



Photo by: Wilson Rodriguez

## Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Man within a Movement

### RESOURCES FOR REIMAGINING MLK DAY

On January 19, 2026, many communities around the United States will celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day to honor the life and legacy of this remarkable Civil Rights Movement leader. Dr. King's words, sermons, and books continue to inspire, motivate, and transform the lives of Americans deeply invested in civil and human rights for all. His voice and vision shaped a movement, *and* the movement shaped his voice and vision. **Racial Justice Ministries** invites you to draw your attention to Dr. King as a man within a movement. No movement is a single leader, but every movement is shaped by individuals who find ways to make their unique contributions to build and amplify our collective power for change. The resources highlighted below are an invitation to celebrate the impact of Dr. King's leadership within the leader-full movement toward racial justice. May Dr. King's voice and vision call you to take up your unique role in the work of racial justice because the movement towards racial justice continues!

## PRAYING A MOVEMENT: WORSHIP RESOURCES

### *Call to Worship*

Leader: With the rolling waters of mighty streams, we gather to join the movement of God's justice.

Assembly: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."<sup>1</sup>

Leader: With the future dreams of a mustard seed, we come together to join the movement of Jesus' liberation.

Assembly: "Every step towards the goal of justice requires...struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action."<sup>2</sup>

Leader: With the shining light of a tender flame, we bring our hearts, to join the movement of the Spirit's love.

Assembly: "It is true that as we struggle for freedom in America we will have to boycott at times. But we must remember...that a boycott is not an end within itself ...the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of [people]."<sup>3</sup>

Leader: Ringing with prayer and praise, bringing our unique gifts and passions, we become the Body of Christ, moving with faith and action in the world.

Assembly: Joining this great movement of hope, let us worship God.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. Facing the Challenge of a New Age, address delivered at the first annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change, 1956.

*Call to Worship*

Leader: Listen, people of God, for the voice of God is calling:  
"The ultimate measure of a [person] is not where [they] stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where [they] stand at times of challenge and controversy."<sup>1</sup>

Assembly: **In difficult times, God calls us to join the movement of courageous truth-tellers.**

Leader: In comfortable times, God calls us to join the movement of silence-breakers.

Assembly: **In times of struggle, God calls us to join the movement toward freedom.**

Leader: In times of peace, God calls us to join the movement toward justice.

Assembly: **In all times, God calls us to join with the movement of the Spirit.**

Leader: Listen, people of God, for the voice of God is calling:  
"Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a better person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in."<sup>2</sup>

Assembly: Let us worship God, listening for the voice that calls us to join the movement of love.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love*, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. March for Integrated Schools, April 18, 1959.



Photo by: Rone Ferreira

*Time of Confession*

- Call to Confession

Leader: As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds, us, "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny,"<sup>1</sup> and yet, we recognize that we are not always aligned with the movement of God's love and justice. Our time of confession gives us the opportunity to tell the truth about our struggles, failures and misalignments, trusting that God's love can and will help us become the beloved community. So let us pray, lifting up our longings that God's kingdom may come on earth.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963

- Prayer of Confession

Assembly: God of many gifts and one Spirit, we confess that sometimes it is easier to celebrate a single prophetic voice, than to honor the complex movements that give rise to freedom. When in our desire to honor leaders, we forget or gloss over all those who make change possible, forgive us. When we lift up Martin Luther King, Jr. as a visionary and leader, and ignore or disbelieve that we have a part to play in making his dreams a reality, forgive us. Empower us to take up our roles in the movement toward racial justice, knowing that each of us has unique gifts to offer, and together, we are the Spirit's movement toward love. Amen.

- Words of Assurance

Leader: Beloved ones of the Holy One, hear the good news:  
"unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."<sup>1</sup>  
We are forgiven and freed to become God's love together.

Assembly: Praise God, who equips us to join the movement of the Spirit.  
"For when people get caught up with that which is right  
and we are willing to sacrifice for it,  
there is no stopping point short of victory."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, Oslo, Norway, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, April 3, 1968.

### *Time of Confession*

- Call to Confession

Leader: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "The person who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as the one who helps perpetrate it. The person who accepts evil without protesting against it, is really cooperating with it."<sup>1</sup> Let us take a moment to confess before God and each other the evil we have perpetrated and the evil with which we have cooperated by doing nothing to prevent it. Trusting in the mercy of the God who calls us to justice, let us confess our sin.

- Prayer of Confession

Assembly: God of justice and mercy, you call us to speak prophetically amid difficult times. We admit that sometimes we are unwilling to give up our comfort and safety to follow where your voice leads us. When we use excuses like, we can't find the right words, or the moment has passed, or it would have been rude to say...forgive us. Give us the courage to join the movement toward racial justice by speaking your words of justice, peace, and love, even when we are fearful. Guide us as we seek to find new ways to follow your call of truth-telling. In the name of the one who is the Word of love that we speak, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

- Words of Assurance

Leader: When we are freed to acknowledge the wrongs around us,  
the pain among us,  
the sin within us,  
and the work before us,  
God's movement of mercy, peace and justice is being revealed in our midst.

