

April 23, Second Sunday of Easter

1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

by [Ayanna Johnson Watkins](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue

In the film *Boycott*, about the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, there's a scene in which Martin Luther King Jr. and local civil rights leader E. D. Nixon are standing outside Nixon's house as it burns to the ground. Nixon knows that white supremacists are behind the arson, but he also seems to know that they will go unpunished. Adding fuel to the fire, the fire department has arrived at the burning house, but the white firefighters elect simply to lean against their trucks and look on while it burns.

King arrives and stands beside Nixon, both of them helpless as the house goes up in flames. Nixon asks King how he can stick to his nonviolent principles—or if he even should—as he and his family are physically threatened and attacked by the powers opposing them. King doesn't answer him directly. Instead, speaking slowly as though it pains him to do so, he quotes from the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 39: “But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved” (NIV).

King is remembered as a great leader, a great speaker, a man of great moral courage. It is worth remembering that he was also a man of great faith—that he took his faith seriously, and its role in the struggle for civil rights for African Americans. King worked for civil rights because he believed that the rights and privileges of Americans should actually apply to all Americans, but also because he believed in upholding the God-given dignity of blacks in America, even if whites and their accompanying power structure refused to acknowledge it. He hoped for a day when racism would be eradicated and the world would be safe for African Americans, safe for the poor, safe for everyone.

These last few years have felt like reliving the history of American racism and global discrimination in some twisted, condensed version. Trayvon Martin was killed by a neighbor who saw himself as the law, Michael Brown by a police officer who saw

himself as a victim; both shooters went free without convictions, as fatal shootings of African Americans and other minorities continued. Syrian people died in their communities and died trying to get out as we watched on TV—the way we watched Rwanda and Bosnia and so on. The Pulse shooting targeted the club’s LGBTQ clients; the election rhetoric targeted women, Muslims, people of color, and others.

These collective experiences take their toll. I feel it in my body and soul: a sadness, a pain, a loss, a reopening of scarred places. And I hear it in the words of my neighbors: a sense of tragic loss, helplessness, fear, and anger. Those of us who count ourselves as people of faith have the challenge of maintaining this identity while also managing all these feelings. We stand and stare at the burning places, wondering if we chose the right team.

The disciples of Jesus must have felt something similar in the hours and days after Jesus’ death. The Gospel text for this Sunday describes them hiding behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews.” When they chose this radical carpenter-turned-prophet to get behind, only to see him crucified, they too must have wondered if they chose the right side.

But when King quotes Hebrews, I hear him saying this: our faith is not meant to keep us from responding to the violence inflicted upon us. Our faith is the response to this violence. We feel the pain and sadness, even helplessness and loss. But we don’t let our feelings make us shrink back from our values. We don’t succumb to the fear that our opponents are stronger than we are. Instead, we believe and are saved. We believe that our God is strong, that what we stand for is true, that God is honored by our resistance to injustice, that God is pleased when we refuse to submit to fear and helplessness. This belief is our salvation.

The reading from 1 Peter unpacks this as the precious gift we have in faith. It is faith that allows us to persist through struggle, while at the same time the struggle tests and—if we allow it—refines our faith, making it stronger than before. Untested faith is not as valuable as faith that’s had to stand and stare at a burning home—without turning around and introducing yet more violence, more death, more hate, and more loss into the world. Tested faith trains us to believe more in God’s ability to give us life than our enemies’ ability to extinguish it.

The Birmingham affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference produced a commitment card for those who would join in their civil rights efforts. It required pledging yourself to ten different commitments. The first was to meditate daily on

the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The second was to “remember always that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation—not victory.” Tested faith, I believe, is what God will be looking for when it’s all said and done—not whether we won all the fights we entered, but whether we could be found fighting faithfully for justice, truth, compassion, and love.