



Religious groups at the Poor People's Campaign Solidarity Day March
Washington, D.C., June 1968
Photo: Oliver F. Atkins, copyright Oliver Atkins Collection,
Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries

Chapter 4

THE LAST WEEK OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE LAST YEAR OF MARTIN LUTHER KING: TEXTUAL REFLECTION

I know a man... He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. ... He didn't have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. They said he was an agitator. He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial.

These are the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from his "Drum Major Instinct" speech given just a few months before his assassination. We all know Martin Luther King as the civil rights leader who led the March on Washington and helped pass the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. But fewer of us are familiar with the King who committed his last years to the eradication of poverty. Martin Luther King spent the last year of his life making connections between racism, militarism and poverty. His last crusade was the Poor People's Campaign—he often wondered what good is it to be able to sit at a lunch counter

if you couldn't afford to buy a hamburger? King also took note of the poverty in Northern cities brought to light particularly in the 1965 Watts Rebellion and the poverty in Appalachia portrayed through images in Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in 1965 and 1966. He wanted to do something about this widespread poverty. The Poor People's Campaign was an effort to unite poor people across racial and geographic lines to make a real war on poverty, with poor people at the lead, so things like the Vietnam War could not turn the War on Poverty into a skirmish and resources could not be diverted away from those who really needed them. Central to King's vision of a Poor People's Campaign was massive civil disobedience in hospitals, welfare centers and governmental and corporate buildings until the needs of the poor were met.

When brought to Marks, Mississippi in the Mississippi Delta, in the poorest county in the United States, for a colleague's funeral in 1968, King toured around the town. He dropped to his knees and cried because of the deep-seated poverty he witnessed. He called a town hall meeting at Eudora AME Zion Church, and from there he determined to start the Mule Train to Washington, the central caravan of poor people that met up with other caravans from all over the country at Resurrection City, a major tent city on the National Mall in Washington D.C.

This last year of King's life, particularly his focus on building the Poor People's Campaign, actually parallels the last week (and the greater mission) of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. In this Bible Study, we will explore the connection of the last year of King and the last week of Jesus Christ. We will, perhaps, find implications for our anti-poverty ministries today. We at the Poverty Initiative invite you to join us in "Re-Igniting the Poor People's Campaign: Finishing the Unfinished Business of Martin Luther King, Jr." We believe King's business is the business of Jesus Christ and that we are all called to take up this work.

This Bible Study was developed during the Poverty Initiative Immersion Trip to the Mississippi Delta commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign.

To do this Bible Study you will just need this chapter you are reading now. We ask you to be open to bringing your experiences into the discussion as well. The Bible Study contains five sessions: the triumphal entry into Jerusalem; the role of women; telling stories/making commitments; radical resistance; and crucifixion/death. Each session contains Bible stories, passages from Martin Luther King and other supporting materials that should help us draw connections between the words and actions of Jesus and King, as well as inform our own commitment to end poverty with poor people in the lead. If possible, please distribute this material before the Bible Study starts so participants have the opportunity to read the materials beforehand.

BIBLE STUDY: THE LAST WEEK OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE LAST YEAR OF MARTIN LUTHER KING

Introduction

What's the connection between Jesus, Martin Luther King, the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and poor people organizing today? Let's start with looking at Jesus, particularly the last week of his activities that leads to his crucifixion as a rebel of the empire.

A starting point is to consider the ways that Jesus was countered with Caesar, the emperor of Rome during Jesus' lifetime. Jesus was called the same titles as the emperor—things like Lord, Son of God, Bearer of Peace, King of Kings, etc., even though Jesus was a poor peasant from Galilee who spent his time healing and teaching other poor peasants. Jesus was doing many of the same activities as the emperor—feeding the people, healing, exorcising, looking after the people—but Jesus' meals were things like feeding the five thousand where lots of poor people shared a small amount of food and it was enough, and Jesus' health care plan didn't cost a thing. We could go on about these contrasts, but let's look at a specific example—the entry into Jerusalem.

John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, leading historical Jesus scholars, talk about the last week of Jesus and the entry into Jerusalem in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem* (2007). Jesus enters Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey—not a chariot, or even horse—in a way that could be viewed as a parallel procession of Caesar's imperial guard. There are two processions happening on Palm Sunday. Jesus is riding a mule, a lowly animal, and in so doing, he is mocking the procession of the Roman military force that is entering Jerusalem to do crowd control during Passover.

Once Jesus enters Jerusalem, he goes to the Temple to check things out. He returns to the temple on Monday and causes a scene there. We like to look at what Jesus does in the temple as civil disobedience—stopping the corrupt buying and selling and pronouncing the temple courtyard as a den of robbers, a safehouse for people who are stealing and cheating the poor. It is after these acts of civil disobedience when it is determined that Jesus must be crucified.

And this is where a parallel with King and the Poor People's Campaign comes in. The last campaign that King participated in was the Memphis Sanitation Workers strike. King was invited to help lead this march, and he resolved to do so. There aren't two parallel marches in Memphis. Instead, the imperial guard (Memphis Police and National Guard) monitor the march and manage the crowd at this procession.

