



**From the Pulpit: January 16, 2022**

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time—Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

Luke 4:14–30

*The Impossible Possibility for an Impossible Time, II: Free at Last!*

During the Epiphany here at Kenilworth Union Church; Christine, Katie, and I are preaching a sermon series called *The Impossible Possibility for an Impossible Time*. The American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called Jesus the impossible possibility and it seems that in this time of the pandemic nearing its second anniversary and racial unrest and divided country that Christ like virtues have never been more needed than now. So we're following the life of Christ in his early ministry.

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom.*

*He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the  
captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

“The Spirit of the Lord  
commands Jesus to  
bring four things:  
good news for the poor,  
sight for the blind,  
release to the captives,  
and freedom for the  
oppressed.”

*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”*

**O**n a preaching tour of Galilean synagogues, Jesus is vastly popular. Every Sabbath he preaches to bigger crowds than Joel Osteen, so he thinks he might as well wander over to his hometown of Nazareth to preach to his family and friends.

From the bimah he looks out over the congregation and knows every single face. The third-grade Sunday School teacher who taught him to memorize Psalm 23 is there. The sixth-grade grammar teacher who taught him to parse Hebrew verbs and decline Aramaic nouns is out there beaming proudly—at the beginning, anyway. The Little League coach who taught him to hit a curve ball when he was 12 is there, or whatever passed for baseball in first-century Palestine. Mother Mary must have been there—yeah?—and his brothers and sisters?

The rabbi at the synagogue hands him a scroll from the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus rolls it out till he finds what he's looking for, chapter 61, verse 1: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

And then with astonishing chutzpah, Jesus wraps the whole seditious sermon up by saying, "Today, right here, right now, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And then he sits down, to the amazement of all.

Jesus' seditious little sermon didn't achieve the desired result. All it does is make his family and friends mad as hell. Which doesn't mean it wasn't a great sermon. In the structure of Luke's Gospel, Jesus' hometown sermon is the place where he sets the agenda for his entire life and mission. This is where he condenses his vast intention to its distilled essence.

The Spirit of the Lord commands Jesus to bring four things: good news for the poor, sight for the blind, release to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed. Exactly half of those four have to do with freedom, release, liberty, equality.

Why is freedom so central to Jesus' mission and vision? It's because granting autonomy and equality to your neighbor is the highest compliment you can pay her. You are saying that her opinion and her unique way of living her life have equal weight with yours. Democracy has its roots in Judeo-Christian theology. Democracy wants to say alongside the Hebrew Bible that we are all stamped with the image of God.

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Authoritarians—and there is a lethal virus of authoritarianism around the world just now, from Eastern Europe and Russia to China and Cambodia—authoritarians want to say exactly the opposite. They want to say, "You are not smart enough to make these epochal decisions for the rest of us. Your voice does not count; your opinion is not worthy. I will make your decisions for you." Freedom: that's what Jesus came to bring.

Martin Luther King, Jr., picks up Jesus' torch 1,900 years later. He even **sounds** like Jesus: "The word of God is upon me like a fire in my bones, and when God is on me, I got to say it!"<sup>1</sup> In 1955 he becomes President of the Montgomery Improvement Association and organizes the bus boycott after the insolent Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat. He only rose to that position because nobody

else wanted to do it. He was only 36 years old and had been Pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for about a year. He didn't know anything about Montgomery; he was from Atlanta.

So Dr. King launches this campaign of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* from the pulpit of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, which was built during Reconstruction on the site of one of the city's slave pens. How ironic but also wonderful is that!

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 21.

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church is one block from the Alabama State Capital, where Jefferson Davis was sworn in as President of the Confederacy in 1861, and also where George Wallace delivered his inaugural gubernatorial address in 1963—“segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

When Dr. King became Pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1954, he instituted a new requirement for new members. Before you could become a member of Dexter Avenue, you had to register to vote.<sup>2</sup> What do you think about that? The vote means good news for the poor, release for the captives, liberty for the oppressed.

We lost a prominent civil rights pioneer around the turn of the year. When Sidney Poitier was a teenager in Florida, two policemen stopped him for walking in a white neighborhood. They pointed a pistol at his forehead and joked for ten minutes about whether they should shoot him in the right eye or the left.

But 20 years later comes *In the Heat of the Night*—Virgil Tibbs—and when a Mississippi police chief makes fun of his name—Virgil—and asks what they call him up north, he says “They call me Mr. Tibbs.” In that film, when a plantation owner slaps him for failing to know his place, Mr. Tibbs slaps back. That was not in the script. He was supposed to look at the white man with disdain and simply walk away. It was Mr. Poitier himself who decided that Virgil Tibbs would not have walked away.<sup>3</sup> “The arc of the moral universe is long,” Dr. King was always reminding us, “but it bends toward the light.”

One last thing and then I’ll quit. I hope you were happy with the result of the football game on Monday night. Many Big Ten fans are in awe of the SEC. I love

Jim Harbaugh and Pat Fitzgerald, but I am in awe of Nick Saban. Lately it seems as if after the Southeastern Conference Final the National Championship game is redundant.

