

"The Death of Evil upon the Seashore," Sermon Delivered at the Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving, Cathedral of St. John the Divine

Author:

King, Martin Luther, Jr.

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Location:

New York, N.Y.

Genre:

Sermon

Topic:

Martin Luther King, Jr. - Career in Ministry

Details

King delivered this sermon at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, headquarters of the Episcopal diocese of New York State, in an ecumenical program commemorating the second anniversary of the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision in Brown v. Board of Education. Twelve thousand people attended the event; several other ministers shared the platform with King, including O. Clay Maxwell, Sr., pastor of Mount Olivet Baptist Church, and James A. Pike, dean of the cathedral. Later that evening, with his parents in attendance, King delivered "A Realistic Look at Race Relations" at the annual dinner sponsored by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, held to commemorate the Brown decision.¹

King had preached "Death of Evil upon the Seashore" at least twice in the past, including once at Dexter in 1954.² King tells the biblical story of the exodus from Egypt, comparing the Israelites' captivity with the plight of African Americans. "Many years ago the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation," he writes, but "through a world shaking decree by the nine justices of the Supreme Court of America . . . the Red Sea was opened and the forces of justice marched through to the other side." King remembered the program as "one of the greatest experiences of my life." His listeners' praise was equally effusive: Dean Pike called King's presentation the "greatest sermon" he had ever heard.³ The text reprinted here was probably published by the organizing committee, which received King's address

*several days before the event. The sermon also appeared in the National Baptist Voice and in a FOR pamphlet.*⁴

“And Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore.”—Exodus 14:30

There is hardly anything more obvious than the fact that evil is present in the universe. It projects its nagging, prehensile tentacles into every level of human existence. We may debate over the origin of evil, but only the person victimized with a superficial optimism will debate over its reality. Evil is with us as a stark, grim, and colossal reality.

The Bible affirms the reality of evil in glaring terms. It symbolically pictures it in the work of a serpent which comes to inject a discord into the beautiful, harmonious symphony of life in a garden. It sees it in nagging tares disrupting the orderly growth of stately wheat. It sees it in a ruthless mob hanging the world's most precious character on a cross between two thieves. The Bible is crystal clear in its perception of evil.

But we need not stop with the glaring examples of the Bible to establish the reality of evil; we need only to look out into the wide arena of everyday life. We have seen evil in tragic lust and inordinate selfishness. We have seen it in high places where men are willing to sacrifice truth on the altars of their self-interest. We have seen it in imperialistic nations trampling over other nations with the iron feet of oppression. We have seen it clothed in the garments of calamitous wars which left battlefields painted with blood, filled nations with widows and orphans, and sent men home physically handicapped and psychologically wrecked. We have seen evil in all of its tragic dimensions.

So in a sense, the whole history of life is the history of a struggle between good and evil. There seems to be a tension at the very core of the universe. All the great religions have seen this tension at the center of life. Hinduism called it a conflict between illusion and reality; Zoroastrianism looked upon it as a tension between the god of light and the god of darkness; Platonism called it a conflict between spirit and matter; traditional Judaism and Christianity called it a conflict between God and Satan.⁵ Each of these religions recognized that in the midst of the upward climb of goodness there is the down pull of evil.

The Hebraic Christian tradition is clear, however, in affirming that in the long struggle between good and evil, good eventually emerges as the

victor. Evil is ultimately doomed by the powerful, insurgent forces of good. Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter. A mythical Satan, through the work of a conniving serpent, may gain the allegiance of man for a period, but ultimately he must give way to the magnetic redemptive power of a humble servant on an uplifted cross. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Biblical religion recognized long ago what William Cullen Bryant came to see in the modern world: "Truth crushed to earth will rise again;" and what Carlyle came to see: "No lie can live forever."⁶