Also, what we know about King and the Poor People's Campaign is that it starts in

Marks, MS with a mule train. Marks is in the poorest county in the U.S., just like Galilee was one of the poorest places in the Roman Empire. Poor folks from Marks set off on mules/donkeys to enter Washington DC, the political and economic and (could we say) religious center of the U.S., just like Jerusalem was the center of Judea within Rome. In fact, the Temple was one of the wonders of the world at this time.

What King proposed and what the people did when they got to DC was set up a “Resurrection City” (notice the religious language). From this tent city, poor people of all races left every day to go protest and do massive civil disobedience in hospitals and the department of agriculture and other temples of our day.

If we wanted to draw the connection between Jesus and the early Jesus movement and King and the Poor People’s Campaign, we could talk about King’s assassination, the abandonment of lots of King’s friends who were not really able to carry the Poor People’s Campaign to a successful conclusion, and a rebirth of that campaign by poor people 40 years later. This effort includes both people who have been fighting to end poverty from Marks for the past 40 years and other poor people who are joining together to re-ignite the Poor People’s Campaign today.

These are themes we will explore in this Bible Study. We hope the texts will offer some insight and impetus for re-igniting the Poor People’s Campaign. Churches, youth groups and community organizations are all needed and wanted.

Getting Started

Use the readings and discussion questions to draw your own connections between the last week of Jesus Christ and the last year of Martin Luther King. All Bible quotes come from the New International Version (NIV). If you prefer another translation, please replace the NIV quotes with the translation of your choice. You may choose to use some of the other readings in this book as supplementary reading for this Bible Study.

Textual Reflection Readings and Questions

Session 1

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey / Poor People's Campaign Mule Train

Readings

- Bible passage: Luke 19:28-41 (or Mark 11:1-11)
- King passage: excerpts from "Nonviolence and Social Change" from *Trumpet of Conscience* (1967)
- Other references: excerpts from John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem* (2007)

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem non-triumphant and anti-imperial? What do you think of Crossan and Borg's argument?
2. Do you see a connection between the donkey in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the mule train in MLK's Poor People's Campaign?
3. What is Jesus' reaction to seeing Jerusalem? What is King's response to poverty in the U.S.? Can this relate to the leaders of grassroots anti-poverty groups and the conditions of poverty and homelessness in this country?

Luke 19:28-41 (New International Version)

Jesus' Triumphant Entry

²⁸After telling this story, Jesus went on toward Jerusalem, walking ahead of his disciples. ²⁹As he came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he sent two disciples ahead. ³⁰"Go into that village over there," he told them. "As you enter it, you will see a young donkey tied there that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks, 'Why are you untying that colt?' just say, 'The Lord needs it.'"

³²So they went and found the colt, just as Jesus had said. ³³And sure enough, as they were untying it, the owners asked them, "Why are you untying that colt?"

³⁴And the disciples simply replied, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵So they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it for him to ride on.

³⁶As he rode along, the crowds spread out their garments on the road ahead of him. ³⁷When he reached the place where the road started down the Mount of Olives, all of his

followers began to shout and sing as they walked along, praising God for all the wonderful miracles they had seen.

³⁸ “Blessings on the King who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!”

³⁹ But some of the Pharisees among the crowd said, “Teacher, rebuke your followers for saying things like that!”

⁴⁰ He replied, “If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!”

Jesus Weeps over Jerusalem

⁴¹ But as he came closer to Jerusalem and saw the city ahead, he began to weep. ⁴² “How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ Before long your enemies will build ramparts against your walls and encircle you and close in on you from every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you into the ground, and your children with you. Your enemies will not leave a single stone in place, because you did not accept your opportunity for salvation.”

from Martin Luther King, Jr. “Nonviolence and Social Change” *Trumpet of Conscience* (1967)

“There is a fire raging now for...the poor of this society. ... Disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds. They need brigades of ambulance drivers who will have to ignore the red lights of the present system until the emergency is solved.

...The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice—not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty.

...There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.”

from Crossan and Borg, *The Last Week* (2007), pages 2-5

“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. In the centuries since, Christians have celebrated this day as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. With its climax of Good Friday and Easter, it is the most sacred week of the Christian year.

One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus

rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class. They had journeyed to Jerusalem from Galilee, about a hundred miles to the north, a journey that is the central section and the central dynamic of Mark's gospel. Mark's story of Jesus and the kingdom of God has been aiming for Jerusalem, pointing toward Jerusalem. It has now arrived.

On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus's crucifixion.

Pilate's military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. Though unfamiliar to most people today, the imperial procession was well known in the Jewish homeland in the first century. Mark and the community for which he wrote would have known about it, for it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals. They did so not out of empathetic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire.

The mission of the troops with Pilate was to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and its courts. They and Pilate had come up from Caesarea Maritima, 'Caesarea on the Sea,' about sixty miles to the west. Like the Roman governors of Judea and Samaria before and after him, Pilate lived in the new and splendid city on the coast. For them, it was much more pleasant than Jerusalem, the traditional capital of the Jewish people, which was inland and insular, provincial and partisan, and often hostile. But for the major Jewish festivals, Pilate, like his predecessors and successors, went to Jerusalem.

Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, the swirling of dust, the eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.

