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During the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, not long after Martin Luther King's own home was bombed, a journalist named William Worthy visited the parsonage where Dr. King lived to interview him. He didn't come alone; he was joined by a nonviolent activist by the name of Bayard Rustin. Now just as the journalist was sitting down in one of Dr. King's armchairs, Rustin shouted at him, "Bill, wait, wait!"

It turns out... King had stashed a couple of loaded *guns* on that particular armchair, and Worthy was *inches* away from... well, blowing his own butt off.

I had never heard that story before. They didn't teach that one in middle school.

Now don't worry, this particular sermon doesn't really have anything to do with *guns*. I *tell* that story because of where it sits in the journey of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this Monday.

That interview took place a year before he became the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, *two* years before he was stabbed in the chest by a disturbed woman, seven years before the march on Washington and "I Have a Dream," eight before winning a Nobel Peace Prize and the passing of the Civil Rights Act, and twelve before a bomb threat, a final speech, and an assassination.

From the moment Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, it can't be said that Dr. King led a charmed life. He, Parks, and so many who fought for Civil Rights faced trials, threats, and obstacles that defied all challengers.

Each of them were tested by a world that wasn't ready for their message, and each of them had to decide *how* they were going to try to accomplish the *incredible* task God had given them.

I mention Dr. King's armchair because it shows a man at the start of his journey, who had already been threatened and attacked more than once, and who was trying to figure out ways to defend himself and his message. I mention that armchair because it reminds us that there were a lot of ways that King's quest could have gone.

Under King's leadership, the Civil Rights movement came to be a crusade with love at its center. A movement that sought love between all people, that fought

oppression and bigoted systems with nonviolent resistance and disobedience, and that strove to force those who *hated* to feel *empathy* for the ones they looked down on. It was a beautiful moral center, and it's not a coincidence that it sounds a lot like the ministry of Jesus Christ.

But the Civil Rights movement could have gone another way, and I think Dr. King's armchair proves that. His house was bombed, he was stabbed, his family was attacked, and his final plane ride was delayed by a *bomb* threat. Every step of the way he was tested by the very obstacles he wanted to overcome, and every step of the way the universe asked him the same question: "What way will you choose?"

With the following he built over the years, and with the sheer number of oppressed and disenfranchised of *all* colors in this country, King could have tried to accomplish his mission in a *lot* of different ways. He could have led an armed revolution, or a mass exodus from the country, or built a walled compound and founded a cult or a sovereign state... or he could have retired to a log cabin in the woods and written pamphlets.

It's not my place to *evaluate* or *grade* Martin Luther King's life choices good or bad... and I wouldn't want to even if I had the right. What I *can* do is state the facts: when faced with all the tests his life and his mission threw at him, King chose the path we remember him for today. A path of nonviolence, of risk, of resistance, of self-sacrifice, and of love.

In our Scripture reading today we encounter someone else who was tested at the beginning, middle, and end of His ministry, and I've mentioned Him once already.

Matthew Chapter 4 starts out very bluntly: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

Two-thousand years of linguistic baggage later, the word "tempted" has a lot of connotations; and all of them bad, right? "Temptation" is evil; it's all the bad stuff in this world trying to make us bad too, because we want to be bad, and being bad feels *so good*. I've got a quart of ice cream waiting for me in my freezer at home that's been calling to me for the last half-hour.

But Matthew 4 wasn't really talking about *that* kind of temptation. In the original Greek, the word we translate today as "tempted" was really a word that meant something more like "tested."

That was what the character of Satan *did* pretty much every time it showed up in the Bible—either Testament. It tested the strength of *Job's* faith by taking away everything he cared about in this world and asking if he still worshipped God. It tested the High Priest Joshua as the prosecuting attorney at his trial. And any Sunday School student will remember the *serpent* in the Garden of Eden testing Adam and Eve's obedience to God.

The name of this character in Hebrew is Ha-Satan, which literally means “the accuser” or “the adversary.” And in Matthew 4 it tests Christ before His ministry has even begun.

Immediately after being baptized, Jesus is led by the Spirit of God into the desert without any food, and without any human contact. A way to take stock, to center His spirit before He started out on the task God had given Him. The task to *save* humanity.

