

Ferguson, Advent, and God's dream

By [James Sledge](#)

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In the aftermath of last night's rioting in Ferguson, Jeff Krehbiel, a friend and colleague, posted this quote on his Facebook page:

It is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the negro poor has worsened over the last twelve or fifteen years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity.

These words are from Martin Luther King Jr. Clearly he was not addressing the events in Ferguson, but the words ring true for today's headlines and for today's America, regardless of those who say that racism and the civil rights movement belong to the past.

In our church staff meeting this morning, we read Isaiah 2:2-4, which includes the famous words, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." In light of events in Ferguson, it felt appropriate to hear a prophet's vision of days to come, a time when people will walk in God's paths.

Prophets are good at sensing God's dream, and holding it up to us. Dr. King was able to do that. He cast a vision of a different day, a new day, a day God dreamed of and so a day that must someday be. And that dream called people to action, to service and sacrifice in a long and difficult journey toward those days to come.

The events in Ferguson occur just before the first Sunday in Advent. The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship contains a litany for the lighting of Advent Candles that says, "We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ. Advent means coming. We are preparing ourselves for the days..." and the words that follow speak of swords transformed into farming implements, wolves living with lambs, the desert blooming, and Immanuel, God with us. But all too often, all we are not preparing ourselves for any of these things. We are simply getting ready to celebrate another Christmas.

I have nothing against celebrating Christmas, but to do so without attending to the prophetic vision, to God's dream, seems to miss the point somehow. Outside the Church, the coming weeks may be about nothing but decorating and shopping and listening to Christmas music, but that cannot be for us if we are to be the body of Christ.

We celebrate Christ's birth because it is proof that God is engaged in the world, in history. We celebrate Christmas because it is the beginning of our call to be participants in making that dream visible. And so Advent must be a time when we recall the vision of days to come, when we remember that God is faithful, and God's promises will bear fruit. Advent and Christmas should be a time when all Christians recommit ourselves to the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Micah and Martin Luther King, to God's dream of a day that is surely coming.

Regardless of the exact sequence of events in Ferguson, regardless of where "fault" lies in the shooting, the grand jury decision, or the unrest that followed, we who follow Jesus are called to show the world a different possibility. We are called to embody and work for that prophetic vision, that divine dream that so easily dissipates in the face of cynicism and hopelessness.

If we are to prepare during Advent and celebrate at Christmas, surely it must be because we have good news for the citizens of Ferguson, especially for those who have lost all hope. We must be able to declare, "God is with us. God will strengthen us as we give ourselves in service to the prophetic vision and divine dream." We may not be able to bring the kingdom in all its fullness, but we can make it visible and tangible and so help create hope. Otherwise our Christmas is little more than an exercise in nostalgia and manufactured cheerfulness.

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