Pilate's procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God. It began with the greatest of the emperors, Augustus, who ruled Rome from 31 BCE to 14 CE. His father was the god Apollo, who conceived him in his mother, Atia. Inscriptions refer to him as 'son of God,' 'lord' and 'savior,' one who had brought 'peace

on earth.’ After his death, he was seen ascending into heaven to take his permanent place among the gods. His successors continued to bear divine titles, including Tiberius, emperor from 14 to 37 CE and thus emperor during the time of Jesus’s public activity. For Rome’s Jewish subjects, Pilate’s procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.

We return to the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. Although it is familiar, it has surprises... It is a prearranged ‘counterprocession,’ Jesus planned it in advance. As Jesus approaches the city from the east at the end of the journey from Galilee, he tells two of his disciples to go to the next village and get him a colt they will find there, one that has never been ridden, that is, a young one. They do so, and Jesus rides the colt down the Mount of Olives to the city surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic followers and sympathizers, who spread their cloaks, strew leafy branches on the road, and shouted, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ As one of our professors in graduate school said about forty years ago, this looks like a planned political demonstration.

The meaning of the demonstration is clear, for it uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the Jewish Bible. According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem (Zion) ‘humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ (9:9). In Mark, the reference to Zechariah is implicit. Matthew, when he treats Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, makes the connection explicit by quoting the passage: ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ (Matt. 21:5, quoting Zech. 9:9). The rest of the Zechariah passage details what kind of king he will be:

‘He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations’ (9:10).

This king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land—no more chariots, war-horses, or bows. Commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of peace.

Jesus’s procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’s procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. This contrast—between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar—is central not only to the gospel of Mark, but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity.

The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus’s life. As we all know, the week ends with Jesus’s execution by the powers who ruled his world. Holy Week is the story of this confrontation. But before we unfold Mark’s story of Jesus’s last week, we must first set the stage. For this, Jerusalem is central.

Jerusalem was not just any city. By the first century, it had been the center of the sacred

geography of the Jewish people for a millennium. And ever since, it has been central to the sacred imagination of both Jews and Christians. Its associations are both positive and negative. It is the city of God and the faithless city, the city of hope and the city of oppression, the city of joy and the city of pain.

Jerusalem became the capital of ancient Israel in the time of King David, around 1000 BCE. Under David and his son Solomon, Israel experienced the greatest period in its history. The country was united, all twelve tribes under one king; it was at its largest; it was powerful and thus its people were safe from marauding neighbors; a glorious temple was built by Solomon in Jerusalem. David's reign in particular (and not Solomon's) was seen not only as a time of power and glory, but also of justice and righteousness in the land. David was the just and righteous king, He became associated with goodness, power, protection and justice; he was the ideal shepherd-king, the apple of God's eye, even God's son."



"Would Jesus Cut Welfare?"

Evelyn Dortch, Direct Action Welfare Group

Photo: DAWG

Session 2

Women in the Movement

Readings

- Bible passage: John 12
- Other references: excerpts from John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem* (2007)
- Poor People's Campaign reference: excerpts from Nick Kotz & Mary Lynn Kotz, *A Passion for Equality: George Wiley and the Movement* (1977)

Discussion Questions

1. What role does Mary in this passage from John's Gospel play in Jesus' ministry? What is her relationship with Judas? Jesus? With the quote "the poor are with you always"?
2. Though women have always played a valuable role in political and religious movements, why do you think they are continually marginalized within movements?
3. What are the theological implications for Mary Magdalene's role in the Jesus Movement being changed from that of an Apostle to that of a prostitute and temptress? What does this show us about sexism within social movements?
4. What roles do women play in the stories of the Jesus movement, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and the Poor People's Campaign, despite the sexism? How are these roles important for the success of these movements?

John 12: 1-11

Jesus Anointed at Bethany

¹Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." ⁶He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁷"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume

for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

⁹Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹¹for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

from Crossan and Borg, *The Last Week* (2007), pages 104-5, 151-2

“[The woman who anoints Jesus] is, for Mark, the first believer. She is, for us, the first Christian. And she believed from the word of Jesus before any discovery of an empty tomb.

Furthermore, her action was a graphic demonstration of the paradoxical leadership cited by Jesus for himself and all his followers on the model of child, servant, and slave. ... The unnamed woman is not only the first believer; she is also the model leader.

... She was both one of those ‘many other women’ and the first and only one who believed what Jesus had been telling them repeatedly. ... The unnamed woman represents the perfect disciple-leader and is contrasted with Judas, who represents the worst one possible.”

... “There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem (Mark 15:40-41).

From what is said about Mary Magdalene in other gospels, she was the most important of Jesus’s women followers. About the other Mary, ‘the mother of James the younger and of Joses,’ we know nothing. About the third woman, we can say only that Salome was a common woman’s name in the first century.

The presence of the women reminds us that Jesus’s men followers are not present. They have all fled. Perhaps it was safer for women to be nearby; they were less likely to be suspected by the authorities of being dangerous subversives.

Whatever the reason, in Mark (and all the gospels) women play a major role in the story of Good Friday and Easter. They witness Jesus’s death. They follow his body after his death and see where he is buried. In all the gospels, they are the first ones to go to the tomb on Sunday and experience the news of Easter. In Mark, as we shall see in our chapter on Easter Sunday, they are the only ones.

