

On the night of April 3, 1968,
at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee,
as a storm raged outside,
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his final sermon,
titled "I've Been to the Mountaintop".

"We've got some difficult days ahead.
But it doesn't matter with me now.
Because I've been to the mountaintop. . . . And I've looked over.
And I've seen the promised land.
I may not get there with you.
But I want you to know tonight,
that we, as a people
will get to the promised land."

Dr. King had interrupted his Poor People's Campaign to come to Memphis, to stand up for a thousand black sanitation workers who had gone out on strike against the City for safer conditions, better wages and the right to unionize.

By 1967, Dr. King had already begun to shift his vision and efforts. Previous gains in civil rights had not improved the material conditions of life for most African Americans.

"Civil rights alone will not solve the problem of poverty" wrote Dr. King.
"Our struggle is for genuine equality,
which means economic equality.
For we know that it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters.
What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter
if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?"

Organized by Martin and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Poor People's Campaign was a multiracial effort—including African Americans, impoverished white Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Native-Americans—aimed at establishing economic justice and alleviating poverty regardless of race. The Campaign called upon the Federal Government to provide a baseline guarantee of employment, income and housing for poor Americans of diverse backgrounds.

By 1968, LBJ's 'War on Poverty' had failed even as the 'War in Vietnam' was expanding.

The Poor People's Campaign demanded a restructuring of America's economy, away from War, asking for a \$30 Billion anti-poverty package. Dr. King called upon elected and appointed leaders in Washington to establish legislation for full employment, guaranteed income, and decent housing for every American. He called for a radical redistribution of economic power that would, as he described it, "Put God's children on their own two feet."

“Employment for everyone in need of a job,
Or, if a work program is impractical,
an annual income
at levels that sustain life and decent circumstances.”

“If a man doesn’t have a job or an income,
he has neither life
nor ‘liberty [nor even] the possibility for the pursuit of happiness’,

he merely exists.”

In many ways 1968 wasn’t remarkably different from today.

Martin said,

“Do you know that most of the poor people in our country
are working every day?
And they are making wages so low
that they cannot begin to function
in the mainstream
of the economic life of our nation. . . .
it is criminal
to have people working on a full-time basis
and a full-time job
getting [paid] part-time income.”

“We look around
and we see thousands and millions of people
making inadequate wages every day. . . .
they work in our hospitals,
they work in our hotels,
they work in our laundries,
they work in domestic service,
and they find themselves underemployed.”

“You see, no labor is really menial
unless you’re not getting adequate wages.
People are always talking about menial labor.
But if you’re getting a good wage . . . that isn’t menial labor.
What makes it menial [isn’t the labor, it] is the income, the wages.”

Having delivered these words the day before, Dr. King stood on the balcony outside room 306 of the Lorraine Hotel and was cut down at a minute past 6:00 on the evening of April 4, 1968.

Dr. King's assassination shocked the nation. And in tribute and recognition of his martyrdom, it pushed the Poor People's Campaign a few feet forward. On April 10, Congress finally approved the Fair Housing Act which President Johnson signed the next day on April 11, a week after Dr. King's murder.

It took the City of Memphis another 5 days beyond that, but the city ultimately signed a settlement that provided for union recognition and increased wages for the sanitation workers.

But following the riots that ensued nationally after Dr. King's murder, the federal government waded into a national crime policy, one that—along with the Vietnam War—diverted billions of dollars away from anti-poverty, social welfare, and educational programs “to systems of punishment aimed at containing, surveilling and locking up some of the most impoverished black and brown communities in the nation.” Billions of dollars that might have been spent to remediate poverty were instead turned to criminalizing drug users.

And fifty years later, racial segregation, in housing and public schools, has worsened. Aided and abetted by ‘policies’ from federal, state and municipal authorities; from zoning regulations to the drawing and gerrymandering of school and voting districts, to tax policy and efforts aimed at development and gentrification — all these have delayed, distorted or perverted the goal of racial integration.

In the past few years we have seen the success of the Voting Rights Act attacked and hobbled.

Our march Toward the Promised Land has faltered.

50 years later, the median annual income among black households in the United States is about \$36,651, that's about \$24,000 shy of the median income among white households.

The typical full-time black worker earns about \$12,000 less annually than a white worker.

On average, black women earn 66 cents for every dollar earned by a white man.