And as His body starved, He was faced with a... a vision quest.

The devil that greeted Jesus in that wilderness *knew* He was the Son of God. It knew what His mission was. And it knew how to test Him.

His first test was to use the power of God to turn the stones around him into loaves of bread. Jesus declined, because his true hunger was for *spiritual* food.

His second test was to use his status to make a spectacle of himself—to leap from the highest point of the temple so that all those gathered would see angels catch him and set him safely on the ground. Jesus declined that too.

Finally his third test was to bow down to Satan—to compromise, to embrace the ways of the world and loosen his grip on the holy—and He would be granted all the kingdoms of the Earth, all the *people* He wished to *save*. *Become* like the world in order to *change* the world from the *inside*.

And once more... Jesus declined. He would serve no way but God's.

And so the devil left Him, because its job was done. Christ had been tested, and through that test He had chosen just *how* he would undertake the task God had given Him.

Just like Dr. King at the beginning of the bus boycotts, after His baptism Jesus still had to figure out *how* He was going to do what needed to be done. What path did He think was *right*?

And just like Dr. King was tested by trial and hardship from the beginning of his ministry to the end, so was Christ.

We can see the shape of the path Christ chose through the way He reacted to the tests he faced.

When offered the chance to use his power for His own gain—to turn stones to loaves of bread to feed *himself*—he instead used His power to multiply the loaves and fishes for five thousand hungry seekers, and He strove every day to feed the spirits of everyone He met.

When offered the chance to test God for an angelic *spectacle* to convince the crowds through stagecraft and special effects, He instead taught *faith* and *humility*, and served *others* rather than expecting *others* to serve Him.

When offered the chance to compromise on what He held most *sacred* to give in to the ways of the world for a shortcut to political victory, He instead chose a path that would end *not* with crowds cheering his name, but with crowds cheering for His suffering and death.

Later, when offered the chance by His own disciples to take the easy way out, to abandon this path that risked His own safety to complete His God-given task, He instead said to the Apostle Peter, “Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

The testing went on and on, every step of His journey, and in the end He chose the path we remember Him for. The same path we remember Dr. King for, as it turns out: a path of nonviolence, of risk, of resistance, of self-sacrifice, and of love.

Both of them were given a holy task—a calling to do the work of God—and both of them were tested. And it was through those tests that they decided just *how* they would strive to accomplish the task that lay before them.

I truly believe that each and every one of us, each person in this world, has been given a task by God. A calling. To be honest, I think God calls us toward a *lot* of things throughout our lives. I’m not really a “destiny” or “fate” kinda guy, but I do believe there are things God wants for us, and things God calls us each *to*. Some of these calls we don’t hear, some of them we ignore or shy away from in fear, some of them we even fail. (And each of those God forgives, because God is big enough for that, and God’s love for us can’t be stopped, even *when* we fall short.)

But the calls we *do* hear, the tasks we *choose* to undertake... none of them just *happen*. We are tested... because nothing worth doing comes easy, does it? But those tests aren’t thrown at us to make us fail, or to prove we don’t have what it takes.

The purpose of every test we ever took in school wasn't to prove we didn't have what it takes... it was to *challenge* us, to teach us how to *learn*, and to *shape* us. Martin Luther King was *shaped* by all the violence and all the hate and all the resistance he faced on his quest for compassion and equality. When faced with all that violence and hate he could have easily chosen to seek his goal by walking a *path* of violence and hate. But he didn't. When faced with those tests, he made choices that led him to the path we remember this Monday and every year.

Just like King, just like Christ, just like every woman and man who ever faced adversity as they tried to accomplish the task God set for them, we *will* be *tested* in our own individual callings, whatever they may be. Some of us may be tested to the lengths of Martin Luther King or Jesus Christ or Joan of Arc... and some of us will be tested in smaller ways. Tests we face when we wake up, when we go into town, when we overhear a conversation, when we see a face...

I can't tell you *how* to accomplish the tasks God has given you in this life. Only you can decide that. But when we are tested... the question shouldn't be *whether* we keep going, or succumb to temptation and give up.

The question should be *how* we keep going. What is the path we *choose*, to accomplish the task God has set for us?

When we are tested... what way will we choose? Amen.