

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day Sermon by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber

“There Is a Way Out and a Way Up from This Mess”

Text: John 12:9–32 (focus: vv. 25–32)

Detailed Summary Generated by OpenAI

1) Opening: Scripture Reading and The Big Theme

A. The chosen text and why it matters

John 12:25–32 centers on:

Losing/surrendering life to gain true life (v. 25)

The call to follow and serve Jesus (v. 26)

Jesus' **troubled soul** and unwavering mission (vv. 27–28)

God's confirming voice (vv. 28–30)

Judgment on oppressive systems ("prince of this world") (v. 31)

The promise: "**When I am lifted up... I will draw all people to myself**" (v. 32)

B. Sermon claim (stated early)

In chaotic, unjust, confusing times:

There is a way out (deliverance from the mess)

There is a way up (higher ground—truth, justice, love, courage)

The "way out" is tied to the "way up": **you don't escape by sinking lower—you rise by looking up.**

2) Honoring Dr. King: Remembering Him Correctly

A. King was a preacher (not merely a public figure)

"The Word of God was his touchstone."

Like Jesus and the apostles, he faced conflict:

Inside the religious world (rejection, opposition)

Outside it (political threats, violence)

B. The preacher's job in serious times

Not performance, not "show," not pulpit entertainment.

A true prophetic preacher:

Gives a **clear word in confusing times**

Helps people **see** what is happening ("turn people's ears into eyes")

Leads people to walk by faith with understanding (Romans 10 logic: hearing → preacher → sent)

C. "We must clear some things up" (the refrain)

Just as Jesus clarified reality in John 12, **King clarified reality in America.**

Our current moment also requires truth-telling and moral clarity.

3) "Clear Some Things Up" About Commemorating King

A. The discomfort with "holiday" language

A “holiday” can become a way to domesticate a prophet.

King was **murdered**—which means the work was not finished.

B. The danger of false closure

The sermon critiques the way political leaders used the holiday to imply:

“America fixed it; now it’s fine.”

But history shows unfinished reconstruction leads to backlash.

C. Unfinished business and the “strong man” returning (biblical framework)

Illustration: the **strong man** driven out, but the house left empty → returns stronger.

Application:

Civil Rights victories drove out a “strong man,” but unfinished work allowed a stronger return.

Question posed: “Who left the door open? What didn’t we do?”

D. How prophets are truly honored

Not by celebration alone but by:

Recommitment

Consecration

Picking up the baton

To honor King is to continue the work he died for.

4) Four Prophetic “Sermons” of Dr. King That Interpret This Moment

(Barber frames these as clarifying messages that equip the people with analysis before action.)

1) 1955 — Montgomery Bus Boycott (the “tired” sermon)

Key line: **“There comes a time when people get tired...”**

“Tired of being trampled by the iron feet of oppression.”

Clarification: protest must be moral and disciplined:

Not burning, not terror

People of God seeking justice

Theological challenge:

If the movement is wrong, then Constitution, prophets, Jesus, and God are wrong.

2) 1963 — March on Washington (the “insufficient funds” sermon)

Key image: America wrote a check that kept returning marked **“insufficient funds.”**

“100 years later... still not free.”

Clarification:

The demand was not radical—**basic rights** and integrity with stated ideals.

3) 1965 — Selma to Montgomery (the “no lie can live forever” sermon)

Declares perseverance despite threats: “We made it.”

Major analytical claim:

The “greedy oligarchy” fears **poor whites and Black people forming a united voting bloc**

Each time unity is possible, **division is sown**

Key insight:

“They don’t pit us against each other because we’re weak... but because we are strong.”

4) 1968 — Memphis (the “don’t turn back now” sermon)

“Nothing would be more tragic than to turn back now.”

Addresses preachers directly:

Heaven talk must not replace earthly responsibility:

Clothes, food, justice “down here”

Corporate moral truth:

“We either go up together or we go down together—but we go together.”

5) Returning to John 12: Jesus Clears Things Up About Trouble and Calling

A. The context in John 12

Jesus has:

Been anointed for burial (Mary anoints; Judas protests)

Raised Lazarus—making Lazarus (and Jesus) targets

Blessing can bring danger:

“Some folks won’t like you because God blessed you.”

B. Jesus is troubled (v. 27)—why?

Not weakness—**moral clarity under threat**

He sees the cruelty of the world’s systems (Herods of his day—Barber makes a modern parallel)

He knows faithfulness will provoke violent backlash.

C. The crucial lesson

Troubled ≠ quit

Troubled can be the conscience of the Spirit:

“If you are troubled and bothered by what’s going on, that’s a sign the Holy Ghost has not left you.”