A graphic example of this truth is found in an incident in the early history of the Hebrew people. You will remember that at a very early stage in her history the children of Israel were reduced to the bondage of physical slavery under the gripping yoke of Egyptian rule. Egypt was the symbol of evil in the form of humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation and crushing domination. The Israelites symbolized goodness, in the form of devotion and dedication to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These two forces were in a continual struggle against each other—Egypt struggling to maintain her oppressive yoke and Israel struggling to gain freedom from this yoke. Finally, however, these Israelites, through the providence of God, were able to cross the Red Sea, and thereby get out of the hands of Egyptian rule. The Egyptians, in a desperate attempt to prevent the Israelites from escaping, had their armies to go in the Red Sea behind them. But as soon as the Egyptians got into the Red Sea the parted waves swept back upon them, and the rushing waters of the sea soon drowned all of them. As the Israelites looked back all they could see was here and there a poor drowned body beaten upon the seashore. For the Israelites, this was a great moment. It was the end of a frightful period in their history.⁷ It was a joyous daybreak that had come to end the long night of their captivity.

This story symbolizes something basic about the universe. It symbolizes something much deeper than the drowning of a few men, for no one can rejoice at the death or the defeat of a human person. This story, at bottom, symbolizes the death of evil. It was the death of inhuman oppression and ungodly exploitation.

The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good. There is something in the very nature of the universe which is on the side of Israel in its struggle with every Egypt. There is something in the very nature of the universe which ultimately comes to the aid of goodness in its perennial struggle with evil. There is something in this universe which justifies James Russell Lowell in saying:

Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong
forever on the throne
yet that scaffold sways the future
and behind the dim unknown stands God
within the shadow
Keeping watch above His own.⁸

Notice how we have seen the truth of this text revealed in the contemporary struggle between good, in the form of freedom and justice, and evil, in the form of oppression and colonialism. Gradually we have seen the forces of freedom and justice emerge victoriously out of some Red Sea, only to look back and see the forces of oppression and colonialism dead upon the seashore. There are approximately 2,400,000,000 people in the world today. The vast majority of these people are found in Africa and Asia. More than 1,400,000,000 of the peoples of the world are found on these two continents. Fifty years ago most of these people were dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated by some foreign power. There were 400,000,000 persons in India and Pakistan under the iron feet of British rule. There were 600,000,000 persons in China under the gripping yoke of British, Dutch and French rule. There were 100,000,000 persons in Indonesia under the oppressive hands of Dutch rule. There were 200,000,000 persons in Africa dominated and exploited by the British, the Belgium, the French, and the Dutch. The great struggle of the Twentieth Century has been between these exploited masses questing for freedom and the colonial powers seeking to maintain their domination.⁹

What we are seeing now in this struggle is the gradual victory of the forces of freedom and justice. The Red Sea has opened, and today most of these exploited masses have won their freedom from the Egypt of colonialism and are now free to move toward the promised land of economic security and cultural development. As they look back, they

clearly see the evils of colonialism and imperialism dead upon the seashore.

In our own struggle for freedom and justice in this country we have gradually seen the death of evil. Many years ago the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation, and his great struggle has been to free himself from the crippling restrictions and paralyzing effects of this vicious system. For years it looked like he would never get out of this Egypt. The closed Red Sea always stood before him with discouraging dimensions. There were always those Pharaohs with hardened hearts, who, despite the cries of many a Moses, refused to let these people go. But one day, through a world shaking decree by the nine justices of the Supreme Court of America and an awakened moral conscience of many White persons of good will, backed up by the Providence of God, the Red Sea was opened, and the forces of justice marched through to the other side. As we look back we see segregation caught in the rushing waters of historical necessity. Evil in the form of injustice and exploitation cannot survive. There is a Red Sea in history that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory, and that same Red Sea closes in to bring doom and destruction to the forces of evil.

