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January 16, 2022

## An Acceptable Time

2 Corinthians 6: 2-10

Letter from a Birmingham City Jail  
Desmond Tutu's Letter to John Vorster

Worship this week coincides with the observance of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday. There are many ways in which the church might observe the King holiday, but one valuable practice, I think, is to take this occasion to listen rather than to speak. Or, to put it another way, we have recently sought to center the voices of women and children in worship through use of the women's lectionary. The King holiday is not the only day throughout the year where we would want to center the voices of African American people, but certainly today is one purposeful day upon which we might center Black voices rather than white. In addition to Dr. King's own work, another Black voice in my head on the King observance this year is Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the priest and prophet of South Africa, who was the voice of God's immense grief and displeasure with the Apartheid regime. Archbishop Tutu died on the day after Christmas.

In place of a conventional sermon this week, I'd like to share with you readings from these two voices. They are bound together by the theme of our scripture today. I also have Wilda Gafney's voice in my head, as we receive her translations of these passages, which are united by their sense of urgency in time. First, the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem, who exclaims, "For the sake of Zion I will not keep silent, and for the sake of Zion I will not keep still." Then Gafney gives us a fresh translation of John the Baptist's preaching in the wilderness. "Repent," he demands, "for the realm of heaven is near." These prophets, Isaiah and John, and soon to arrive on the scene Jesus, plead with the people with a great sense of urgency. The time has come, they are saying. No more waiting. Do not tarry. God's justice demands movement from us. Paul speaks with similar energy. "Look! Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation."

When Dr. King writes from the Birmingham Jail to moderate white ministers, he writes to justify the urgency of the Civil Rights Movement. Change cannot wait for another time because the people who hold power will never find that there is an acceptable time to relinquish their benefits of position, or to risk their privileges with courageous action.

Passages from Letter from the Birmingham Jail  
Page 296; 295; 292-293

The urgency of taking immediate courageous action was also a common theme in the speeches and writings of Archbishop Tutu. Best known to Americans through his leadership of South

Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu rose to prominence as the voice of South Africa's imprisoned and exiled Black leadership. While Nelson Mandela and others were locked up on Robben Island, Tutu's role as a bishop and status on the global stage gave him a measure of freedom to speak and travel. He maintained personal contact with white government ministers imploring them to address the problems of minority rule. In this letter you'll hear him describe the suffering of Black South Africans. One policy of the Apartheid government was the Homelands system, which separated Black South Africans by their ethnic identities and resulted in a harsh economy of forced migration that separated working men from their families. If anything the situation for Black South Africans was even more violent than the Jim Crow system of segregation in the United States. While the Civil Rights struggle in our country used nonviolent resistance to achieve constitutionally defined rights for all people, in South Africa there was no constitutional consensus that all people could be free. Tutu worried that without immediate constitutional reforms the country would experience devastating bloodshed. Globally, he implored rich nations to sanction and divest from the apartheid regime to force the white government to negotiate. He could often be heard in speeches, books, and radio interviews pressing American and European governments to take action now.

Tutu's Letter to John Vorster  
28-29, 31-33, 35-36

Look! Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!