The role of women in Mark’s story of Good Friday raises an interesting question. Why would first-century Jewish women (and slightly later, gentile women) be attracted to Jesus? For the same reasons that first century men were, yes. But in addition it seems

clear that Jesus and earliest Christianity gave to women an identity and status that they did not experience within the conventional wisdom of the time. Women in both Jewish and gentile cultures were subordinated in many ways. Jesus and the early Christian movement subverted the conventional wisdom about women among both Jews and gentiles. The subversion has been denied by much of Christian history, but it is right here, in a prominent place in the story of the climactic events of Jesus's life: Good Friday and Easter."

from Kotz and Kotz, *A Passion for Equality: George Wiley and the Movement* (1977), pages 248-9

"In early February, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was coming to Chicago to meet with [National Welfare Rights Organization founder George Wiley] and his executive board—at NWRO's demand. It promised to be a showdown. King was planning a 'Poor People's Campaign' for Washington, D.C.—a tactic born in desperation, as the Civil Rights Movement was in shreds. King had failed, during the previous two years, to solve the riddle of further effective action against northern racism and poverty. The new campaign called for thousands of the poor to encamp in Washington, dramatizing the issues for Congress and the country. The campaign needed foot soldiers. Wiley had them—ten thousand paying members in one hundred functioning chapters—and felt that King was trying to divert NWRO members to the Poor People's Campaign without any recognition of NWRO and its own purposes, program, and strategy.

When King walked through the lobby of the downtown Chicago YMCA on February 3, 1968, he was immediately surrounded by admirers—a crowd seeking to glimpse or touch the famous, charismatic leader. He moved upstairs, with his lieutenants—Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Bernard Lafayette, and Al Sampson—to a meeting-room where Wiley and his thirty-member committee sat waiting. There were place-cards around the big rectangular table so that Johnnie Tillmon would be seated in the center, with Wiley on her right and Dr. King on her left. King would be separated from his lieutenants, who were surrounded in each corner by the welfare-recipient leadership. Tim Sampson characterized Wiley's seating arrangement as 'a grand piece of psychological warfare.'

To the ladies, King and the SCLC's Poor People's Campaign was a threat. They were angry that King's lieutenants had moved around the country contacting local welfare rights groups, asking them to join the banner at the cost of abandoning their own welfare-organizing efforts. 'The women's concern was that they had a major constituency organization,' said Sampson. 'They had created it with their blood, sweat, and tears, and it was something magnificent to them. Not to be recognized was an attack on their very being. And to have it taken away was unthinkable.'

While Johnnie Tillmon presided, holding her grandchild in her lap, King waited qui-

etly until each woman introduced herself. He then began to describe the purposes of the forthcoming Washington campaign. ‘We need your support,’ he concluded.

Then Etta Horn opened the barrage: ‘How do you stand on P.L. 90-248?’ Puzzled, Dr. King looked toward the Reverend Andrew Young, his executive director. ‘She means the Anti-Welfare Bill, H.R. 12080, passed by the Congress on December 15, and signed into law by Lyndon Baines Johnson on January 2,’ interrupted Mrs. Tillmon. ‘Where were you last October, when we were down in Washington trying to get support for Senator Kennedy’s amendments?’ Beulah Sanders held up a copy of the NWRO pamphlet *The Kennedy Welfare Amendments*.

King was bewildered by the technical discussion of the new law as his staff tried to fend off the women’s hostile questions. Finally, Johnnie Tillmon said, ‘You know, Dr. King, if you don’t know about these questions, you should say you don’t know, and then we could go on with the meeting.’ ‘You’re right, Mrs. Tillmon,’ King replied. ‘We don’t know anything about welfare. We are here to learn.’ The NWRO members proceeded to bring Dr. King up to date on the history of what they saw as welfare repression in Congress and the nation.”



Coalition of Imokalee Workers members and allies march in downtown Miami on a 9-mile march to Burger King headquarters in November 2007. Large, spirited, colorful marches have become a trademark of the CIW’s creative organizing approach.

Photo: Jacques-Jean Tiziou

Session 3

Telling Stories, Making Commitments

Readings

- Bible passage: Matthew 26:36-46
- King passage: excerpts from “Drum Major Instinct”
- Other references: excerpts from David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1987)

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about Garrow’s story about King and the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott?
2. How does King’s attitude change from before he first gets involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott until the time that he writes his “Drum Major Instinct” speech?
3. Do you see a parallel between Martin Luther King and Jesus in these passages?
4. Do you feel a connection to King or Jesus in these stories? What role do you have to play in this work to end poverty and racism?

Matthew 26:36-46

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

³⁶Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, “Sit here while I go over there to pray.” ³⁷He took Peter and Zebedee’s two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. ³⁸He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

³⁹He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”

⁴⁰Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, “Couldn’t you watch with me even one hour? ⁴¹Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!”

⁴²Then Jesus left them a second time and prayed, “My Father! If this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³When he returned to them again, he found them sleeping, for they couldn’t keep their eyes open.

⁴⁴So he went to pray a third time, saying the same things again. ⁴⁵Then he came to the disciples and said, “Go ahead and sleep. Have your rest. But look—the time has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Up, let’s be going. Look, my betrayer is here!”

from Martin Luther King, Jr., “Drum Major Instinct”

“And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, (Everybody) because everybody can serve. (Amen) You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. (All right) You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. (Amen) You only need a heart full of grace, (Yes, sir, Amen) a soul generated by love. (Yes) And you can be that servant.

