

The Rev. Greg Tallant
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A Short Homily on “Why We’re Here” given at the ecumenical MLK service
at N. Broad Baptist Church

I’d like to speak to you for a moment about why we’re here. As a group, the answer is obvious: we’re here to remember and celebrate and give thanks for the life, work, and ministry of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

But a more interesting question, or series of questions, might be: why are each of us here individually? Why are YOU here? Why aren’t you taking a nap? Or working? Or watching the NFL playoffs, or visiting your mother, or doing any of the hundreds of other things that you could be doing right this moment? Why are YOU here?

I thought maybe I’d tell you why I’m here this afternoon, and that my answer might remind of you of your answer, even if our stories are very different.

In St. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, he writes to encourage a community of faith that is losing its way. They’ve been expecting the Kingdom of God to COME DOWN...and it hasn’t happened. They’ve been waiting for Jesus to OVERTURN THE WORLD...and it hasn’t happened. Some of the people in their community have died waiting, and they’re wondering if maybe Paul had lied to them. Sometimes I wonder that, too.

Paul’s response is what some people call his “already / not yet” understanding of God’s actions in Jesus. Others call it living in the “in-between” times. Jesus’ resurrection has ALREADY shattered the power of death, but because the Kingdom of God has NOT YET fully come among us, we have to hold on just a little longer.

I was born in Forsyth County, Georgia, the same county where my family has lived for over 200 years. We don’t move around much. About 90 years ago, a mob of angry white residents ran all the black residents out of the county, and made those who owned property there sell it for pennies on the dollar. The black population in Forsyth County in the early part of the 1900s went from around 10% to 0%. I haven’t done the research, but I suspect my family profited from some of the cheap land that came on the market.

When I was born in 1969, I grew up in a county that was sleepy and segregated. But that all changed in 1987. In 1987, a small group of people organized a brotherhood march in Forsyth County, and a group of counter-

protestors shouted them down and pelted them with rocks. A few weeks later, my sleepy, segregated county became the battleground for racial injustice. Thousands upon thousands of people came in buses to my home and held a march. The national guard came. People magazine interviewed me. Oprah came!

And things changed. Or rather, things are continuing to change. Slowly.

My sleepy little county had to face the fact that although it thought it was living in the already, in truth it was living the not yet.

The curious part of all that for me, though, as a person who has roots as deep in Forsyth County as anyone, is this – the people who participated in bigotry and racism and segregation were the same people who loved me and told me I was special and who told me that all people were created equal.

I'm not kidding.

And so lately when I think about my home, I think about St. Paul's "already / not yet" understanding of God's work in this world, but I think the true "already / not yet" is not in our world, but in ourselves. We carry within us the seeds of the already, of people who live in and of the Kingdom of God right now. And we carry within ourselves the not yet, when we lash out at those who are different from us, out of fear or greed.

Maybe all of us live in the already / not yet world. Maybe all of us carry within us the image of God and the seeds of our own destruction. And when we live in that world, we need a sign post.

We need somebody who reminds us that we don't have to give in to the not yet;
somebody who already chose hope and courage over fear and anger;

We are here today because we have that sign post.

We are here today because a prophet walked among us. We are here because a prophet walked among us and through his life, his work, and his words, he showed us that no matter how much our lives and our hearts might yell, "not yet," we know that we can stand and say, "already."

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is that prophet whom we honor today. And we don't gather just to remember his work and the work of those he inspired. Rather, we gather to stop for just a moment and look up, and see his sign post, to regain our bearings, and then to resume our work for the Kingdom of God.