

*We Must Overcome*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Text:**  
Amos 5: 1-27  
Luke 4:14-21

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### Amos 5: 1-27

**1** Hear this word that I [Amos] take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel: **2** Fallen, no more to rise, is maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up. **3** For thus says the Lord God: The city that marched out a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which marched out a hundred shall have ten left. **4** For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek me and live; **5** but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beer-sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. **6** Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. **7** Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! **8** The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name, **9** who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress. **10** They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. **11** Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. **12** For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. **13** Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. **14** Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. **15** Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. **16** Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, "Alas! alas!" They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; **17** in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the Lord.

**18** Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; **19** as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. **20** Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? **21** I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. **22** Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. **23** **Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24** **But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.** **25** Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? **26** You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images, which you made for yourselves; **27** therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts.

### Luke 4:14-21

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. **15** He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. **16** 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, **17** and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: **18** "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed 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, **19** to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." **20** 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. **21** Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

On Friday afternoon a week ago I stood in Rooms 306 and 307 of a motel in Memphis, TN. I looked out the plate glass window in front of me and saw what Martin Luther King, Jr. saw just before a bullet tore through the right side of his face and exploded in his chest taking his life. I looked out the window at the iconic balcony railing that has become for us a memory of the end of a life that changed in so many ways the tenor and tone of our society.

On April 4, 1968, Dr. King stood on that balcony, joking with fellow pastors Ralph Abernathy and Billy Kyles as they prepared to go to dinner at Kyles' home. He leaned over that railing and chatted with Jesse Jackson down by the waiting cars. Jackson said to King, "Doc, this is Ben Branch. Ben used to live in Memphis. He plays in our band." King leaned over the railing to tell Branch he remembers him and asked him to "play 'Precious Lord' like you've never played it before," at the worship service later that evening. Branch said, "Dr. King, you know I do that all the time." King responded, "But tonight, especially for me. I want you to play it real pretty." Branch said, "I will, Doc," and told him to put on an overcoat, since it might be chilly later. At 6:00 pm a shot rang out from the bathroom window of the rooming house across the street and Dr. King's life came to an end.

Standing in that spot on Friday with "Precious Lord" singing from the audio system filling the room around me, I was moved to an almost indescribable feeling of sadness for what we lost with that act of violence. Yet I was also filled with a reminder that violence will never win out over determined, God-led acts of justice and non-violent resistance. Even on that balcony where a huge, brilliant life came to an abrupt violent end, that violence did not win. That single bullet ended a life but not the movement that Dr. King's witness inspired nor the dream that he spoke of 5 years earlier on the Lincoln Memorial steps when he called us to task, to never be satisfied until, as God through Amos told us, "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

"I have a *dream* today! ... I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; 'and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.' This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go ... with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

Standing on that balcony on Friday I was also filled with the scriptural power that led Dr. King then and that leads civil rights movements today – be they for racial equality, or gender issues, or sexual orientation, or disability rights – movements of justice that continue to call us to task at this moment in our history. In whatever acts of justice we take on today we are also girded by the same words of scripture that have called to us generation after generation after generation.

Words of the prophet Amos: "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," Of Isaiah as read in the synagogue by Jesus: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed 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." And of Micah: what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? "

Friday afternoon my eyes and mind were focused on the exhibits of the National Civil Rights Museum attached to the Lorraine Motel in Memphis (where I was attending a UM Disability Task Force meeting) and my heart was heavy when I realized that the

final exhibit in which I stood was actually Dr. King's room looking out over that balcony railing.

On Friday evening during my journey home I was attacked by a vicious stomach bug which put me to bed for the next 3 days. I was in a feverish stupor on Saturday morning when from my bedside radio I began to hear reports from Tucson, AZ, where a young man with a handgun critically wounded Congresswoman Giffords in a failed assassination attempt and in the process shot 19 people, killing 6. As news reports that morning filtered into my cloudy brain I started to connect the events of Saturday with my revelations of Friday.

When will we truly realize that violence leads to violence leads to violence leads to violence? When will we finally figure out that even violent talk leads to violent talk leads to violent talk? And when will we ever accept the fact that God does not want us to ever react to each other in violence and that we must overcome whatever urge we might have to do so? It's not going to happen miraculously, it's not going to happen with the stroke of a legislator's pen, it's not going to happen spontaneously when one day we wake up and violence is gone. Non-violent resistance, non-violent behavior, non-violent reaction is only going to happen when we decide it's going to happen.

I cleaned out my office earlier this week and I discovered a Sunday comic that I had forgotten I saved. *Opus*, by Berkeley Breathed from 2007 and it reminded me of the same issue we face today – failure to accept anyone who disagrees with us and ultimately turning the anger, rage and frustration back on the mediator. A lack of civility we're calling it these days.



As chairperson of *Heeding God's Call*, our non-violent, multi-faith gun violence prevention movement that has grown continually since our civil disobedience arrests in January 2009, I was asked to comment on the Tucson shooting for a press release. Some were immediately responding (defensively it would seem) that they saw no connection between this act and the violent political rhetoric of the past few years. My initial public response went like this – my rhetoric contribution to the moment if you will:

Do they really not see the connection? Two of Congress-woman Giffords' political rivals have responded by saying that they just don't see the connection between this attempted assassination and a sniper's crosshairs on a map in one's political campaign or the shooting of an M-16 as a fundraising promo in another's campaign. How sad it is that they *can't* see the connection. When our erstwhile political leaders step over the line and reference violence as a solution it's clear that some people will inevitably respond in violence. People of faith who believe in a non-violent solution will not be silent on this issue. Weapons manufacturers, gun lobbyists, retailers, and politicians who vote their line must hear our cry – we *must* overcome the fear and intimidation and we will stand with the majority in this nation who favor reasonable laws to prevent gun violence.