And most telling, by 2016, the median wealth of white Americans was \$142,000, compared to \$13,500 for black Americans, much of African American wealth having been wiped out in the Great Recession.

Black Americans hold college degrees at only 62 percent the rate of whites. Among black households, one-third fewer are homeowners. And if the homes they own are in predominantly black neighborhoods, they are valued at nearly half the price of similar homes in communities with no black residents.

Black Americans are five times more likely to be arrested and incarcerated than white Americans. And many times more **unlikely** to be hired for decent employment.

According to the Harvard Business Review and Forbes Magazine hiring discrimination against African Americans hasn't declined one bit in the last 25 years.

And though overall 'percentage rates' of poverty in America, including African American poverty, have declined since 1968, the claim that we have essentially won the War on Poverty could not be further from the truth. The United States has the second highest rate of poverty among wealthy developed countries.

At the time of Dr. King's assassination, overall poverty in the US was 12.8%, today it is 12.3%, a half a percentage point decline, but it's still about one in eight Americans- approximately 40 million people living in poverty.

In 1968, almost 35% of African Americans lived in poverty. Today the percentage is down to 22%.

But these percentages hide the fact that greater numbers than ever live in poverty as the population of the country has increased.

In 1968 over 7.6 million African Americans lived in poverty, today that number is over 10 million even though the percentages are down.

Despite claims otherwise, America has yet to alleviate the problem of our own citizens living in extreme abject poverty. According to the World Bank there are 5.3 million Americans who are absolutely poor by global standards. This is the kind of poverty on par with Ethiopia and Nepal, representing a lack of both basic necessities of food and shelter. Today, there are places — "the Mississippi Delta and much of Appalachia — where life expectancy is lower than in Bangladesh and Vietnam." And among a significant percentage in this country "life expectancy is falling; mortality rates from drugs, alcohol and suicide are rising; and the long historical decline in mortality from heart disease has come to a halt."

And somethings haven't changed: women are still poorer than men; minorities are still poorer than non-minorities; the less educated are still poorer than the more educated; single-parent households are poorer than two-parent households;

But most troubling, today, children are poorer than everyone else, their overall rate of poverty standing at 17.5% -- but a **startling 50% of children** in female-headed households live in poverty in the United States of America – **50%!!!**

We are an indifferent outlier among developed nations when it comes to child poverty.

To add to our troubles, the figures I've shared generally ignore such factors as income and payroll taxes, childcare costs and the regional variability of housing costs. In truth, our real American poverty rates are probably percentage points higher.

The figures here in New York State and New York City should worry us: Today 15.5% of New York State residents live in poverty. 22% of children in the State of New York live in poverty. 23% of African American residents and 25.5% of Hispanic/Latinx residents live in poverty.

Here in Kings County with a population of 2.6 million, almost 23% of our residents live in poverty; 32% of our children, 20% of white residents, 22.5% of African-American residents and a whopping 30.5% of Hispanic/Latinx residents.

In NYC, only Bronx County, with 1.2 million fewer residents than Brooklyn, exceeds our own borough's poverty rates with 30.5% of overall residents living in poverty, 43% of children, 23% of white residents, 27% of African American residents, and 36% of Hispanic/Latinx residents.

These aren't numerics, they're human beings. These aren't statistics, they're a national crisis!

Dr. King wrote that , when

“the architects of our republic
wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution
and the Declaration of Independence,
they were signing a promissory note
to which every American was to fall heir.
This note was a promise that all men,
yes, black men as well as white men,
[black women as well as white women]
would be guaranteed
the unalienable rights of life, liberty,
and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today, [said Dr. King back in 1968],
that America has defaulted on this promissory note
insofar as her citizens of color are concerned.
Instead of honoring this sacred obligation,
. . . a check . . . has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the Bank of Justice is bankrupt.
We refuse to believe
that there are insufficient funds
in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.
So we have come
to . . . demand the riches of freedom
and the security of justice.”

Martin had been to the mountaintop and he had seen the Promised Land. He knew that to make it there the march would need to include not only African Americans, but all Americans, for it was his belief and commitment that the only way America could fulfill her promise was if it fulfilled it for each and every person.

More than fifty years after Dr. King was cut down by the assassin's bullet we are called upon to engage in an assessment and reflection on how much and how little progress we have made.

