

### On the night in which he died,

Sermon by Robb McCoy

The night Martin Luther King Jr was murdered, he was tired. In a 1967 interview, he told the reporter that, “in many ways my dream has turned into a nightmare.” As King’s work shifted from civil rights to anti-war protests, he received a lot of backlash. As he broadened his work to move beyond dismantling segregation to addressing systemic poverty, he received backlash. As he stuck to his strict non-violence, he received backlash.

In April 1968 he was tired, weak, and worn. He was in Memphis to support the sanitation workers strike. The night before he gave a speech that became known as the “I’ve been to the mountaintop” speech. In this speech he talked about the threats made on his life. His closing words were ominous, wondering how long he might live.

The next day, as he was preparing to go to another rally and give another speech, he saw a musician friend of his. He called out from the balcony, “Ben, make sure you play ‘Take My Hand, Precious Lord’ in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty.” Ben’s response was somewhat puzzled because that song was a staple of King’s rallies. Music was the soul of the civil rights movement, and “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” (as it is titled in the United Methodist Hymnal) was one of King’s favorites. Moments after making the request, a bullet killed him.

Thomas Dorsey is known as the Father of Gospel music. He was a blues piano player who was raised in the Baptist church. After a spiritual awakening, he became a church musician, blending blues styles with Christian verses. Dorsey wrote over a thousand songs, is a member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Blues Hall of Fame. “Precious Lord” is probably his most well-known song.

Written in 1932, it was a product of deep despair. Dorsey was in Saint Louis for a revival meeting when he received a telegram that informed him that his wife died in childbirth. He drove immediately back home to Chicago. He met his newborn son, but the infant did not survive the night. Understandably despondent, he withdrew from people for some time.

Eventually, a friend, mentor, and music teacher took him to a music school. There, Dorsey sat at a piano and let his fingers wander the keys. He plunked out a tune that was a variation of an old Sunday school song he knew. He sung the words, “Blessed Lord, Blessed Lord, Blessed Lord,” to the tune, but could not go any further. Finally, his friend suggested, “Why don’t you try ‘precious’?”

Precious. What an odd word to describe God. God is mighty



God is transcendent. God is not precious. Precious describes a deep relationship. It describes longing, rarity, and protection. The word is used in the Bible to describe how God feels about people, not the other way around. Yet in his despair and grief, this word unlocked something in Dorsey’s soul. He wrote, “Precious Lord, take my hand,” and the song flowed out of him.

The disciples thought they were doomed. The storms were tossing their boat to and fro. Jesus had learned of John the Baptist’s brutal murder. He tried to withdraw, but people pursued him. In his grief, he fed 5,000 people. Then he sent the disciples away so he could finally be alone. As he walked to them on the sea, he beckoned Peter to “Come.” Peter stepped out of the boat, start toward his precious Lord, but as the wind raged and the sea stirred, he was afraid. He began to sink. “Precious Lord, take my hand,” he shouted.

The moment Jesus took Peter’s hand, he could stand. The winds ceased. When Dorsey called upon his “Precious Lord,” he was saved. Grief lingers. Pain does not go away the moment we call out to Christ, but staying focused on our “Precious Lord” can do much to save, redeem, and restore us.

After Dorsey wrote the song, he gave it to his friend to sing at his church. Dorsey’s friend took it to Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. They sang it, and the whole church loved it, including the senior pastor: Rev. Martin Luther King Sr.

Thirty years later the song that Dorsey wrote in the midst of grief became an anthem for the civil rights movement. A song about grief became the soul of a movement of liberation. A song about a deep and enduring relationship became a balm for a leader who was in need of care. “Precious Lord,” was sung at Martin Luther King’s funeral, and many point to it as a healing moment when a nation was raging with anger and riots in response to his brutal murder.

Storms rage, but if we keep our eye on our precious Lord, we may find fuel to endure, courage to stand, and hope to walk tall.