



ADVENT VESPERS HOMILY – WTU – DECEMBER 4, 2011

The newest memorial in Washington, DC, dedicated on October 16 of this year, honors Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in particular for his work for civil rights. The simple but impressive monument is set beautifully on the tidal basin and stands appropriately across from the Jefferson Memorial, commemorating the author of the Declaration of Independence, a charter of freedom.

If you have seen the monument, I'd simply encourage you to recall it. If not, I'd like to describe it to you as I think reflects Dr. King's work. One could approach the monument from the rear, behind a large mass of granite, what is called the mountain of despair. It should be one large mass of granite, but one walks in between these two masses of rock because another part of this mountain has been hewn from it and is moved forward; at the front of that piece of granite, and sculpted from it, stands the 28 foot figure of Dr. King. He looks straight ahead, resolute. A phrase from Dr. King's 1963 "I have a dream" speech describes the monument: "out of a mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

If I were to offer an interpretation of the work, I would suggest that it describes graphically the quest for civil rights in this country. One begins with the mountain of despair, the situation of denial of the rights and dignity of persons; out of that mountain, through the work of people like Dr. King, comes a stone of hope, a stone to build a new mountain. But the work is not yet complete. So Dr. King looks forward to a future where the still unrealized dream may be fulfilled. He stands determined, but with hope.

I'd like to suggest, brothers and sisters, that this memorial might offer us a visual for the Season of Advent that we began last week and that we celebrate in joyful hope this evening. The season is one that really focuses on three moments in our own liberation, in our salvation history. We look to the past when we as humanity lived in a mountain of despair, in need of a savior, and see that Emmanuel came into our world to save us from sin and despair and to invite us to a place on a new mountain of hope and of life. We might see in the "stone of hope" a second moment that we recall in Advent, that, as we look to the celebration of the birth of Christ, of the invisible God becoming visible, we also celebrate the ways that Jesus Christ still comes into our world, the way in which God is raising up living stones of hope today, forming the new mountain of the Kingdom of God. And yet this work is incomplete. As Dr. King looks forward in hope, so we live in joyful hope for the coming of the fullness of God's Kingdom, much as the Israelites waited as the prophets Micah and Isaiah spoke of the Lord's mountain as a place of wisdom, of healing, of comfort, of peace, of nourishment and bounty; that is yet to come. We live in joyful hope.

I would like to focus a bit on our "in-between" time and how, in this time between the Gift of Emmanuel and the fullness of the Kingdom, we are to form and to be living stones of hope in our world. Each one of us might reflect on how we might do that individually. But in light of our intention this year to celebrate the Washington Theological Union's mission over these past forty-three years, I would like to reflect on how the Union has been a stone of hope for our world, how it was born and continues to minister in situations where there might be a temptation to fear, or hopelessness or even despair.

As you know, the Union was formed in 1968, at a time when the founding religious orders saw their numbers dwindling and found themselves unable to sustain free-standing seminaries. Out of that situation of uncertainty, perhaps hopelessness, the Union was founded, a genuine stone of hope to continue the ministry of formation of religious in the Church. Then, almost immediately the Union, committed to the vision of the Second Vatican Council, responded to the call to educate the laity. The vision of the church as People of God with a mission and a ministry for everyone in light of Baptism raised questions such as, "What do we do? How do we know our place in the church? How do we prepare for it?" And the Union became a stone of hope for the laity and religious in the church to build up the kingdom. Since its foundation, over 1400 graduates and many other students, I believe, have been instrumental in forming and being stones of hope in the world.



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Each of us might think of people whom we know who prayed, studied, and ministered at the Union over the years. Think, for example, of Laurie Schuler who works as a campus minister at the University of St. Thomas in Fayetteville, Arkansas; Redemptorist John Gallagher working among the addicted poor in Brazil; Jill Rauh's work for the poor at the Catholic Campaign for Human Development; Franciscan Paul Breslin working with the poverty stricken in Peru; current student, Mary Novak, active in peacebuilding efforts in Kenya; Glenmary Tim Murphy working in rural Mississippi; Capuchin Paul Zaborowski serving with the poor in inner city Baltimore; I think, only partly in jest, of Joan Christenson's quiet ministry within the walls of this institution for many students almost on the brink of despair; Jim Coriden, not only dedicated dean here for twenty years but servant to the church through his expertise in Canon Law; and Vincent Cushing who served as president for 24 years, but widely respected beyond these walls for his contribution to theological education in the United States. Each one of these people, and so many other alumni, staff, administrators, board members, faculty, and benefactors that you recall, have been and will be stones of hope in the church and world.

Now, calling all of this to mind could be a cause for us to despair because we know that the doors to our beloved institution will be closing. But I think it is still a moment of joyful hope, at least bittersweet hope, because One who is greater than us is at work here; it never has depended and never will depend solely on us.

Many years ago German theologian Jürgen Moltmann (*God in Creation*, Fortress Press, 1984, page 133) noted a distinction between two different Latin words for future. He says that *futurum* expresses the future that flows out of the present, almost what must be in light of what is. The future is, in a sense, determined by current conditions.

Moltmann also speaks of the word *adventus*, from which our season of Advent comes. This refers to a future coming toward us that does not depend solely on what is, but rather it is God's future for us, coming into our time. There is often an element of surprise to this future. And that is cause for joyful hope. We have already experienced some of God's future in the various stones of hope in our lives, unexpected but welcome experiences of hope. But we await its fullness.

It is certainly true that as a community, we could easily give way to despair, but that would be living a future of *futurum*, as if all depended on us. As you know, religious orders surfaced in the Church to respond to a particular need. Sometimes those orders ceased to exist, not because there was no more need, but because, in some way they had accomplished a particular mission entrusted to them and God was calling others to continue their work. God was raising up other stones of hope.

Might we view the Union's mission in this light and pause tonight to celebrate what God has done in raising up this stone of hope, the Washington Theological Union, and by means of it, countless others living stones of hope in our church and world? We pause in thanksgiving and in joyful hope this evening, grateful for being given the gift of Emmanuel and for the invitation to be instruments of his presence in the world *now* and well into God's future through our graduates and those touched by their ministry.

So, we might pray together the former translation of the Embolism from our Eucharistic liturgy: "Deliver us, Lord, from every evil and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy, keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety, as we wait *in joyful hope* for the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ." "See, I am coming soon." Come, Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen.

- Rev. Kevin O'Neil, C.Ss.R.