five years.” King replied, “That would be just the right amount of time. We would be strong enough, spirituality, coming out of jail to really transform this nation” (166).

If we are honest about Dr. King’s dream, it is important to be clear that he was not a capitalist. As a minister, his understanding of what following the example of Jesus actually mean included a form of democratic socialism, which in the Christian tradition is called the social gospel (87, 162).

Dr. King lived out those values at significant cost to his family:

Honoraria from his speaking engagements poured in at the rate of \$200,000 or more a year. [That’s the equivalent of \$1.4 million today.] But he kept only a tiny fraction for himself. The rest he diverted to the SCLC (“Southern Christian Leadership Conference”) treasury. He allowed himself an income of \$10,000 - \$12,000 a year.... [The equivalent today is \$88,000.] He donated all of his \$54,000 in Nobel Prize money to the movement [the equivalent today is \$400,000],

in spite of Coretta’s strong urgings to save some of that money for the children’s educations (129).

There is so much more to say about Dr. King, but I want to be sure we get both to his final moments, and his legacy. On Thursday, April 4, 1968, a few minutes before 6:00 p.m., the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stepped out of Room 306 at the Lorraine

Motel in Memphis to the second-story balcony. The temperature was in the mid-fifties, and Dr. King was dressed in his usual dark suit. He had on a conservative yellow and black tie (Rosenbloom 155).

He was preparing to go to a party at the home of the Rev. Billy Kyles, a local minister in Memphis. There had been some conflict between King and the Rev. Jesse Jackson in the preceding days, and when King saw Jackson in the parking lot, he shouted: "Jesse, I want you to come to dinner with me." Before Jackson could respond, Kyles said, "Jesse already took care of that." Jackson was intending to go to that party whether King wanted him to or not!

King, not to be outdone, added, "Jesse, we're going to Billy Kyles's, and you don't even have a tie on." (Jackson had on a turtleneck and jacket.) Undeterred, Jackson quipped back, "The prerequisite to eating is an appetite, not a tie." King laughed and said, "You're crazy."

King then turned his attention to Ben Branch, the bandleader, who was beside Jackson, and said, "Ben, I want you to play 'Precious Lord' for me tonight." It was one of King's favorite songs, and he would have known that it had been originally written by a hymn writer crying out in grief over the deaths of his wife and newborn son.

King said, "Sing it real pretty." Branch assured him, "I sure will" (156).

Before King could say another word, a bullet hit him, and he fell. It was 6:01 p.m.

*Precious Lord, take my hand\**

Not many people knew that only days before Dr. King chose to return to Memphis to be in solidarity with the sanitation workers strike, he had been offered what was once his dream job. King had been invited to take a much-deserved one-year sabbatical as the interim pastor of New York City's Riverside Church, renowned for its commitment to social justice. If he had accepted that offer, he would not have been in Memphis that night.

*I am tired, I am weak, I am worn*

On April 4, 1967, precisely one year before his assassination, Dr. King had ascended to that historic Riverside pulpit and preached his most radical sermon to date, titled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence."

*Through the storm, through the night*

He declined the offer of a sabbatical because it would take him too far from the front lines of the struggle for social justice (158).

*Lead me on through the light*

If King were alive today, he would have celebrated his ninety-first birthday this past Wednesday. I am always shocked to remember that he was only thirty-nine years old when he was killed: that's two years *younger* than I am standing before you today.

*Take my hand, precious Lord, And lead me home*

To share an excerpt from a [social media post by a contemporary community organizer](#):

King's leadership is a North Star. He taught us not about a sterile "civility" but about revolutionary love!

*When my way grows drear*

King showed that we can engage in fierce conflict — marching, sitting in, boycotting, going on strike, shutting it down! — and still love and respect our opponents: even those who hate and seek to harm us. We do this not because it's nice or comfy or proper, but because it's...powerful.

*Precious Lord, lead me near*

When King was assassinated, he was in the midst of organizing a multi-racial Poor Peoples Campaign to confront what he called the "giant triplets of evil" — systemic racism, poverty, and militarism.... [If he were alive today, he would've added ecological devastation to that list. Remember that King was killed prior to the first Earth Day.]

*When my life is almost gone*

Another part of what King's legacy means in this moment is that we must be able to lead with love, to disagree with mutual respect, and to put the suffering of those who are hurting the most first.... When King was killed he was in Memphis, supporting striking black sanitation workers — garbage men, two of whom had been crushed to death by a [trash] compactor — in their fight for basic dignity. Who is hurting the most in America today? There's no one answer, but a group that comes to my heart are the migrant children who have fled desperate circumstances

only to find themselves detained in cages by our government, forcibly separated from their parents....

*At the river I will stand*

If you truly respect Dr. King, ask yourself what he would do now?

*Guide my feet, hold my hand*

We must lead with love. Rather than assuming the worst in others, we must reach graciously for the good in them. If King could live and die to build a beloved community of justice in which the segregationists who threatened his life might also be redeemed, we can rise above [the toxicity of this political moment] to show what principled, generous, mature leadership with our eyes on the prize of political revolution looks like—for our democracy, for the climate and our planet, for the prospects of a just, multi-racial America! As Dr. King said, “We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.”

*Take my hand, precious Lord, And lead me home*

Dr. King was taken from us too soon, but his legacy lives on. It is *our time now* to continue the work to which he called us of building the world we dream about.

\* I owe the idea of interspersing text between lines of this hymn to a meditation from my colleague The Rev. Barbara Hoag Gadon.