I know a man—and I just want to talk about him a minute, and maybe you will discover who I’m talking about as I go down the way (Yeah) because he was a great one. And he just went about serving. He was born in an obscure village, (Yes, sir) the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. (Amen) Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some things. He didn’t have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. (Yes) He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. They said he was an agitator. (Glory to God) He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. And the irony of it all is that his friends turned him over to them. (Amen) One of his closest friends denied him. Another of his friends turned him over to his enemies. And while he was dying, the people who killed him gambled for his clothing, the only possession that he had in the world. (Lord help him) When he was dead he was buried in a borrowed tomb, through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today he stands as the most influential figure that ever entered human history. All of the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together (Yes) have not affected the life of man on this earth (Amen) as much as that one solitary life. His name may be a familiar one. (Jesus) But today I can hear them talking about him. Every now and then somebody says, ‘He’s King of Kings.’ (Yes) And again I can hear somebody saying, ‘He’s Lord of Lords.’ Somewhere else I can hear somebody saying, ‘In Christ there is no East nor West.’ (Yes) And then they go on and talk about, ‘In Him there’s no North and South, but one great Fellowship of Love throughout the whole wide

world.’ He didn’t have anything. (Amen) He just went around serving and doing good.

This morning, you can be on his right hand and his left hand if you serve. (Amen) It’s the only way in.

Every now and then I guess we all think realistically (Yes, sir) about that day when we will be victimized with what is life’s final common denominator—that something that we call death. We all think about it. And every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral. And I don’t think of it in a morbid sense. And every now and then I ask myself, ‘What is it that I would want said?’ And I leave the word to you this morning.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. (Yes) And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that’s not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. (Yes)

I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. (Yes)

I’d like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. (Amen)

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. (Yes)

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. (Yes)

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. (Lord)

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. (Yes)

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. (Amen) Say that I was a drum major for peace. (Yes) I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. (Yes) I won’t have any money to leave behind. I won’t have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. (Amen) And that’s all I want to say.

from David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* (1987), pages 17-18

The long-discussed boycott was about to get under way. After a fitful night, E.D. Nixon arose early Friday morning to begin assembling the black leadership. Nixon knew that a mass boycott of Montgomery’s buses could not be accomplished simply by the WPC and a few regular activists such as himself. Although the women had been the driving force

behind all of the black community efforts of the last few years, a mass protest would succeed only if they could obtain the enthusiastic support of Montgomery's black ministers. With that in mind, Nixon made his first call to one of the youngest and most outspoken of the city's pastors, Ralph D. Abernathy.

Abernathy, the secretary of the Baptist Ministers' Alliance, told Nixon he would support the effort. Nixon queried Abernathy about when and where the black leadership should meet, and they agreed that a meeting that evening at a central, downtown location would be good. Abernathy recommended that they call the meeting in the name of the Baptist Ministers' Alliance, and that Nixon call the elderly president of the group, the Reverend H. H. Hubbard, to secure his blessing. Abernathy also advised Nixon to phone one of Abernathy's best friends, the Reverend M. L. King, Jr., pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and ask if the meeting could be held there. In the meantime, Abernathy would begin contacting other ministers.

Nixon quickly secured Hubbard's approval. He then called King. Nixon related the events of the previous evening, told King of the emerging consensus to begin a boycott on Monday, and asked if the young pastor would join in supporting the effort. King hesitated. He had a new-born daughter, less than one month old, and heavy responsibilities at his church. Only a few weeks earlier, he had declined to be considered for president of the local NAACP chapter because of these other demands on his time. He wasn't sure he could handle any additional responsibilities. 'Brother Nixon,' he said, 'let me think about it awhile, and call me back.' Nixon told King that he and Abernathy already were telling people to meet at King's church that evening, 'That's all right,' King replied, 'I just want to think about it and then you call me back.' Nixon agreed.

King hadn't had long to mull over Nixon's request before Abernathy called. Abernathy had heard from Nixon about his friend's hesitation, and wanted to stress to King the opportunity that the Parks arrest represented. King acknowledged that Abernathy was correct; he had no quarrel with the boycott plan. So long as he did not have to do the organizational work, he would be happy to support the effort and host the evening meeting at Dexter church. Satisfied, Abernathy turned his efforts to contacting additional ministers.

... When the MIA's presidency unexpectedly was thrust upon him on December 5, King was uncertain of his ability to lead a community he had resided in so briefly, but he was able to draw upon the same strong convictions that had inspired his leadership at Dexter. The pressures upon him had grown as the boycott continued, and by the time the protest entered its third week, the white community focused upon King as the effort's principal spokesman.

... That night, for the first time in his life, King felt such an experience as he sought to escape the pressures the MIA presidency had placed upon him. He thought more about

how trouble-free his life had been until the movement began.

