

Gloria White-Hammond:

Good morning. Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to my mentor and colleague and friend Stephanie Paulsell for this invitation, and thanks to all of our colleagues at Harvard Divinity School, the students and staff and faculty. I express my appreciation to the staff of Memorial Church for your support and for your hospitality to this wonderful choir. Thank you for bringing angels among us, and I'm certainly especially grateful to those of you who are in the pews, whether they're the pews at Memorial Church or if you're listening on the radio from mattress Methodist or bedside Baptist or a pillow Pentecostal. It's all good. We're happy to have you in worship this morning. On this final Sunday of black history month and the final Sunday before we begin that reflective season of Lent, I'm going to ask that you would pray with me and for me as we consider the topic drawn, as you've heard from the title of Reverend Martin Luther King's last book published in 1967, the year before his death, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" And if you're looking for something a little shorter to hang on to, think with me on this topic, how big is your "but"? How big is your "but"?

Gloria White-Hammond:

Historians often describe watershed events. Those are critical turning points in history that fundamentally change how people think about and do life. Typically, watershed events are only recognized in hindsight, because as philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard reminds us, though we live life going forward, we understand life when we look backwards. The challenge for us as participants is that we can't always perceive what God is doing in the midst of a watershed event, or we can have a keen sense afterwards, but in the moment when we're experiencing the event, we're often constrained and sometimes scared by what we can see immediately in front of us.

Gloria White-Hammond:

The Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott from December 5th, 1955 to protest racial segregation on public transportation, was a watershed event for its participants. It was a watershed event for Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin, both of whom refused to vacate their seats to accommodate a white passenger. It was a watershed event for Mary Fair Burks and Joanne Robinson of the women's political caucus who organized the carpools for the 380 days of the bus boycotts. It was a watershed event for Georgia Gilmore, who organized the Club From Nowhere, that posse amazing cooks who prepared and sold meals to raise funds to support and fund the resistance action, and it was a watershed event for Martin Luther King, who was thrust into leadership to some extent, unwillingly. The pace of the actions and the intensity of the reactions caught up with him one dark, lonely night on January 26, 1956, two months after the launch of the historic Montgomery boycott.

Gloria White-Hammond:

The threatening phone calls were mounting to up to 40 a day and had become more menacing, and he wrote later on, "It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. It reached the saturation point. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and I prayed aloud, God, I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right, but now I am afraid that people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I cannot face it alone." It was in that kitchen table moment that Dr. King had to choose which path to pursue, the wide well-trodden path of convenience or the narrow, less traveled road of conviction. We know the choice that he made, and well, the rest is history. Martin King's decision at that kitchen table capitalized a movement continues to bear fruit for peoples of all kinds throughout this nation and indeed around the world.

Gloria White-Hammond:

In today's text in the 13th chapter of numbers, we encountered the Israelites at a kitchen table having a moment. Having made the epic Exodus to escape Egypt through the Red Sea, having endured the difficulty of what Moses called that dreadful desert, they are now encamped on Canaan's border, poised to enter into the promised land. The 12 spies had been out to do reconnaissance on the land that God said was flowing with milk and honey, and so they've returned and Moses has called a press conference and the whole Israelite community is gathered to hear the report. "Yes," they reported, "The land was as had previously been described," and what we would now know as Deuteronomy eight. It was a good land, but it was a land with brooks and streams and deep springs that were gushing out into the valleys and hills, but ... it was a land with wheat and barley and vine and fig trees and pomegranates a plenty, but ... oh, there were resources, all right. This was a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills, but, but, but, but the people there are like giants, and they're powerful, and the cities are very large, and they're fortified with high walls, but, but ...

Gloria White-Hammond:

I want to submit this morning that it was a kitchen table moment for the Israelites, in which two spies, Joshua and Caleb, looked through the eyes of faith and only saw victory, and the 10 spies saw with their physical sight what seemed to them to be overwhelming circumstances, and I will say that after living six, almost seven decades of life and doing pastoral ministry, through many kitchen table moments, I would say that that ratio is about right when faced with a momentous decision. For every two voices of faith that I hear in my head, "God is with you. God has open doors," I hear 10 voices of fear. "You're not smart enough. You're going to blow this. People will laugh at you. It's going to be too hard. Don't you remember the last time?"

Gloria White-Hammond:

But honestly, I've come to be okay with the voices of fear because I think that the voices of fear provide us with a good reality check. They help me to honestly assess the risk and anticipate the obstacles, but this is what I've learned about the voices of fear. You'd listen to them, but never let them have the final word. Unfortunately for the Israelites, the "buts" carried the day, and they dismissed the promises and disrespected God's sovereignty, so that when they opened their eyes. They seemed like grasshoppers and assumed that everybody else saw them the same way. So those Israelites, while no longer enslaved to the Egyptians, remained shackled to the bully of fear, and well, the rest is history.

Gloria White-Hammond:

We can't know for sure, but I sense that this country is in the midst of some watershed events, and for people who profess to have a heart for God and passion for justice, this is a kitchen table moment, and the only question is, how big is your "but"? The temptation to curl up in a fetal position in disengage is great, but I draw from the wisdom of Martin King's book, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" to remind us of this. We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. Martin writes, "In this unfolding conundrum of life in history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare and naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and she rushes on," and he ends by saying, "Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words 'too late'."

Gloria White-Hammond:

It is certainly too late for the immigrants who have died on the borders of this country. It's too late for the millions who have been incarcerated unjustly in the prison industrial complex. It's too late for the children's stymied by educational systems, ill equipped to provide them with gainful employment in 2020. It's too late for the people who died because they could not afford healthcare. It's too late for the icebergs that are melting, for the glaciers that have receded, for the islands that are disappearing, but now is not the time to give up. I draw from the wisdom of the writer in the Hebrew text who reminds us that that's not who we are. That's not where we've come from. Whether we arrived in this country in the lap of luxury, we're in the belly of a slave boat. That's not who we are. The writer reminds people as they're getting prepared ... these are people who believed in Christ and are now getting prepared to experience greater persecution. He reminds them to recall those earlier days when after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes you were partners with those who were so treated, but you had compassion for those who are in prison and you cheerfully accepted the confiscation of your possessions because you knew that you had something, some possessions that were better and more lasting.

Gloria White-Hammond:

As we say in my tradition, you had a joy that the world couldn't give and the world couldn't take away, and so the writer says, "Therefore, do not abandon your confidence. It'll bring a great reward. You need to endure so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what God has promised," and it reminds us that his righteous ones, God's righteous ones will live by faith, and that God takes no pleasure for anyone who shrinks back, and the writer concludes with this critical reminder, "For we are not among those who shrink back and are lost, but we're among those who have faith and are so saved." My friends, I could be wrong, but I just kind of think that we might be in the midst of some watershed events. You know what was ironic about the Israelites? They opted to go with fear and spent the next 40 years wandering around the wilderness. It was only at the end of the 40 years when they actually went into Canaan and met with Rob and Rob said, "Whoa, we've been frightened that you were coming for 40 years. We've been quaking because we heard how powerful your God was." Our God is still powerful, and as we continue to work to effect this change that's so necessary in the midst of these watershed events, I just stopped by to remind all of us to kick butt, and the rest will be history.