

Beyond the Mountaintop

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The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Commemoration of the Life and Witness of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
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Deuteronomy 34:1, 4-5; John 1:43-51

“Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land. . . .” -- Deuteronomy 34:1

As many of you know, I am generally cautious about allowing events “out there” to dictate what we do “in here.” Worship is meant to form a different kind of world—a world shaped not by fear, domination, or scarcity, but by grace, justice, and love. In here, we rehearse a reality that does not yet fully exist out there, trusting that God uses this rehearsal to reshape us for faithful living.

But there are moments when the world beyond these walls presses so insistently upon our lives that silence would be a form of denial. This weekend, as we remember the life and witness of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we find ourselves again at such a moment.

The news does not surprise us anymore. Violence, injustice, economic precarity, racialized fear, environmental collapse—these have become the background noise of American life. What shocks us is not that these things exist, but how easily we are tempted to accept them as permanent. What demands our attention is not simply the persistence of injustice, but the danger of losing the capacity to imagine something better.

That is why the image of the mountaintop matters.

In Deuteronomy, Moses is brought to the edge of the promised land. After decades of leading a traumatized, stubborn, hopeful people through the wilderness, Moses is given a vision—but not completion. He sees what could be, not what is. The promise is real, but it is unfinished. The future belongs to those who will come after him.

This is not failure. It is vocation.

Moses' life reminds us that faithfulness is not measured by arrival, but by orientation. He spent forty years resisting the hardening of a people's hearts—keeping their faith flexible enough to respond to new realities, new challenges, and new calls from God. What he saw from the mountaintop was not triumph, but possibility: a people capable of becoming a blessing to the world.

Nearly sixty years ago, another servant of God stood on another mountaintop.

In April of 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke words that still echo through Black churches, through freedom movements, and through the unfinished conscience of this nation: "I've been to the mountaintop." King knew, with devastating clarity, that he might not live to see the promised land of justice and equality. And he was right. But he also knew that seeing the promise was enough to sustain the struggle.

For Black Americans especially, that mountaintop vision has never been a guarantee of safety, prosperity, or ease. It has been a costly hope—held in bodies that bear the marks of history, and sustained by faith communities that refused to let suffering have the last word. The Civil Rights Movement did not begin with King's birth and it did not end with King's death; nor did it end with landmark legislation. It continues wherever people insist that dignity is not negotiable.

Here we are in 2026, living with the mixed legacy of progress and backlash, representation and retrenchment, visibility and vulnerability. We know now—if we did not know before—that symbolic victories do not dismantle structural sin. We know that racism adapts, that economic injustice deepens, and that democracy itself requires vigilant care. We know that the promised land is still contested territory.

And yet—we also know this: hope is not naïve optimism. Hope is disciplined, practiced, and often hard-won. Hope, as the church understands it, does not come from evidence alone, but from trust in a God who is still at work beyond what we can see.

Jesus' call to Philip in John's Gospel—"Follow me"—was not a promise of fame. It was an invitation to a movement. To follow is to leave what is familiar, to risk disappointment, and to trust that God's future is larger and brighter than our fears. The movement Jesus started was not Christianity; it was those moving their entire lives, bodies and souls, toward God's realm of peace and non-violent justice, whatever their religious label, social location, or personal history. As Jesus said, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). That, friends, is big-tent religion.

We have been to the mountaintop, you and I. We have glimpsed what justice could look like—in neighborhoods where children are safe, in economies that reward labor with the compensation that it's actually worth, and in communities where Black lives are not merely acknowledged but cherished. And like Moses, like King, like Jesus himself, we are called not simply to admire the view, but to come down the mountain and get to work.

This weekend, we give thanks for those, like Dr. King, who showed us the way, not merely from the mountaintop, but through a sometimes frightening and deeply shadowed valley. And two weeks from now, we will begin our celebration of Black History month with a series of weekly educational and musical events. Tomorrow, we will celebrate courageous lives. And on Tuesday—and Wednesday, and Thursday—we will, together, continue the long, faithful work of building the beloved community not in the promised land but in the promise of God.

Thanks be to God.