‘Everything was done [for me], and if I had a problem I could always call Daddy—my earthly father. Things were solved. But one day after finishing school, I was called to a little church, down in Montgomery, Alabama. And I started preaching there. Things were going well in that church, it was a marvelous experience. But one day a year later, a lady by the name of Rosa Parks decided that she wasn’t going to take it any longer. ... It was the beginning of a movement...and the people of Montgomery asked me to serve them as a spokesman, and as the president of the new organization...that came into being to lead the boycott. I couldn’t say no. And then we started our struggle together. Things were going well for the first few days but then, about ten or fifteen days later, after the white people in Montgomery knew that we meant business, they started doing some nasty things. They started making nasty telephone calls, and it came to the point that some days more than forty telephone calls would come in, threatening my life, the life of my family, the life of my child, I took it for a while, in a strong manner.’

But that night, unable to be at peace with himself, King feared he could take it no longer. It was the most important night of his life, the one he always would think back to in future years when the pressures again seemed to be too great.

‘It was around midnight,’ he said, thinking back on it. ‘You can have some strange experiences at midnight.’ The threatening caller had rattled him deeply, ‘Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.’

‘I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born. She was the darling of my life. I’d come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point that I couldn’t take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, you can’t call on Daddy now. He’s up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can’t even call on Mama now. You’ve got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.’

‘And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it. ... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night, I said, ‘Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now, I’m faltering, I’m losing my courage, And I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin

to get weak.’

Then it happened:

‘And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’ ... I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.’

That experience gave King a new strength and courage, ‘Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared.’ He went back to bed no longer worried about the threats of bombings. The next morning he went down to the Montgomery courthouse and was convicted of the Thursday speeding charge. He was fined \$10, plus \$4 in court costs, Fred Gray filed notice of appeal.”



The United Workers Labor Day Prayer Breakfast—Living Wages Hunger Strikers and allies stand for opening prayer delivered by Rev. Roger Powers of Light Street Presbyterian Church

Photo: The United Workers

Session 4

Radical Resistance

Readings

- Bible passage: Matthew 21:12-14 or Mark 11:15-19
- King passage: “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” (1967)

Discussion Questions

1. What does King propose in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech? What type of massive civil disobedience does King suggest as a part of the Poor People’s Campaign and Resurrection City?
2. Can we conceive of Jesus’ actions in Jerusalem as political, radical, resistant?
3. How does King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech apply today? Can you name specific examples of community groups and poor people’s organizations in your area that are addressing the intersection of poverty, racism and war?

Mark 11: 15-19

Jesus Clears the Temple

¹⁵When they arrived back in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the people buying and selling animals for sacrifices. He knocked over the tables of the money-changers and the chairs of those selling doves, ¹⁶and he stopped everyone from using the Temple as a marketplace. ¹⁷He said to them, “The Scriptures declare, ‘My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations,’ but you have turned it into a den of thieves.”

¹⁸When the leading priests and teachers of religious law heard what Jesus had done, they began planning how to kill him. But they were afraid of him because the people were so amazed at his teaching.

¹⁹That evening Jesus and the disciples left the city.

from Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” (1967)

“I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no other choice. ... Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large

and loud: Why are you speaking about war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say. Aren't you hurting the cause of your people, they ask? And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live.

... Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

... Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours.

... We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin

the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: 'This is not just.' It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: 'This is not just.' The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Session 5

Crucifixion / Assassination

Readings

- Bible passage: John 19
- King passage: “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”
- Other references: excerpt from MLK Assassination Trial Transcript

Discussion Questions

1. Is there a connection between the death of Jesus and the death of King?
2. According to the Gospel of John, what role does the Roman Empire play in the crucifixion of Jesus? According to the Tennessee District Court, what role does the U.S. government play in the assassination of King? How does this manifest?
3. Does crucifixion connect to what we see in poor rural and urban communities across the U.S. and the globe? Why or why not?

John 19: 1-37

Jesus Sentenced to Death

¹Then Pilate had Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip. ²The soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they put a purple robe on him. ³“Hail! King of the Jews!” they mocked, as they slapped him across the face.

⁴Pilate went outside again and said to the people, “I am going to bring him out to you now, but understand clearly that I find him not guilty.” ⁵Then Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said, “Look, here is the man!”

⁶When they saw him, the leading priests and Temple guards began shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

“Take him yourselves and crucify him,” Pilate said. “I find him not guilty.”

⁷The Jewish leaders replied, “By our law he ought to die because he called himself the Son of God.”

⁸When Pilate heard this, he was more frightened than ever. ⁹He took Jesus back into the headquarters again and asked him, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave no answer. ¹⁰“Why don’t you talk to me?” Pilate demanded. “Don’t you realize that I have the power to release you or crucify you?”

¹¹Then Jesus said, “You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above. So the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin.”

¹²Then Pilate tried to release him, but the Jewish leaders shouted, “If you release this

man, you are no ‘friend of Caesar.’ Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar.”

¹³When they said this, Pilate brought Jesus out to them again. Then Pilate sat down on the judgment seat on the platform that is called the Stone Pavement (in Hebrew, Gabbatha). ¹⁴It was now about noon on the day of preparation for the Passover. And Pilate said to the people, “Look, here is your king!”

¹⁵“Away with him,” they yelled. “Away with him! Crucify him!”

“What? Crucify your king?” Pilate asked.

“We have no king but Caesar,” the leading priests shouted back.

¹⁶Then Pilate turned Jesus over to them to be crucified.