I doubt anyone of us gathered here today subscribes to the canard that we've already arrived in the Promised Land. No, the real question is 'are we still marching toward it?', or 'have we encamped at some dreary oasis along the way'; exhausted, in part satisfied and in part dispirited so that we have confused lapping the first few miles, with actually reaching the finish line.

Sisters and brothers can any of us doubt that we are not yet there? That the Promised Land still lays far in the distance?

There were those among the Israelites in the desert, who counselled that continuing on the path toward the Promised Land was too fraught with danger. That Moses did not know wither he was going. That Moses had died on the mountain top. 'Come!' they said, 'let us build a calf of Gold and we will return to Egypt and be embraced as equals, our God having displayed his awesome might.' The defective reality they had known seemed a more realistic, more pragmatic choice than the aspiration they had only dreamed of.

Today, there are some who argue that, like mixed multitude of old, that for now, it is sufficient to waylay at the oasis on the road.

You may not know this, but in reality, it is only a two-week hike on foot from Egypt to Beersheva. Yet our ancestors spent forty years wandering in the desert.

Well we have spent 50 years, more, wandering since Dr. King's death and we have made *some* progress, but it seems to me that when it comes to poverty, to true economic justice for Americans of Color and therefore for all Americans, we are still closer to Egypt than the Promised Land.

And now we appear to have begun backsliding . . .

Dr. King's words , about living "on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" still ring true. Not only for increasing numbers of African-Americans, but for Hispanics and Latinx, for American Indians and Alaskan Natives, for anyone without a high-school diploma, for the disabled, for the unemployed, and for children, especially those under the age of 5. We have entered a bizarre twilight zone in America, having returned to the economics of the Gilded Age.

As Dr. King once observed,

"This country has socialism for the rich;
rugged individualism for the poor."

This was the Other America that King described the month before his assassination.

"I'm sure that each of us
is painfully aware of the fact
that there is another America,
and that other America
has a daily ugliness about it
that transforms the buoyancy of hope
into the fatigue of despair.
In that other America,
millions of people find themselves forced
to live in inadequate, substandard,
and often dilapidated housing conditions."

"In spite of years of national progress,
the plight of the poor is worsening.
Jobs are on the decline as a result of technological change,
schools north and south
are proving themselves more and more inadequate
to the task of providing adequate education
and thereby entrance into the mainstream of the society.
Medical care is virtually out of reach of millions of black and white poor.
In Mississippi, children are actually starving."

Today we must ask ourselves and the leaders of our government:

'How much has changed since Martin spoke these words in 1968? Has anything changed?'

"We [must] place the problems of the poor
at the seat of government
of the wealthiest nation in the history of mankind." . . .
"We are coming to Washington in a poor people's campaign.
Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses ...
We are coming to demand
that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. . .
We are coming to ask America
to be true to the huge promissory note
that is signed years ago.
And we are coming . . . to call attention
to the gulf between promise and fulfillment;
to make the invisible visible."

"We are called upon
to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. . . .
I choose, [said Dr. King,] to identify with the underprivileged.

I choose to identify with the poor.
I choose to give my life for the hungry.
I choose to give my life for those who have been left out..."

Martin was making the striking point that Poverty in a nation such as ours is not an accident!
is not a condition! is not a social problem!

It is a choice! that we as a society have made and that our leaders have instituted.

And it is a decision that we continue **to choose** to live with!

We can and must choose differently!

"Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness." Dr. King urged the nation.

In the words of the Hebrew Scriptures: "Do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy neighbor. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs."

"I choose to identify with the underprivileged" said Dr. King

"Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the ETERNAL your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings.

"I choose to identify with the poor."

"For there will never cease to be needy ones upon the Earth, which is why I command you: open your hand to your poor and needy neighbor . . ."

"I choose to give my life for the hungry."

"But there shall be no one in need among you, because the Eternal is sure to bless you in the land that the Eternal your God is giving you as a possession . . . , if only you will obey the Eternal your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today."

[Deuteronomy 15:4-11]

"I choose to give my life for those who have been left out"

B'chol l'vavecha, u-v'chol nafshecha, u-v'chol m'odecha

Dr. King gave his heart, his soul , his very being –

WHAT SHALL WE AS A NATION, AND AS CITIZENS OF THAT NATION,
WHAT SHALL **WE CHOOSE**????