

**“Remaining Present”**  
**Micah 7:1, 7-9; Theme Reading from MLK Jr.**

**Theme Reading: Martin Luther King Jr.**

“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.”

**Introduction**

Weary. Not just being tired, but weary. That is how many of you have described yourselves to me in recent days and weeks. Weary is a feeling of being worn down. Resources depleted. Spent. Rest may be recommended, but the weariness that has been described to me has more to do with demands on our strength that we have carried successfully, but not without effort, for just too long.

I am not exempt from either the weariness, or the question of where to find the energy for yet another round of Covid-19. I have been teaching two in-person classes this Winter term at Clark College. On the first day of one of those classes, a student who was formerly in one of my Fall classes that was entirely on Zoom, said to me, “Wow! Dr. Ludwig, you are really short.” Knowing what he just said in front of the entire class, he retracted a bit, and said, “It is just that you have such a tall personality on Zoom!”

But the weariness that we all feel has to do with more than just the ongoing Covid and Zoom fatigue. Like so many of you, I have been weary about our state of politics and lack of progress on so many levels. So many of us, if not all of us, are not just tired, but weary.

Martin Luther King III expressed his weariness not too long ago when he said that we should not hold celebrations of his father’s life this year—not another re-playing of “I Have a Dream”—UNTIL the right to vote—for all of us—has been secured once again. Weary.

**Spiritual Guides: Eddie Glaude and James Baldwin**

These days, I have found myself drawn to Eddie Glaude, Jr.’s recent book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. Glaude is a Professor of African American Studies at Princeton. Many of you will have seen him on MSNBC where he regularly offers commentary. James Baldwin was probably the most prominent Black author and public intellectual of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. The book is not just biography, not just history, not just scholarly analysis. It is all of those, but more importantly it is a blueprint for managing challenges and disruptions in our lives.

Glaude refers to Baldwin, and like so many of you that lived through King’s assassination, describes how he had to find a way to move on, to move ahead, to continue after that violent loss. Perhaps it was the many violent losses of Baldwin’s day and the many violent losses of our own that causes such weariness. Baldwin writes:

*“When the dream was slaughtered and all that love and labor seemed to have come to nothing, we scattered ... We knew where we had been, what we had tried to do, who had cracked, gone mad, died, or been murdered around us.” Then we said something profound! “Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost; it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again.”*

The choice to “check-out” or be absent or abdicate is an option. The choice to allow our weariness to take hold and simply give up is an option. But I know that those options aren’t in me and I suspect that they are not in you either. We will not give up. Not everything is lost! We will choose to be present even if we are held apart at times by a pandemic. We choose to keep the dream alive.

### **Darkness Vs. Light**

Last month I traveled to Puerto Rico to meet with our Lutheran and Presbyterian mission partners. On my first night there, I must confess, I broke the law. It was dark when I arrived and after renting my car and setting up Google Maps with my phone, I realized that I could not get Siri to talk to me. I was truly on my own. Here in the huge city of San Juan trying to navigate to my hotel with a phone that wouldn’t talk to me, I was forced to hold my phone so that I could read the directions (without my reading glasses mind you) while trying to navigate the rush hour traffic, in the dark, of a foreign city. After taking several wrong turns and exits, including a wrong tunnel or two, several alleyways, I somehow arrived at my hotel. Thank God!

It was one of the scariest moments of my life. It was also thrilling to be fully dependent on myself and to be present in the moment. We so often shield ourselves from darkness and find ourselves dependent on directions and technology and light for our sense of safety and security. And when our lives are disrupted with the loss of our friend Siri, or on the more serious side, with the loss of a loved one, or values that seem hopeless, or irrational politics, or a never-ending pandemic, we become weary. We need to remain present even in difficult times. Even when we experience disruptions. Especially then.

The only direct flight from New York JFK to Portland is a night flight that leaves the East Coast at 7:30 PM and, thanks to the time zone change, arrives six hours later, at 10:30 PM. I took that flight on my return from Puerto Rico last month. Most of the flight was spent above the clouds in the deep darkness, of course. But as the plane descended toward Portland we broke through the low cloud cover and instantly found ourselves confronted by the jarring brightness of the lights of the city. It looked as if every light in the city was lit to hold back the dark.

Rev. John Marsh writes, *“If you are going to meditate by candlelight, do not hurry to light the candle. The glow [of the flame] may concentrate your energies but it will cost you the contours of the room.”* He goes on to say, *“All that your light does not expose will become alien. [Leave the flame unlit and be present to] the night...as one who belongs.”* As one who belongs. Don’t be an alien to the darkness.

### **Another Spiritual Guide: Rosemary Bray McNatt**

Another spiritual guide that has been meaningful to me during these times is Rosemary Bray McNatt. McNatt is an editor at the NY Times Book Review who wrote a personal memoir entitled “Unafraid of the Dark.” I commend it to you.

In her memoir, Rose tells of growing up poor on Chicago’s South Side. She writes: *“Certain things can shape you, change you forever. Years later, long after you think you’ve escaped, some ordinary experience flings you backward into memory. Being poor is like that. Living surrounded by fear and rage is like that. I grew up hating the cold, dreading the approach of night. Thirty years later, a too-cold room at night can trigger a flash of terror.”*

Rose, despite her accomplishments, lived much of her life, afraid of the dark. Being a Black woman in America, she had good reason to. But she goes on to write of her sons, now grown, who found the dark a safe place to rest because she made it a safe place for them. And she writes of learning not to fear the dark herself. *“I am learning to be a black woman in a world that often fears and resents my presence. I am learning to [live through the defeats and the frustrations of living in this nation]. ... “I am learning not to be afraid of the dark. ...For the sake of my precious sons, and for the precious children not my own, I can stay unafraid of the dark, and work my way toward morning.”*

Perhaps that language can be helpful for us this time in our life together. How can we learn not to fear the dark—not to fear the troubled times we have lived through and are living through still? How can we continue to work for justice even when such an assault on voting rights is happening? How can we remain present and work our way toward morning?

The task for Christians has always been to trust, to wait and prepare ourselves for the return of the light—to prepare our hearts to welcome the rebirth of hope. We yearn to fly back under the clouds and see the beautiful lights of Portland scattering the hillsides and rivers.

### **Closing**

But let’s NOT be in a hurry to light the candle—lest we lose sight of the contours of the world around us. Be present even in your uncertainty. The Dark is NOT the time to shut down your senses or close off your yearnings and commitments but to deepen them. It is the time to pause and remain present like so many giants of our faith have done in the past—let’s remain present in this historical moment we find ourselves in.

Friends, there is a blessing even in the weariness of this pandemic and unjust world: we have each other. We have one another. If we are committed to remain present— if together, we work toward morning—we shall overcome.

**Amen.**