The Crucifixion

So they took Jesus away. ¹⁷Carrying the cross by himself, he went to the place called Place of the Skull (in Hebrew, Golgotha). ¹⁸There they nailed him to the cross. Two others were crucified with him, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹And Pilate posted a sign over him that read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” ²⁰The place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, so that many people could read it.

²¹Then the leading priests objected and said to Pilate, “Change it from ‘The King of the Jews’ to ‘He said, I am King of the Jews.’”

²²Pilate replied, “No, what I have written, I have written.”

²³When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they divided his clothes among the four of them. They also took his robe, but it was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. ²⁴So they said, “Rather than tearing it apart, let’s throw dice for it.” This fulfilled the Scripture that says, “They divided my garments among themselves and threw dice for my clothing.” So that is what they did.

²⁵Standing near the cross were Jesus’ mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, “Dear woman, here is your son.” ²⁷And he said to this disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from then on this disciple took her into his home.

The Death of Jesus

²⁸Jesus knew that his mission was now finished, and to fulfill Scripture he said, “I am thirsty.” ²⁹A jar of sour wine was sitting there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. ³⁰When Jesus had tasted it, he said, “It is finished!” Then he bowed his head and released his spirit.

³¹It was the day of preparation, and the Jewish leaders didn’t want the bodies hanging there the next day, which was the Sabbath (and a very special Sabbath, because it was the Passover). So they asked Pilate to hasten their deaths by ordering that their legs be broken.

Then their bodies could be taken down. ³²So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the two men crucified with Jesus. ³³But when they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead, so they didn't break his legs. ³⁴One of the soldiers, however, pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water flowed out. ³⁵(This report is from an eyewitness giving an accurate account. He speaks the truth so that you also can believe.) ³⁶These things happened in fulfillment of the Scriptures that say, "Not one of his bones will be broken," ³⁷and "They will look on the one they pierced."

from Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop"

"Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, 'Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?'"

... Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, 'If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.'

Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding.

Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee—the cry is always the same: 'We want to be free.'

... Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.

... Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be—and force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That's the issue. And we've got to say to the nation: We know how it's coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point

short of victory.

... It's all right to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

... Now, it doesn't matter, now. It really doesn't matter what happens now. I left Atlanta this morning, and as we got started on the plane, there were six of us. The pilot said over the public address system, 'We are sorry for the delay, but we have Dr. Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of the bags were checked, and to be sure that nothing would be wrong with on the plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected and guarded all night.'

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really 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 so 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!!"

from the MLK Assassination Trial Transcript, Closing Statement by William F. Pepper

"I remember vividly, I was a journalist in Vietnam, when I came back he asked to meet with me, and when I opened my files to [King], which were devastating in terms of the effects upon the civilian population of that country, he unashamedly wept.

I knew at that point really that the die was cast. This was in February of 1967. He was definitely going to oppose that war with every strength, every fiber in his body. And he did so. He opposed it. And from the date of the Riverside speech ["Beyond Vietnam"] to

the date he was killed, he never wavered in that opposition. Now, what does that mean? Is he an enemy of the State? The State regarded him as an enemy because he opposed it. But what does it really mean, his opposition? I put it to you that his opposition to that war had little to do with ideology, with capitalism, with democracy. It had to do with money. It had to do with huge amounts of money that that war was generating to large multinational corporations that were based in the United States, corporations that were based in the United States.

When Martin King opposed the war, when he rallied people to oppose the war, he was threatening the bottom lines of some of the largest defense contractors in this country. This was about money. When he threatened to bring that war to a close through massive popular opposition, he was threatening the bottom lines of some of the largest construction companies, one of which was in the State of Texas, that patronized the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson and had the major construction contracts at Cam Ran Bay in Vietnam. This is what Martin King was challenging. He was challenging the weapons industry, the hardware, the armament industries, that all would lose as a result of the end of the war.

... Now, he begins to talk about a redistribution of wealth, in this the wealthiest country in the world that had such a large group of poor people, of people living then and now, by the way, in poverty.

That problem had to be addressed. And it wasn't a black-and-white problem. This was a problem that dealt with Hispanics, and it dealt with poor whites as well. That is what he was taking on. That's what he was challenging.

The powers in this land believed he would not be successful. Why did they believe that? They believed that because they knew that the decision-making processes in the United States had by that point in time, and today it is much worse in my view, but by that point in time had so consolidated power that they were the representatives, the foot soldiers, of the economic—the very economic interests who were going to suffer as a result of these times of changes. So the very powerful lobbying forces that put their people in the halls of Congress and indeed in the White House itself and controlled them, paid and bought them and controlled them, were certainly not going to agree to the type of social legislation that Martin King and his mass of humanity were going to require.

... Now we move to the local conspiracy that related to the death of Martin Luther King. You've heard evidence of a very reputable forty-year-in-business store owner sit up there and tell you that he always bought—every Thursday he went to Frank Liberto's warehouse, that was his last stop before he went back to Somerville, and on that Thursday, April 4, he heard the owner of that place take the telephone and scream into it, 'Shoot the son-of-a-bitch when he comes on the balcony,' amongst other things. That is the first indication of the involvement of a Mr. Frank Liberto, which information was given to the

police and the FBI and forgotten about.