When does it end? When will we learn? When does it stop? When do we stop? After April 4, 1968? – No. After September 11, 2001? – No. After January 8, 2011? – One can hope, but probably – No.

On Friday, Eric Fuller who had been shot in the knee at last Saturday's massacre had some free time before a doctor's appointment to look at the bullet that was still lodged in there. He decided to go to the home of the shooter and his parents. His plan was to offer forgiveness to the man and his family. No one came to the door. One can only assume that in his own heart and mind Fuller has forgiven the man who brought violence directly into his path and who had deepened the violence in our world.

Yesterday during the filming of ABC's weekly "Town Hall" with news anchor Christiane Amanpour she brought up the issues of gun safety and mental health. One member of the audience who identified with the tea-party movement stood up and said debate over the shooting's political and gun-law implications should be delayed until emotions settle down. The same Eric Fuller was seated near the front in an area reserved for victims and special guests and he began to appear increasingly frustrated and agitated. Fuller swiveled in his chair, raised his camera and took a photo of the pro-gun speaker, muttering, "You're dead," according to the man sitting behind him. "You need to be respectful. You need to calm down," the man said. Fuller said, "What'd you do, vote for this guy?" Police officers escorted Fuller outside and arrested him for making threats.

When does it end? When will we learn? When does it stop? When do we stop?

Hear Amos again sharing with us what God has spoken to him:

"I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish

justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious. ...

Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept the ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

God requires from us justice, not hate and anger. God requires righteousness, never vengeance or violence. When we act in hate and anger and vengeance and violence, the day of the Lord will be dark for us – if we flee from violence like we flee a lion we end up facing a bear anyway – so I assume the only way to resist the lion (or the bear) is to stand up to it. God rejects our offerings which we often only offer at face value – our simple word-offering about forgiveness is muted by our acts which speak volumes about what's truly in our hearts.

The anthem of the civil rights movement begun in the 1950s still carries today. "We Shall Overcome" has its roots in African American hymns from the early 20th century, and was first used as a protest song in 1945, when striking tobacco workers in Charleston, S.C., sang it on their picket line. In the 1950s, it quickly became the movement's unofficial anthem of the American racial civil rights movement. When President Lyndon Johnson in March 1965 made his vow to fight for voting rights for all Americans, he included a final promise: "We shall overcome." In the decades since, the song has been embraced by civil rights and pro-democracy movements from Northern Ireland to Eastern Europe, from Berlin to Beijing, and from South Africa to South America.

We sang it in front of Colisomo's Gun Center just before getting arrested in January 2009. "We shall overcome ... we shall overcome someday."

We sing it remembering Dr. King.

What I would rather we sing these days is "we *must* overcome." Violence snuffed out Dr. King's life in 1968 – just a few years before it had taken away President John Kennedy and just a few months after King's assassination violence silenced Bobby Kennedy. Violence in all its forms rears its head often and when it does we are startled and often our first instinct is to be cowed and intimidated. We must not be. We must overcome – our baptismal vows demand nothing less of us than we accept the power God gives us to "to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." Acts of violence – words of violence – are nothing less than evil and unjust and oppressive.

In today's New York Times, columnist Frank Rich writes: "If we learn nothing from this [Tucson] tragedy, we are back where we started. And where we started was with two years of accelerating political violence — actual violence, not to be confused with violent language — that struck fear into many, not the least of whom was Gabrielle Giffords." He recounts some of the violent politically motivated acts over the past two years – not just words, but actual acts of violence with political motives. (Or see the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence's, "Insurrectionism Timeline" <http://www.csgv.org/issues-and-campaigns/guns-democracy-and-freedom/insurrection-timeline>).

It's not just language. It's not just that they (or we) don't see the connection between political rhetoric and actual violence. It's actual violence that we must overcome. And we must overcome it not with more guns or more armor or more bodyguards or, as one Congressman has proposed for the House gallery, a Plexiglass shield between us and our elected leaders. We must decide to

overcome evil without cowing to it, without being afraid of it, and without resorting to evil ourselves.

Jesus knew what he was talking about, didn't he? I think we still believe that, right? "Filled with the power of the Spirit" he rose as the lay reader in the Nazareth synagogue one sabbath day. "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, because he has anointed 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.' 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.'"

Good news to the poor, release to the captives, healing to those who need it, freedom for the oppressed, redistribution of wealth. And we know that he chose to accomplish those things using non-violence as a tool.

We *must* overcome. Not just someday, but this day. We must tone down the violent speech that calls us to violent confrontation that leads some to violent action. We must face violence acknowledging it for what it is – cowardice and fear wrapped in frustration and anger – and we must back it down to its true place where it has no control over our lives.

We *must* overcome. Dr. King once said: "When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

We *must* overcome. As followers of Jesus we really have no other choice. We *must* overcome.

Amen.