Assembly: The good news is that we are forgiven and freed.

Leader: Our burden is lifted:  
we are empowered to follow the movement of the Spirit.

Assembly: The liberating love of God is at work within us. Thanks be to God.

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* 1958

### *Prayers for the Day*

To find excellent prayers on freedom, liberation, racial justice, reparations, etc. check out Cole Arthur Riley's wonderful prayers via Black Liturgies on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/blackliturgies/>

Find out more about Riley on her website: <https://colearthurriley.com/>

And pre-order her book, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation and the Stories that Make Us* here: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/673836/this-here-flesh-by-cole-arthur-riley/>

### *Benediction*

Referencing Jesus' own recognition of the prophetic movement he joined and the liberatory character of the movement into which he called others (Luke 4:14-21), Jan Richardson's "A Prophet's Blessing" would be a wonderful combination of benediction and charge for an MLK Day service. You can find the text here: <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2013/01/20/epiphany-3-to-proclaim-release/>

## VOICING A MOVEMENT: QUOTES AND EXCERPTS FROM SPEECHES AND SERMONS

Perhaps the most quoted and recognized of all of Dr. King's speeches and sermons is his, "I Have a Dream" speech, with its iconic imagery of King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after a peaceful march on Washington by hundreds of thousands of protestors. And yet, it is rare that communities engage with this speech in its entirety. The dream of which King speaks is so often taken out of context and used to support a colorblind narrative that ultimately reinscribes racial injustice. Dr. King was, however, unflinching in locating this dream in the critiques, goals and tactics of the Southern Freedom/Civil Rights Movement. And King was equally clear that this was no pie-in-the-sky dream of a far-off future, but a dream whose time had long-since come, and would take struggle, and the disciplined collective power of resistance to make real.

"It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. 1963 is not an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."

- From "I Have a Dream" speech, given as part of the March on Washington at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, August 28, 1963

[Read or listen to the full speech](#)

- For a multi-media exploration of the speech in historical context and engaged by contemporary activists, see Stanford University's Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute's [Freedom's Ring](#) project.

In many speeches, sermons and writings, Dr. King highlighted what he understood to be the three most vexing social structures preventing the flourishing of all creation, and most directly impacting Black communities: racism, militarism, and materialism/economic exploitation/capitalism. King recognized that any movement that holds at its center dismantling discrimination based on race, must also have in its sights the structural inequities created by capitalism and the global consequences of perpetual war and imperialistic conquest. When we consider Dr. King as a "man within a movement," we can turn to the complex systemic analysis of these three constellations of social dominance as the heart of the movement he helped build and sustain. From Black Lives Matter to Land Back, many of our contemporary movements for social justice continue the systemic and structural work aimed at combatting these strategies of dominance. Focusing on these "giant triplets" can help us imagine a fuller picture of the movement to which King contributed and consider how we might continue this "radical revolution of values" in our day.

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

- From "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" speech, given at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967

[Read the full speech](#)

- See also "Three Evils of Society," speech to the National Conference for New Politics in Chicago, August 31, 1967

[Listen to the full speech](#)

- For a contemporary analysis of these "giant triplets," see "[Overcoming Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'three evils of society'](#)" by Thomas Fraser of the Fellowship of Reconciliation

In the movements Dr. King shaped and was shaped by, the strategy and philosophy of nonviolence was the beating heart. King placed himself within a long line of nonviolent activists, from Jesus to Ghandi to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And many have continued use this central tactic within movements toward racial justice. Yet, the nonviolence at the heart of the civil rights and southern freedom movements has often been misunderstood as an avoidance of conflict, or misused to condemn and tone police the actions of newer resistance movements. A deeper exploration of the practice of nonviolence could offer sustenance and inspiration for those who are being called to join the movement in this moment. For King, nonviolence was not only a movement tactic, but a fundamental approach to life, including the inner life of oneself. Transforming the violence within ourselves is indelibly linked to the transformation of violence in society itself. How might we be called to practice nonviolence as the pathway to racial justice?

“What the main sections of the civil rights movement in the United States are saying is that the demand for dignity, equality, jobs, and citizenship will not be abandoned or diluted or postponed. If that means resistance and conflict we shall not flinch. We shall not be cowed. We are no longer afraid.

The word that symbolizes the spirit and the outward form of our encounter is *nonviolence*, and it is doubtless that factor which made it seem appropriate to award a peace prize to one identified with struggle. Broadly speaking, nonviolence in the civil rights struggle has meant not relying on arms and weapons of struggle. It has meant noncooperation with customs and laws which are institutional aspects of a regime of discrimination and enslavement. It has meant direct participation of masses in protest, rather than reliance on indirect methods which frequently do not involve masses in action at all.

... Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. I am not unmindful of the fact that violence often brings about momentary results. Nations have frequently won their independence in battle. But in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.

... The nonviolent resisters can summarize their message in the following simple terms: we will take direct action against injustice despite the failure of governmental and other official agencies to act first. We will not obey unjust laws or submit to unjust practices. We will do this peacefully, openly, cheerfully because our aim is to persuade. We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts. We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witnesses to truth as we see it.”

- From the Nobel Lecture, given the day after Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Sweden, December 11, 1964

[Read the full lecture](#)

- See also, King's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech from Oslo on December 10, 1964

[Read the full speech](#)

- For more on the six principles of nonviolence and six steps of nonviolent social change, check out the [King Philosophy – Nonviolence 365 resources](#) from the King Center.
- For a contemporary take on Kingian Nonviolence from a longtime practitioner who has trained thousands of system-involved people in the practices of nonviolence, check out Kazu Haga's [Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm](#)

## JOINING A MOVEMENT: RESOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Resources for deeper exploration*

➤ [The King Center](#)

Established in 1968 by Mrs. Coretta Scott King, the King Center serves not only as a destination for exploring Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's history and legacy, but also as a resource for those wanting to create a just, humane, equitable and peaceful world by applying Dr. King's nonviolent philosophy and methodology. Check out their educational resources, historical documents, and live events, including Beloved Community talks.

➤ [The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University](#)

An incredible repository of documents with commentaries that help illuminate their historical context and impact, the King Institute at Stanford also offers expansive and innovative educational resources, from curricula to podcasts to timelines and chronologies. Many of King's original texts are available digitally in their entirety on the site, and accompanying articles offer deeper understandings of how each speech, sermon, letter, and essay fits within the broader movements of which King was a part.

➤ [Learning for Justice](#)

An educational partner of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Learning for Justice offers lesson plans, curricula, and other resources for engaging more fully Dr. King's radical history and legacy. Just reading the lessons plans provided can be a profound learning experience, but they also provide great fodder for sermons, reflections, faith formation classes, and worship experiences.

➤ [Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial](#)

In addition to be a location for contemplation, remembrance and education, the National Park Service website for the King's DC memorial offers many resources for learning more about Dr. King's life and legacy, including a page of quotes from throughout King's life, including their sources, that are featured in the memorial. Also check out [the African American Civil Rights Network](#), a new national network of places and resources honoring the Civil Rights Movement across the United States.

*Brief Bibliography*

- *Strength to Love*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963.  
This is a collection of Dr. King's most requested sermons.
- *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967.  
An assessment of America's priorities and a warning that they need to be re-ordered.
- *Why We Can't Wait*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963.  
The essential writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., James M. Washington, ed.
- *A Testament of Hope*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986.  
A collection of quotations by Dr. King selected by Mrs. Coretta Scott King focusing on seven areas of concern: The Community of Man, Racism, Civil Rights, Justice and Freedom, Faith and Religion, Nonviolence and Peace.
- *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York: IPM in Association with Warner Books, 1998.  
A collection of eleven of Dr. King's most powerful sermons, from his earliest known audio recording to his last sermon, delivered days before his assassination. With introductions by renowned theologians and ministers including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, filled with moving personal reflections and firsthand accounts of the events surrounding each sermon.
- See also this [list of books for further study](#) from the King Institute at Stanford.

*Articles and Podcasts on King as "a man within a movement"*

- Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, "[Martin Luther King's Radical Legacy, From the Poor People's Campaign to Black Lives Matter](#)"

- Grace Lee Boggs, "[The Beloved Community of Martin Luther King](#)"
- Barbara Ransby, "[The Preacher and the Organizer: The Politics of Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement](#)" in *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*
- Clayborn Carson, "[Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle](#)" in *Journal of American History* Also check out this interview with Clayborn Carson on the [Radical Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King](#)
- [The Radical King audiobook](#), ed. by Cornel West  
A cast of beloved actors performing 23 selections from the speeches, sermons, and essays of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—many never recorded during his lifetime – chosen and introduced by Cornel West.
- [World House Podcast](#)  
21 Episodes take listeners through King's biography, focusing on important moments in his life and leadership. Many episodes shed light on the larger workings of the movement within which King organized, like Episode 16: Selma, AL and the 1965 Voting Rights Campaign.
- [Episode 293: MLK 360, The Breakdown with Shaun King](#)  
Shaun King plays 5 very special audio clips of Dr. King that you have likely never heard before and breaks down why they are so very important.
- Jasmine Pulido, "[Freedom-Dreaming is What Will Save Us](#)"
- [MLK 51: 5 Black Poets Reflect on Expanding the Dream](#)  
"I only dream of us. That's not the hard part. The hard part is not forgetting in the morning... The hard part is the showing up to tell you. Knowing that what I know is less than what we all forgot. The hard part is practicing in the light, what can only be learned in the dark..."

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