

## WHAT TO DO WHEN THERE IS NO JUSTICE

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*January 15, 2023*

*Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday*

**Text: Isaiah 59:11b-16**

No justice, no peace. That is the rallying cry most often heard at marches for racial justice and protests against police misconduct and violence. Some have misinterpreted the phrase to suggest that those who say it threaten to do violence if they do not get their way. Just hearing it chanted elicits disgust from some people who cannot divorce its use and popularity from Rev. Al Sharpton or who oppose anything having to do with Black Lives Matter or agitation for racial justice. Rev. Sharpton did not originate the phrase, nor was he the first to use it. He has written that he heard someone yell out, “no justice, no peace,” when demanding justice for Michael Griffith, who was killed in 1986 in Howard Beach in Queens, NY, by a group of white men yelling racial epithets. And yes, there are many who are just simply tired of hearing about anything having to do with justice. Phrases like “racial justice” or “social justice” are verboten in some circles.

As I reflect on the current state of our nation and politics, I’ve seen “no justice, no peace” as vital commentary about our national unease, anxiety, and disillusionment and potentially as an invitation to do everything in our power to make sure that nobody is left out of the security, dignity, and well-being of the beloved community. When I read the words of the prophet Isaiah in our Scripture lesson today, “no justice, no peace” easily could be slipped into the reading without disrupting its flow or its meaning, for the prophet is seeking to describe why Israel can’t seem to shake the discord, anxiety, and upheaval that blanket the nation now that exile is over. After years in the wilderness of exile, Israel returns home, the fulfillment of Isaiah’s previous prophecies of deliverance. Israel is reconstituting Judaism, restoring Jerusalem, and rebuilding the temple as Judaism’s cultural, religious, and worshiping center. This anticipated return of God’s people from exile marked God making good on God’s everlasting covenant with Israel.

God had promised abundant life of love, peace, justice, and wholeness. And yet, peace, justice, and wholeness elude the nation. Israel is wracked by infighting, economic uncertainty, and deep inequality and exploitation. When it came down to being the community Israel wanted and claimed to be, the reality was far from the ideal or the prophetic expectation. Some blamed God for failing to honor God’s promises. Others are too proud, too comfortable, too resistant to change, too stubborn to admit they have fallen short, or too unwilling to do what it takes to make things right. Their nation is disintegrating because of the reckless pursuit of power and wealth and misremembering what covenant relationship with God was all about. They expected justice; they expected peace. And things are not turning out quite exactly as they hoped.

Isaiah’s prophecy diagnoses what Israel is experiencing. The problem is that there is no justice, and there is nobody doing justice. Too many are left out of the promise of security, dignity, and well-being. The prophet confesses and laments, naming what’s really going on . . . We have this blessing of our home, temple, and nation. God blessed us to return from a foreign land. God has delivered us from the bondage and oppression of our enemies. And yet, we have turned our back on being just. We’ve turned away from

the God who did right by us; we have driven justice back by inciting revolt and oppression; we don't honor or pursue truth as a public good. There is no civic or judicial integrity. People cannot be sure they will receive a fair hearing or get the righteousness they seek. There is no justice, so we don't have peace.

What are they to do with this precious gift of God's city and presence when it is filled with dispute and discord? What do they do when there is no justice? They do as Isaiah models in this prophetic oracle: they lament over their failure to do justice; they confess that they have contributed to the injustice through their sin and recrimination; they join with God in partnership to create a world of peace, justice, and liberation God promised. This is the path to God's restored and redeemed beloved community . . . lamenting injustice, confessing their role in it, and co-creating God's justice for all. Don't blame God. Don't hide behind God. God is displeased and will judge their failure. No justice, no peace. Do justice and realize God's peace.

As we observe the MLK holiday, I am reminded that he burst onto the scene when our nation celebrated and anticipated a world made safe for democracy. But Black Americans were relegated to the margins of that democracy. There was no justice and peace for a nation that should have been the beacon of freedom. There is no record of Martin Luther King, Jr. ever chanting that familiar slogan in his many marches, protests, and rallies. Yet, King is on record making that connection between them. When King visited anti-war protestors in prison a year before he was assassinated, he concluded about the national conflict over race, war, and poverty that "there can be no justice without peace. And there can be no peace without justice." King knew deep down the community, our nation, was not possible or viable without justice. King sought to lead the country in collective acts of lament, confession, and action.

And that work goes on until "justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." King's confrontation with the injustice of segregated buses did not transform Montgomery, Alabama, into an integrated multi-racial democracy of equality and nonviolence. King's "I Have a Dream" speech at that historic March on Washington did not immediately cause the United States to live out the true meaning of its creed. The signings of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act did not make everything right for Black people, who still suffered the impact of discrimination and segregation. King and his co-workers and allies often articulated in despair their fear that the nation was too far gone, too sick, ever to be counted on to do justice. But just like the Prophet Isaiah, King knew that God was not pleased with injustice, that we are called to co-create a world of God's justice, and that God would come to judge the world to see justice done.

On the last night of his life, in his last sermon, King demonstrated the posture of one who knows what is required of God's people when there is no justice. He said, "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me 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 . . . Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

When all else fails, when the lies persist, when the truth is nowhere to be found, remember that God is appalled at the lack of justice and will intervene. Martin Luther King knew that and trusted God to be faithful. That's why he could be courageous, why he loved hard and unconditionally, why he could dream, and why he wasn't afraid to lament, confess, and act. Because King knew that God would be faithful to the work of justice, he knew that God, in God's displeasure, would intervene and uphold justice and righteousness.

Sadly, we are advocating for and protesting many of the same issues today that King and his generation worked so hard on. That means that Isaiah's prophetic confession, lament and call to action address a

reality we are experiencing in our time: no justice, no peace—all across the nation, duly elected officers talk oppression and dishonor the truth in the public square. Many have chosen to avoid hard truths, indulge and promote misinformation, and disregard history to sustain narratives of goodness and exceptionalism. Some deliberately seek to take away reproductive justice, ban books that open minds to diverse experiences and perspectives, misinform the masses with selective, narrowcast, or distorted history, and encourage their followers to see their opponents as enemies to be conquered. Justice is driven back, truth is nowhere to be found, and fraud and treachery appear to be the normal ways of engaging the people. Our nation and our politics are unsettled. No justice, no peace.

We are surrounded by anxiety, polarization, radicalization, division, and tribalism. And it is a justice issue. We have learned to lament that there is no justice, but perhaps we must confess how we have contributed to it. Perhaps, we are too silent, too coopted, too comfortable, too afraid, or simply too indifferent to join God in making real the promise of democracy and beloved community. I know that's not our intent. I know that we want to get it right every time. We want to upend or reorganize the whole system and tear down old structures. I know I have proclaimed from this pulpit and before many other microphones about embodying and proclaiming God's alternative ordering of society.

And yes, doing that is hard work. And here's the thing, it's not our work alone. God's promises are sure, so we get to be on the side of victory even if the struggle and resistance to justice appear to be winning the day. And so, sometimes, we fail to see what we can do when there is no justice. What do we do? We intervene. We do justice when we can, with what power and capacity we have. Because God is displeased and before God intervenes with God's righteous judgment, we can lament, confess, and co-create the just world God promises. We look honestly at ourselves and what we have wrought, the world we have created and protected through acts of omission and commission, and act courageously with obedient righteousness to make the world we know God envisions.