... All of these things, all of these events, I submit to you profoundly are strong evidence of the existence of a conspiracy just at the local level, not even mentioning the fact that the defendant has also indicated that planning sessions took place in his grill prior to the assassination.

So I think it is important to see that total picture of evidence you have. There should be no doubt that all of these things are indicative overwhelmingly of conspiracy. Now, are we conspiracy buffs because we find all of this evidence insurmountable? I think not. But you have heard it. The masses of Americans have not. And the media has never put it to them and I submit to you probably never will. That's why your presence is so important.

... Then we move directly into the government of the United States, their agents themselves. We've learned that the 111th Military Intelligence Group based at Fort McPherson in Atlanta, Georgia, were here.

They were in Memphis. They had Martin King under surveillance. That was open-quote, open surveillance, eye-to-eye surveillance.

They had him under surveillance. Eli Arkin of the Memphis Police Department Intelligence Bureau, Intelligence Division, said they were in his office. He has admitted they were in his office.

They were here.

... You have got to understand the monumental importance of your decision. You are going to—they are going to forget everything I said, everything defense counsel has said, everything the witnesses have said. They are going to remember one thing, the ruling of this jury, the verdict of this jury because you have heard evidence that has never before been put on in a court of law.

Some of it would have been put on in Mr. Ray's trial, if he had ever been granted a trial. He wasn't. It wasn't heard. Judge Brown was on the verge of granting that trial, on the eve, in our view, so close to granting that trial, and then he was removed by the Court of Appeals in this state from the case, summarily removed. Without any argument, any oral argument, they made that decision. So Mr. Ray never had the trial. He was in his dying months when he might have gotten that trial. The Court of Appeals finished that possibility.

Only you have heard this. The people in the United States of America have not heard this. The masses of people in this country or the world have not heard this. They've heard snippets, they've heard edited clips on various documentaries and programs, but no one has heard the detailed evidence that you have here.

That is why your decision at this point in time is the most significant decision that will have been taken in thirty-one years in terms of this case.

Please don't underestimate the importance of it. In our view, what has happened in this case, the injustice that has happened in this case, and it may be symptomatic of other cases, we don't know—we haven't gotten into that, we've just focused on this case—but what has happened here in our view is representative of the failure that symbolizes to me the failure of representative democracy in this country.

Isn't it amazing that one could say that over a simple murder case. But when you look at the wealth of evidence that has come forward and you understand how this case has been conducted and you understand how it has been covered up, and when you see how unresponsive elected officials and government has been and how complicit they have been, you can come to no other choice.

Governmental agencies caused Martin Luther King to be assassinated. They used other foot soldiers. They caused this whole thing to happen. And they then proceeded with the powerful means at their disposal to cover this case up. This is a conspiracy that involved—and that's a nasty word. People insult people in this country who use the word 'conspiracy.' Nowhere else in the world, as Bill Schaap told you, is it viewed that way. In Italy and France conspiracy is taken for granted because they have lived with it so much longer. Remember that there were thirty-nine daggers going into Caesar.

You know, these things do not happen as a rule without the involvement of other people and in this case, this type of murder, without the involvement of seriously prominent individuals in government. So it is in my view a failure of democracy and this Republic that it has not been able to bring this forward.

What we're asking you to do at this point in time is send a message. We're asking you to send a message, not just right a wrong. That's important, that you right a wrong and that you allow justice to prevail once and for all. Let it prevail. Let justice and truth prevail, else the heavens fall. No matter what, let it prevail. Let it come forward. We're asking you to let that happen.

But in addition to that, we're asking you to send a message, send a message to all of those in power, all of those who manipulate justice in this country that you cannot get away with this. Or if you can get away with it, you can only get away with it for so long. Ultimately truth-crushed earth will rise again, and it has risen in this courtroom, ladies and gentlemen. Send that message. You, you twelve, represent the American people. You are their representatives with respect to justice in this case. They cannot be here. The media will keep the truth from them forever. You represent the people of this land. You must speak for them.

In all of my years I've had confidence in one institution anywhere in the Anglo-American world, and it is a jury. It is twelve people independently hearing evidence and ruling. That's you. You have this duty to yourselves, this obligation to your fellow citizens, and you

have an opportunity to act in a most significant way that perhaps you can ever imagine, because your verdict of conspiracy in this case, your verdict of liability for the defendant and his other co-conspirators, means history is rewritten, means textbooks have to be rewritten, means the actual result of this case and the truth of this case now must come forward formally.

This message also will be sent to the Attorney General of the United States, whose team are investigating in a limited way, they say, this case. But you have heard much more, so that is why this message is so important. Please send it.

On behalf of the family of Martin Luther King, Jr., on behalf of the people of the United States, I ask you to find for the plaintiff and find that conspiracy existed and that those conspirators involved not only the defendant here but we're dealing in conspiracy with agents of the City of Memphis and the governments of the State of Tennessee and the United States of America.

We ask you to find that conspiracy existed and once and for all give this plaintiff family justice and let's cleanse this city and this nation of the ignorance that has pervaded this case for so long. Let the truth reign in this courtroom once and for all.

Thank you very much."



Praying for change on the steps of city hall
Nashville Homeless Power Project
Photo: Lawrence Boothby