

*Tyranny, Hope, and Freedom*  
A Sermon on Joel 2:23-32 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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God's desire is for us to live in hope and in freedom. God's concern is for goodness and empowerment for all people. God's desire is for each person to be treated with honor and respect, as people created in God's image.

This is the message behind our passage from the prophet Joel. Joel lived about 500 years before the time of Christ. He was a prophet for the people of Judah after the return of the captives from exile in Babylon. These verses were first heard by the descendants of people who were forced to leave Judah, and forced to live in captivity in Babylon.

So the issues of honor and respect and freedom and empowerment are not secondary issues for them. Their ancestors were not free. Their ancestors did not have the power to choose their destiny. Joel gives them a new message of hope: *I will pour out my spirit on all people; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.* We worship a God who pours out God's spirit on all people, slaves and free, old and young, women and men, immigrants and native people. The story of salvation is a story of the continuous struggle of God's people against the forces of tyranny.

We see those forces of tyranny in the enslavement of the Hebrew people by the Pharaoh of Egypt. We see the forces of tyranny in the assault on Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon. We also see the forces of tyranny within the nation of Israel. We see the forces of tyranny in the corrupt and oppressive rule of many of the kings of Israel.

Even King David, the greatest of all of the kings, acted like a tyrant when he commanded Bathsheba to come to his palace, then forced himself upon her, and then ordered the killing of the man she loved. Reading between the lines of the book of Leviticus, we see that the people of Israel were prone to mistreat vulnerable members of the community. In chapter nineteen of Leviticus the people of Israel are warned, *When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.*

Eventually the mistreatment of the vulnerable extended well beyond the foreigners. One of the primary complaints of prophets such as Amos, Micah, and Isaiah was that wealthy, powerful individuals were abusing and exploiting the poorest, weakest members of the nation of Israel. The struggle against tyranny is a struggle within the heart of each person.

The story of salvation is the story of God creating each person in God's image. It's the story of us struggling to be treated with respect by others. It's the story of us struggling to treat others with respect as persons created in the image of God. The story of salvation is the story of our struggle against the forces of tyranny that seek to oppress us, and the struggle against the forces of tyranny within us.

The struggle against the forces of tyranny is part of our story as Americans. Before the Revolutionary War, the Second Continental Congress created a committee of five of their members to write the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence presents 27 grievances against the king of England. The king had refused to obey laws passed by the Congress. The king had kept standing armies in the colonies in times of peace, without the consent of local governments. The king had cut off their trade with other parts of the world. The king had imposed new taxes on the colonists without the consent of the Continental Congress. I could read the other 23 grievances, but I think you get the idea.

The people of the colonies fought their war against England because of the tyrannical, oppressive rule of King George. So the United States Constitution was created to empower the people and to resist the tendency of those with great amounts of power to act like tyrants.

Of course, the United States Constitution and the people who wrote it were far from perfect. As it was for the Hebrew people, the people of the United States sometimes behaved as tyrants when they had the opportunity. Freedom, empowerment and equality were for the European Colonists, not for the native people. Freedom, empowerment and equality were for the slave owners, not for the slaves who worked in their homes in their fields. Freedom, empowerment and equality were for the people who spoke English, not for the immigrants. Freedom, empowerment and equality were for the men, not for the women.

The struggle for freedom and empowerment has continued through the history of our nation. The Civil War was fought, in part, to end the tyrannical oppression of black Americans. In the decades after the Civil War new barriers to freedom and empowerment were erected to exclude immigrants, native Americans, and black Americans.

The systematic oppression of black Americans came to be known as Jim Crow. All across the United States Jim Crow laws prevented equal access to housing and education and equal protection under the criminal justice system. In southern states Jim Crow laws prevented equal access to the right to vote. White Americans enforced this system of tyranny through violence.

The story of salvation told in Holy Scripture is the story of our struggle against the forces of tyranny that seek to oppress us, and the struggle against the forces of tyranny within us. So it was not by accident that the person who made the most profound contribution to the struggle in America was a Christian pastor. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that the struggle against the forces of tyranny is a spiritual struggle.

Our struggle for freedom, equality and empowerment is the same struggle faced by the Hebrew people when they were trying to escape from slavery in Egypt. Our struggle to treat all persons as individuals created in the image of a loving God is the same struggle faced by the Hebrew people when the author of Leviticus instructed them to treat foreigners as friends and neighbors.

The unique gift brought by Martin Luther King was a spiritual gift. Martin brought hope to the struggle. Tyrants are trying to take hope away from people. Tyrants try to get people to give up, to stop caring. Tyrants try to get people to be cynical, to not believe or trust in anyone or anything.

So Martin's first concern was to encourage hope in the people he served and led. In 1955, when Martin was 26 years old, he was asked to be the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. At the time Martin was pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Eleven months into the Montgomery Bus Boycott Martin preached a sermon titled "The Most Durable Power".

He said, *Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as for yourself.*

Martin helped us see that love and hope are the critical ingredients we need as we work for empowerment and freedom for all of God's people. Martin helped us understand that there is no freedom without love, there is not justice without hope.

Next Sunday we will celebrate All Saints Day. We will take time to honor people who function as saints for us in our lives. Guess who I will be honoring Next Sunday? Martin Luther King, Jr! Likewise, I encourage you to reflect on someone who has been a saint for you in your life, and to remember and honor them during our worship service next Sunday.

Near the end of his sermon Martin said: *I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the*

*end (or the purpose) of life. The end of life is not to be happy...The (purpose) of life is to do the will of God, come what may.*

God has given us the ability to love and to have hope, knowing these will be critical powers as we struggle for respect, empowerment and freedom for all people. It is our task to protect and nurture these most durable powers. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Use only the power of love.