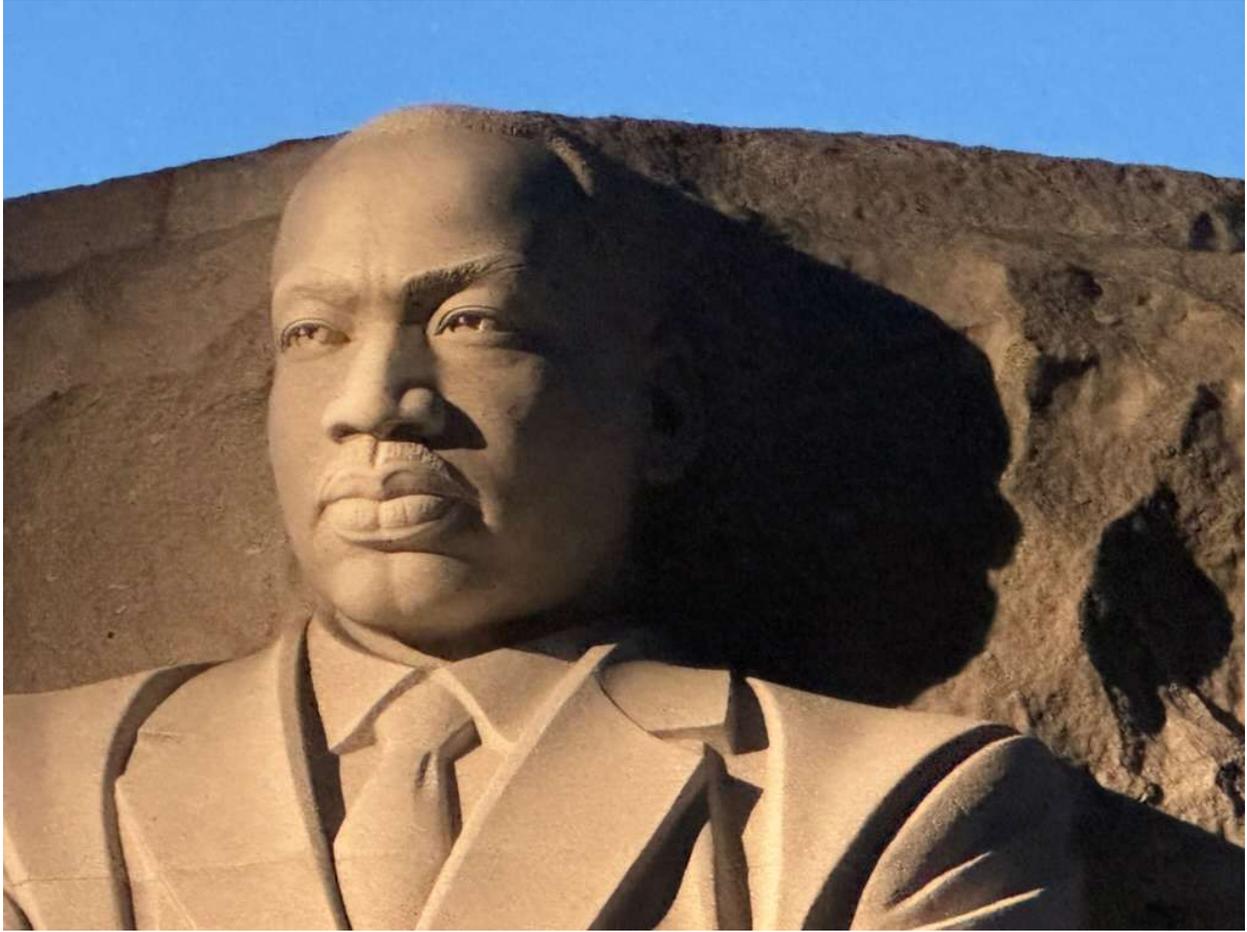
