

“A *Savior*”

January 18, 2009

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Way back, a thousand years ago, when I was applying to be admitted into Starr King School for the Ministry, there was a question on the application form asking what I thought of Jesus. Our Unitarian Universalist traditions are firmly planted in the liberal Christian traditions, so this was an appropriate question, but it was a pretty hard one to answer.

Since I was also firmly planted in a strong Christian tradition—albeit one *much* more traditional than other Unitarians—I had to consider my new relationship to that mysterious and world-changing man named, Jesus the Christ. That name is a Greek translation of what the Hebrews called “the Messiah”, and what later Christians called “the Savior” of the world, no less.

I wrote in my application essay that I believed that I believed in Jesus the Christ in much the same way I believed in Martin Luther King, Jr. as a modern Christ or savior. That is to say, I believe that there was a man who lived and who taught great truths about the human experience and who was finally killed for those teachings. In the end, I said, Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr. and many other great prophets over the centuries have “saved us” as a human species in their lives, their words and finally, their deaths.

I still believe these things. And now on this great day celebrating the words of one modern savior, namely, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I said that he was, indeed, a savior of us all.

But I also know that, like so many saviors and prophets in our motley and disfigured human history, Martin was murdered for his beliefs and his words and his prophecies. This comes to me whenever I make a *public* announcement about my own beliefs, as in this coming Saturday night when I will be speaking from the pulpit of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the premier African-American congregation in Seattle. Our Music Director, Fred West, has organized a gathering of folks there to celebrate the dawn of a new day in our nation’s history, the Inauguration of President-Elect Barack Obama. Fred asked me to deliver a short comment at that time on my own feelings about it all, and I will do that.

(It turns out that we also have our monthly SoulSong service right here at Shoreline Church on that same evening at that same time. I want you to attend *both* services if you can. Hmmm.)



I’m not entirely sure of what I’m going to say at Saturday’s gathering. After all, just about everything has already been said, often by great orators with silver-tongued language.

I may take part of this sermon with me, maybe the part about MLK being a savior. But since I will be speaking in a powerfully grounded Christian church setting, I must be clear about exactly what a savior is. Indeed, the people at Mt. Zion have a definite answer to that question.

I must revisit the root of the word which is the verb “to save”. I’ve spoken on that theme many times over the years—how the word has multiple meanings, including “to rescue” and “to secure” and “to heal”.

A savior does all these things. All the great saviors in history did something to rescue somebody or something. And the recipients of that salvation are many and varied.

There is such a story in this week's news. For at least 155 people, Capt. Chesney Sullenberger is a savior. He was the pilot of the US Airways jet which ditched into the Hudson River just minutes after taking off, having run into some geese which shut down the engines. New York mayor Bloomberg called the incident "miracle on the Hudson", for Captain Sullenberger, "Sully", miraculously, safely set the plane down in the water and led everyone out of it, to be rescued by a fleet of ferries. He went through the plan twice to make sure everyone had escaped and was the last to leave. Everyone declares the pilot to be a hero, and in truth, there were many heroes that day.

We all can remember stories like that one, where someone was able to save somebody else by risking his/her life. Yes, that's a major qualification for a savior: to risk one's own safety and welfare for the sake of others.

Martin Luther King spent a large portion of his life at risk and we know of the many stories of his near death experiences. We also know of the one time, on April 4, 1968, when he was murdered. I'm not sure he thought of himself as a savior, but the results of his life—and death—are profoundly evident in the history of the United States and even the world.

The night before his death, Martin Luther King, Jr. sounded like a messiah as he spoke these words:

*"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop.*

*And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.*

*I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."*

The next day Dr. King was murdered and that event reverberated throughout the world. Our own country was nearly torn apart in the aftermath.

But as is true with other saviors, there is a hope for the resurrection. Even though they are usually killed, in a very real way the saviors live on. They are ever present in people's lives, giving hope and sustenance forever.

Some people claim that the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States this Tuesday is a kind of resurrection. For King's famous dream seems to be coming true as the first African American president says the oath of office.

I love the T-shirt that has a picture of MLK saying "I have a dream!" Next to him is a picture of Barack Obama with the inscription, "The Dream"

There's another element to the idea of a savior, and that has to do with faith. That is, we can choose to *believe* in the savior, whoever it is and whatever circumstances there are. I think our nation's honoring of the work of Dr. King is a *faith statement* which says, "We believe in what he did and what he stood for and what his life and death signify. We have instituted a national holiday based on that faith, and that's what we celebrate this day."

As in all cases faith is not an empty gesture. It requires some sort of action, so that we *live* according to our faith. We do something as we are inspired by whatever savior has given the gift of life.

In this sense, Obama is not our Messiah. Neither was King. Neither in fact was Jesus. Here is the final truth of what a savior is: we—whoever we are—can't delegate the work of peacemaking and anti-racism and foreign policy and yes spiritual and religious policy and practice to someone whom we would hold up as our Savior—that is, someone who will do the work for us.

A savior is a prophet who calls forth action on the part of the believers. When Barack Obama steps into the White House this Tuesday, the work begins. We have placed an enormous faith upon him—so much that any ordinary human being might succumb under its weight.

The truth is that the responsibility for the salvation of our country with its myriad and crushing difficulties lies not just with the president, but with us all. We must all enter the fray, for there is no other course, even as we see the Promised Land ahead.

May we all see that vision which Dr. King so eloquently put forth when he proclaimed, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

Amen and Amen.