



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Reflections on the 50th Anniversary of
The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's
"Christmas Sermon on Peace"**

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Fifty years ago, the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) invited The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to deliver the renowned Massey Lectures, a series of talks broadcast live over the radio that continues annually to this day. And whereas some lectureships have a narrow focus, the tradition of the Massey Lectures is broad. Speakers are asked to **"explore the ideas that make us who we are and ask the questions that make us better human beings."**

If you are interested in reading or listening to these lectures, they have been published in a short book titled The Trumpet of Conscience through the UUA's Beacon Press with an accompanying audio CD. I bring them up this evening because **today is the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. King delivering the final installment of his Massey Lectures**, which was broadcast live as he preached to his own congregation from the pulpit of Ebenezer Church in Atlanta, Georgia on December 24, 1967.

In an interesting coincidence of the calendar, that Christmas Eve, fifty years ago, was also on a Sunday. And this series of talks takes on an added weight when we recall that **Dr. King was tragically assassinated a little more than three months later** at the far too young an age of thirty-nine, which is the same age I am today.

I don't mean for our focus to be unduly heavy on Christmas Eve, but it is stunning to consider that **if Dr. King were alive today, he would be only 88 years old**. He should be with us still as an elder in the movement for peace and justice. Although he is no longer with us, his

legacy lives on. And I would like to invite us to spend a few minutes reflecting on the message that he wanted the world to hear on Christmas Eve fifty years ago, a message that continues to be profoundly relevant today.

He titled his homily **“Peace on Earth.”** These were the opening lines: "This Christmas season finds us a rather bewildered human race. We have neither peace within nor peace without. Everywhere paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night" (69). He then proceeds to explore three conditions that would make for peace. As I briefly summarize these three conditions, I invite you to consider the ways that we might each, within our spheres of influence, help create these conditions for peace in the coming year of 2018.

First, if we are ever to have peace on earth, Dr. King said, we must transcend sectional loyalties. Instead of putting our race, tribe, or class first—instead of putting even “America first”— we must “develop a world perspective.” In Dr. King’s words, **“We must either learn to live together...or we are all going to perish together as fools”** (70).

Second, Dr. King cautioned that the only way to create a lasting peace is through peaceful means (72). Dr. King was convinced that any attempt to create peace through violence would either intentionally or unintentionally sow the seeds of future violence and retribution. Instead, in the words of the activist A.J. Muste (1885–1967), King called us to consider that, **“There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.”**

Third, Dr. King said that an essential condition for peace was recognizing what our UU First Principle calls “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” (74, 79). Until we **ensure that every human being has a basic minimum** (clean water and healthy food, a “simple, decent place to live,” access to health care and education), the conditions are ripe, *not* for peace through the presence of social justice; rather, the conditions are ripe for unrest due to the conditions of social injustice.

Finally, toward the end of his sermon, Dr. King looked back to August 1963, when he stood before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.” A little more than four years later, on December 24, 1967, Dr. King said, **“I must confess to you today that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare.”** He went on to detail the nightmare of violence that was the Vietnam

War and the nightmare of violence that was inflicted upon peaceful civil rights activists, seeking only to assert their “equality under the law” (78).

Today, fifty years later, **Dr. King’s legacy of working for “peace, liberty, and justice”—not merely for some, but for *all*—is carried forward in the #BlackLivesMatter movement for racial justice, in the #MeToo movement for gender justice, and in the revitalized “Poor People’s Campaign” for economic justice.** Dr. King’s dream of building the beloved community is a secularized update of what 2,000 years ago was called the “kingdom of God.” This dream was embodied in the life and teachings of a baby whose birth we remember and celebrate tonight, an infant who grew up to become the Jewish social prophet Jesus of Nazareth.

And in the more than 2,000 years since that baby’s birth, there have been many victories in the ongoing struggle for peace, liberty, and justice for *all*. And there have also been many times when the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction—toward violence, greed, and division. That’s why we continue to carve out time in our busy schedules to gather in places like this sanctuary. **We need one another as companions—as midwives—in the ongoing work of Collective Liberation.**

In the words of Dr. King—which he borrowed from the 19th-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker—it may be true that the “**moral arc of the universe bends toward justice,**” **but there is no guarantee that the arc will bend on its own.** The moral arc of the universe needs our help if we are to more fully incarnate the values of Christmas in our lives every day of the year—the values of hope, peace, joy, and love. Together we can accomplish far more than any of us could alone.

In a few moments, we will each light our individual candles, and **our *collective light* will shine far brighter than that of any single candle.** There will be times in the coming year when your light—or the light of those around you—dims, flickers, or threatens to go out. May the memory of our time together this night remind you of the support this community and others like it can provide. You are not alone.