You may have noticed that Alabama and Georgia have a couple of Black football players. Not many. Just one or two. It’s remarkable how Black the SEC is. At Louisiana State, for instance, the first Black football player didn’t happen until 1972. 1972!

“Martin Luther King, Jr., picks up Jesus’ torch 1,900 years later. He even sounds like Jesus: “The word of God is upon me like a fire in my bones, and when God is on me, I got to say it!””

But the revolution started 20 years before the first Black **football player** with the first Black **student** at LSU, 1953. A. P. Tureaud, Jr., became the first black undergraduate at Louisiana State University. His dorm room was in a barracks-like building in the shadow of Tiger Stadium. It was built for three students, but no one would room with A. P. Tureaud. He lived alone. When he entered the shower, all the other men walked out.

The guys in adjoining rooms took turns banging on the walls all night long so he couldn’t sleep. Some professors wouldn’t touch his papers. The only people who would talk to him were the maids, the groundskeepers, and the waiters, who

were all black, of course. He was lonely and terrified.

You probably know that LSU has a real Bengal Tiger as a mascot. They call him Mike the Tiger. The current tiger is Mike VII. Mike the Tiger lives in one of the most luxurious tiger pens in the world. His pen is 19,000 square feet, with a stream, a waterfall, a huge mountain of rocks, and an Italian bell tower that mimics the architectural motif of the rest of the LSU campus. In 1953, Mike the Tiger’s domicile was more modest, but Mike still had his own swimming pool.

In the shadow of Tiger Stadium, A. P. Tureaud lived across the street from Mike the Tiger, and every morning A. P. Tureaud would go over and talk to Mike

<sup>2</sup> Lischer, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Bernstein, “Sydney Poitier, First Black Man to Win Oscar for Best Actor, Dies at 94,” *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2022.

## —Prayers of the People—

By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

the Tiger. “Mike,” he’d say, “you’re in jail, and I’m in jail. How are we going to get out of this?”

And then one morning, A. P. Tureaud is talking to Mike the Tiger, and this pickup truck pulls up in front of them, and A. P. Tureaud thinks, “Oh boy, I hope this pickup doesn’t have a rifle rack in the rear window.”

But a black man in overalls gets out of the truck, and he says, “Are you A. P. Tureaud?” A. P. says, “I am.”

The black man goes back to the truck and retrieves his seven-year-old son, and he says, “I want him to meet you, because I want him to know that this is possible, thanks to you.” After A. P. composes himself, he says, “Man, you’ve just ruined my day. I want to get out, I want to get out, and now I can’t because I became a symbol of integration.”

Alexander Pierre Tureaud lasted only eight weeks at LSU in 1953. The university sued to prevent his matriculation, and won, and he was expelled.

He completed his degree at another college in New Orleans, and then he went on to spend 38 years in public education in White Plains, New York, but in 2011, Louisiana State University awarded him an honorary doctorate, so now he is Dr. Alexander Pierre Tureaud, Jr. “We were wrong, A. P.,” they said. “Please forgive us.” And he did.<sup>4</sup>

“Mike, I’m in jail, you’re in jail. How do we get out of this?” It might take a long time, but Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, release to the prisoner, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty for the oppressed. “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I am free at last.”

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<sup>4</sup> From the website [storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org), “The Students Wouldn’t Speak to Me.” Supporting detail from Gilbert King, “58 Years Later, LSU’s First Black Undergraduate Receives Honorary Degree,” *The Huffington Post*, 2011-05-23.

Open our eyes, O True Rest. Awaken us, O Morning Song of Love. Steady us, O Ground of Being. Shelter us, O One who brings us Home.

For we bear our most fragile selves to your throne of grace. We who are fraught and frazzled, come to you rarely without ache. We harbor sorrow, unseen and overflowing. We surge with imperfections seldom alluded to in polite company. We deliberately fight to protect our image, assuming that shattering it will completely undo us. But you see our flaws and draw us nearer. You see our guilt and overflow with love for us anyway. You see our errors spill out, and you pour unimaginable mercy upon us. May such compassion flood into us today. May the peace of your presence buoy us. May your nearness draw us into a renewed relationship with you. When we are wandering, find us. When we are breaking, mend us. When we are diminished, comfort us. When we are raw, console and restore us. Hold us in the safety of silence, here in this sanctuary of love...

You are the Fountain of Holiness and Giver of Names: the One who calls to us amid every trouble. Pave the way. Set a light on our path. Be our guide. As Martin Luther King says, help us to see that “In a real sense all life is interrelated...caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” When a friend’s synagogue in Texas is occupied by fear, hatred and terror, show us how to strengthen our interfaith relationships and love our neighbor more deeply. When a volcano erupts halfway around the world, help us to remember the web of life that connects us, one to another. When hospitals overflow with patients sick still with a virus unending, help us to see how we are all bound together.

We rely on one another, God.  
Give us energy, imagination, and love  
to serve one another with gentleness  
and a recommitment to peace.  
Amen.