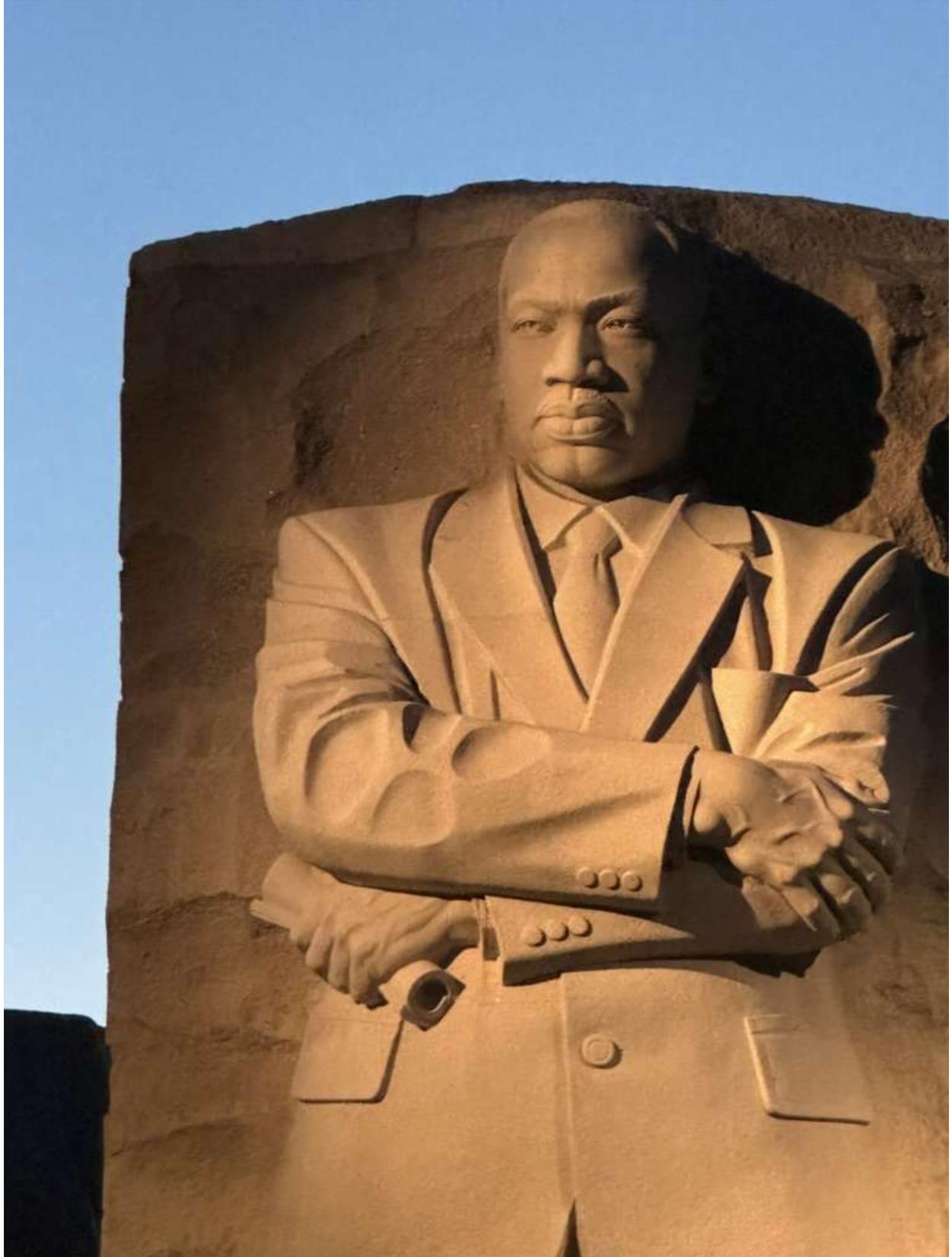