6) What Should Trouble Us Now: Naming the “Mess”

(*A diagnostic section—prophetic analysis.*)

A. Technocratic feudalism

Wealth + technology + elite control:

The belief that “smartest” rulers should run everything

People reduced to expendable labor (even replaced by machines)

B. Apocalyptic politics

Leaders claim crisis so extreme they deserve:

Power **without guardrails**

Warning principle:

Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.

C. Attacks on voting rights

Claim: fewer protections now than in key moments post-Voting Rights Act.

Pattern:

Gutting safeguards → wave of suppression laws → harder access to democracy.

D. The speed of regressive public policy

The sermon emphasizes urgency:

People distract from immediate harm while destructive legislation advances.

Moral claim:

Policies that cut healthcare, food assistance, public services produce preventable suffering.

E. “This isn’t new”—the Southern Strategy framework

Division as a long-term political strategy:

Identify social groups

Stoke resentment

Keep coalition unity from forming

Strong statement:

“Trump is not the problem; he’s a symptom.”

The deeper disease is America’s recurring pattern:

progress → fear → backlash.

F. Religious nationalism (false religion as political cover)

A “heresy” that:

Elevates party/nation above the cross

Calls empathy “bad”

Blesses domination rather than service

Pattern in scripture:

Bad rulers always hire **false prophets**.

G. The stakes

Framed not merely as a political moment:

“More than a battle for democracy—this is a battle for civilization... right vs. wrong.”

Important distinction:

Movements fought not just for “majority rule” but for **justice** that makes democracy worth having.

7) The Turn: God Speaks in Troubling Times

A. The thunder-voice moment (vv. 28–30)

The crowd hears; misunderstands; Jesus clarifies:

“The voice was for your benefit.”

B. The central promise

“If I be lifted up... I will draw all people to myself.”

This becomes Barber’s blueprint: **lift up Jesus = lift up love, truth, justice, courage.**

8) Three Things We See When Jesus Is Lifted Up

(Main teaching section—three outcomes.)

1) When Jesus is lifted up, we see Love that will not quit

The cross reveals love that endures suffering to change reality.

Application:

Move beyond endless “anti-” talk toward a **positive moral agenda**

People run with vision, not perpetual resistance

Warning: resistance without vision can breed bitterness

Key line: “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

2) When Jesus is lifted up, we see Unearned suffering is magnetic

People follow genuine sacrificial love:

It “draws” (connects directly to John 12:32)

Movement implication:

We need a **love-vision that draws people in**

Action word: “Hook up”

Build coalitions across:

race, class, labor, faith communities, immigrants, LGBTQ, and allies

Organize those most impacted:

people losing healthcare, food aid, wages, protections

Electoral realism:

Large numbers disengaged are often the difference-maker

The barrier is frequently that no one talks to them with a real agenda

3) When Jesus is lifted up, we see Faith that will not bow down

Looking up reveals God’s power greater than worldly power.

“Don’t just look at leaders—look up.”

Biblical/historical witnesses to “looking up”:

David vs. Goliath

The three Hebrew boys refusing to bow

Paul’s thorn → grace sufficient

Frederick Douglass encouraged: “Is God there?”

King: mountaintop vision

9) Practical Calls to Action: “Love Forward Together”

A. A movement with an agenda (not a personality cult)

Stop searching for “the next Martin.”

Do the work locally and statewide.

B. Core practices

Lift your voice

“Truth needs the microphone.”

Lift your vote

Participation is moral action, not mere preference.

Stop using “tired” as an excuse

Three “tireds”:

The “lying tired” (tired but inactive)

The “comparison tired” (forgetting what ancestors endured)

The “Fannie Lou Hamer tired” (sick and tired—and still standing)

Stand up + speak up + pray up

Prayer is essential, but faith must have legs (works).

C. Coalition imagination (what “hook up” looks like)

Vision of hands joining across every line used for division.

The rejected becoming cornerstone—God’s reversal.

10) The Closing Image: “Above the Snake Line”

A. The metaphor

In dangerous terrain, you don’t survive by staying low:

you go **up**—above where snakes thrive

Spiritual/political meaning:

Justice, healthcare, living wages, voting rights are **above the snake line**

B. The altar-call style conclusion

“Look up.”

“Higher ground.”

Prayerful plea: “Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”

Final refrain:

There is a way out and a way up—but you’ve got to look up.

Optional: One-Sentence Sermon Summary

In troubling times, the people of God must “clear some things up,” refuse despair, lift up Jesus (love, justice, truth), build coalitions that draw people in, and move to higher ground—because there is a way out and a way up from this mess.