This is our hope. This is the hope and conviction that all men of goodwill live by. It is at bottom the conviction that all reality hinges on moral foundations and that the whole cosmic universe has spiritual control.¹⁰ It is therefore fitting and proper that we assemble here, just two years after the Supreme Court's momentous decision on desegregation, and praise God for His power and the greatness of His purpose, and pray that we gain the vision and the will to be His co-workers in this struggle.

Let us not despair. Let us not lose faith in man and certainly not in God. We must believe that a prejudiced mind can be changed, and that man, by the grace of God, can be lifted from the valley of hate to the high mountain of love.

Let us remember that as we struggle against Egypt, we must have love, compassion and understanding goodwill for those against whom we struggle, helping them to realize that as we seek to defeat the evils of Egypt we are not seeking to defeat them but to help them, as well as ourselves.

God has a great plan for this world. His purpose is to achieve a world where all men will live together as brothers, and where every man recognizes the dignity and worth of all human personality. He is seeking at every moment of His existence to lift men from the bondage of some evil Egypt, carrying them through the wilderness of discipline, and finally to the promised land of personal and social integration. May it not be that this is entirely within the realm of possibility? I prefer to live by the faith that the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever,¹¹

Hallelujah!

Hallelujah!

^{1.} An edited version of the speech was reprinted in the *Socialist Call* as "The 'New Negro' of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story," June 1956, pp. 280-286 in this volume.

^{2.} He later expanded and revised the sermon for publication in *Strength to Love*, pp. 76-85.

^{3.} See King to George W. Lawrence, 4 June 1956, and Lawrence to King, 15 June 1956, pp. 291 and 296-297 in this volume.

^{4.} King sent an advance typed version of the sermon to George W. Lawrence for publicity purposes (King to Lawrence, 14 May 1956). It was also published in the *National Baptist Voice*, June 1956.

^{5.} Cf. Harry Emerson Fosdick, "How to Believe in a Good God in a World Like This," in *Living Under Tension* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), p. 216: "All the great religions have so pictured life in terms of conflict. Hinduism called it a conflict between reality and illusion; Zoroastrianism a conflict between light and darkness; Platonism a conflict between spirit and matter; traditional Judaism and Christianity a conflict between God and Satan."

^{6.} William Cullen Bryant, *The Battlefield* (1839), stanza 9. King probably paraphrases Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837); see note 3 to "Rediscovering Lost Values," 28 February 1954, in *Papers* 2:253.

^{7.} Cf. Phillips Brooks, "The Egyptians Dead upon the Seashore," in *Selected Sermons*, ed. William Scarlett (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1949),

p. 105: “The parted waves had swept back upon the host of the pursuers. The tumult and terror, which had rent the air, had sunk into silence, and all that the escaped people saw was here and there a poor drowned body beaten up upon the bank, where they stood with the great flood between them and the land of their long captivity and oppression. It meant everything to the Israelites. . . . It was the end of a frightful period in their history.”

⁸ James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis* (1844), stanza 8. This passage, as well as the two earlier ones from Bryant and Carlyle, became commonplace in King’s oratory. Cf. Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Why We Believe in God,” in *On Being Fit to Live With: Sermons on Post-war Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. 94: “There is something in this universe besides matter and motion. There is something here that justifies Carlyle in saying, ‘No Lie can live for ever’; and Shakespeare in saying, ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will’; and Lowell in saying, ‘Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,—/ Yet that scaffold sways the future.’” In the version of “Death of Evil” published in *Strength to Love* (p. 77), King corrected and lengthened the quotation from Thomas Carlyle.

⁹ In subsequent oratory King included similar references to colonialism (see, for example, “The Montgomery Story,” 27 June 1956; “Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony,” 23 July 1956; “The Birth of a New Age,” 11 August 1956; and “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” 3 December 1956, pp. 308, 324, 340-341, and 454 in this volume, respectively).

¹⁰ These two principles form the basis for King’s sermon “Rediscovering Lost Values,” 28 February 1954, in *Papers* 2:248-256.

¹¹ Revelations 11:15.