Daily Lenten Devotional
Sunday, March 23, 2025,
Written by Rev. Fred Garry











There are 955 streets named after the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I was in college in San Diego, when city voted to reverse the honor of the street renamed for the Civil Rights leader. In 1986, the city council of San Diego voted to rename Market Street, a six-mile stretch of the downtown, into Martin Luther King Jr. Way, or King's Way. Within a year of the change and a public referendum, the people of San Diego voted to revert to calling the street "Market".

I remember the controversy. Claims of an improper process of review, merchant frustration with directions for customers, and the most persistent, this was an historic street in a city without a lot of history. In the end a stretch of highway was named in honor Dr. King and people seemed to move on.

Maybe 955 streets is pretty good accomplishment. Maybe it was just a bad decision of civic leaders. But maybe it is consistent with what it means to honor King. King was assassinated in 1968; perhaps his life and legacy were not yet apparent, or perhaps too apparent.

In 2008, the New York Times reported on a swirling controversy over the monument to King nearing completion in the mall. The monumental project to completed on the mall near the tidal basin creating a midway point, or direct line of sight between Jefferson and Lincoln began in 1996. 906 entrants were considered for the project being narrowed down to 23 finalists. In 2000 the Roma Group from San Francisco was selected to design the site. It was another seven years before the sculptor Lei Yixen was chosen. Once selected and once the design and statuary plan was revealed, the uproar was intense. Public monuments always garner controversy, but this was intense from many different sources. The Times reported:

The high degree of furor correlates to the number of people alive who remember Dr. King and feel a sense of private ownership over that memory. Another factor is that amid the founding fathers, Civil War generals and eminent philanthropists, there are still few traditional statues of blacks.

"The very first one in a national monument was this figure of a kneeling slave with Lincoln in 1876," said Kirk Savage, an art history professor at the University of Pittsburgh. "So that's our starting point, and there was nothing erected after that for decades and decades and decades."¹

Kirk Savage's comment is regarding the "Emancipation" statue. Indirectly what he is raising the challenge that since 1876, more than 130 years, the monuments and memorials to the Civil War have left the topic of emancipation alone.

At the finished King Monument dedicated in 2011, there are quotations from his speeches and a 30-foot-tall statue of King carved in pink granite. In addition, there are mountains and valleys leading the visitor to the statue. Important to note, there is no mention of slavery, no

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/weekinreview/18dewan.html>

reference to emancipation, or even the Civil Rights Act. King looks off in the distance with his arms crossed as if he is surveying the landscape, the nation itself.

There was significant critique of Lei Yixen's design. Some objected to a Chinese sculptor, some thought the image too modern, others too dour, still some read chastisement or disapproval into King's countenance. Like the "wall" of Vietnam Veterans and the "pools" cascading into darkness at ground zero, the King Monument cut deep into personal memories, wounds of the past, while at the same time sought to offer a place for the future.

I am not sure I would have had the reaction I did to the King Monument if it were not for a recent trip to Egypt. My wife's lifelong dream was to visit the land of Goshen and after two failed attempts we found ourselves in Luxor and Karnak and the Valley of the Kings. Having spent time in Athens and Rome, Jerusalem and Petra, you would think such ancient cities with their monumental architecture and sacred sites would have prepared me. Yet, the only preparation those prior forays provided was how little they prepared me. Egypt was massive. The Pharaohs and the temples and pyramids made everything else look like an also-ran.

From my first step into the King Monument I felt like I had been transported to Egypt. Walking the monument at night helped the impression. Karnak and Luxor at night made the massive columns and statues ominous and mysterious. Walking into the valley leading to the statue of King I felt the same sense of wonder and overwhelming proportion.

Yet, once I arrived at the statue of King the point of view shifted. I began to wonder if I was supposed to meet him as a modern pharaoh, which would be odd. As his image came into focus, with arms crossed and his gaze looking beyond, a leader surveying the path ahead it hit me. This is not a pharaoh (king), this is a Moses, our Moses. The valleys to the mountain are like the path to Sinai. The words written in the stones were like tablets given to the freed slaves. This was not a celebration of emancipation; this was a call to find it at last.

In all the research on American monuments and memorials and museums in the U.S. there is one nagging, goading, even glaring problem: we never truly reckoned with emancipation. The paltry or pathetic attempts to embody those now free, the crippling truth of Jim Crow, the suppressed attempts to even reference emancipation (Lady Liberty) were met with a deafening blow, "Silence!"

Walking the stone and mountain at the tidal basin in the tension of Jefferson and Lincoln, I could see something I had thought impossible: hope. In the long, languishing look of King I felt the "campfires" were not "way o'er yonder." The river and the sea they may be behind us.