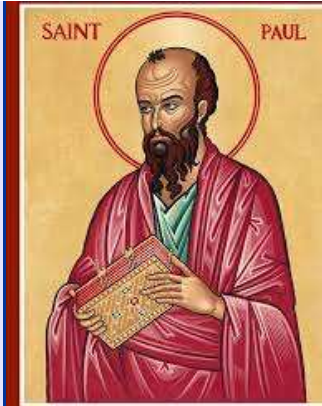


Letters from Prison: Paul, Bonhoeffer, and ML King



What are we to make of them?

Steve Thomason
Saint Mark's Cathedral
January 14, 2026

Many have written profound works while imprisoned

- Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas (d. 203)
- Boethius (5th C. Trinitarian)
- Martin Luther (15th C.)
- Thomas More (16th C.)
- John Bunyan (17th C.)
- Olivier Messiaen
- Nelson Mandela



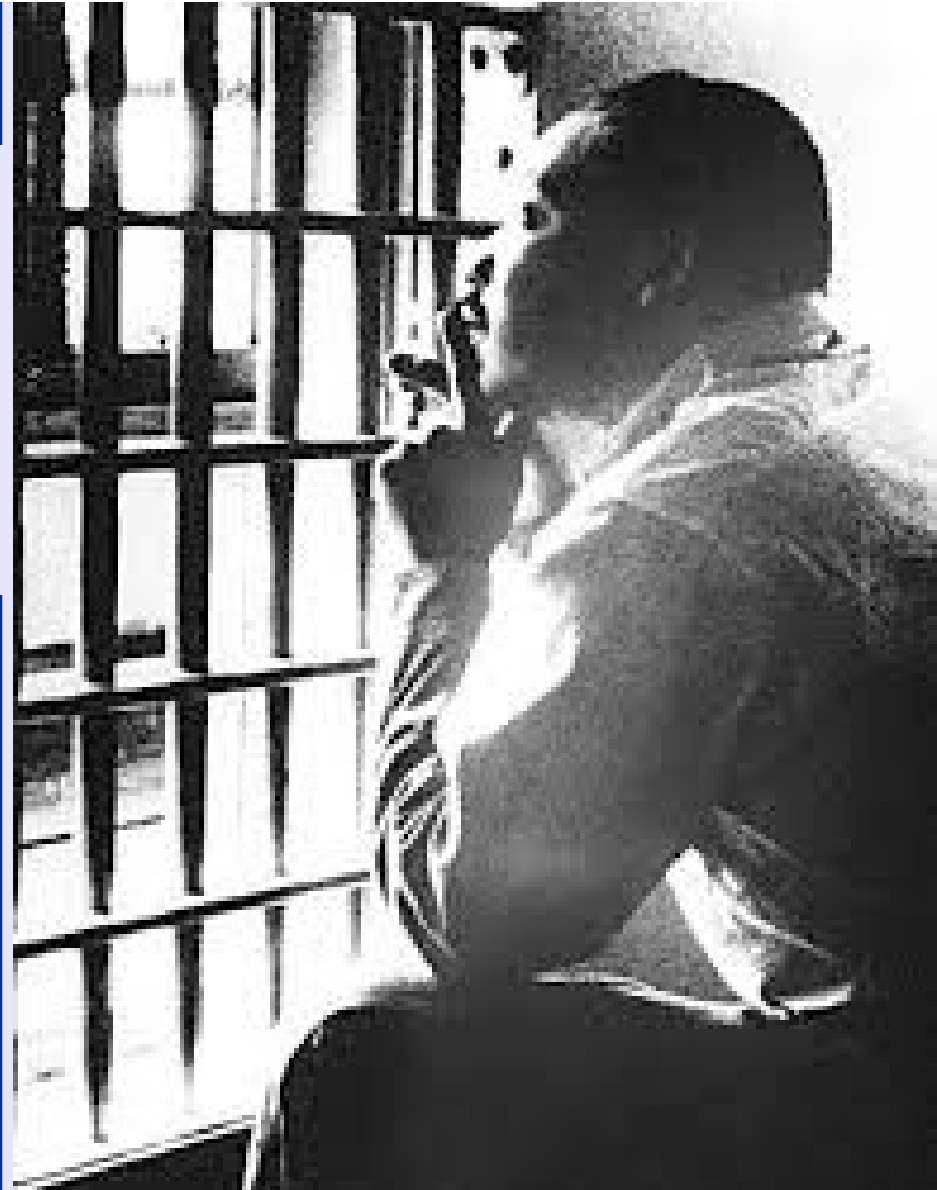
Imprisonment as Crucible Moment?

- Time
- Solitude
- Prayer
- Fear
- Torture
- Courage...to write



**“WHAT ELSE CAN ONE DO WHEN
HE IS ALONE IN A NARROW JAIL
CELL, OTHER THAN WRITE LONG
LETTERS, THINK LONG
THOUGHTS AND PRAY LONG
PRAYERS?”**

-MLK, 1963



Bookend I: Initial Conversation



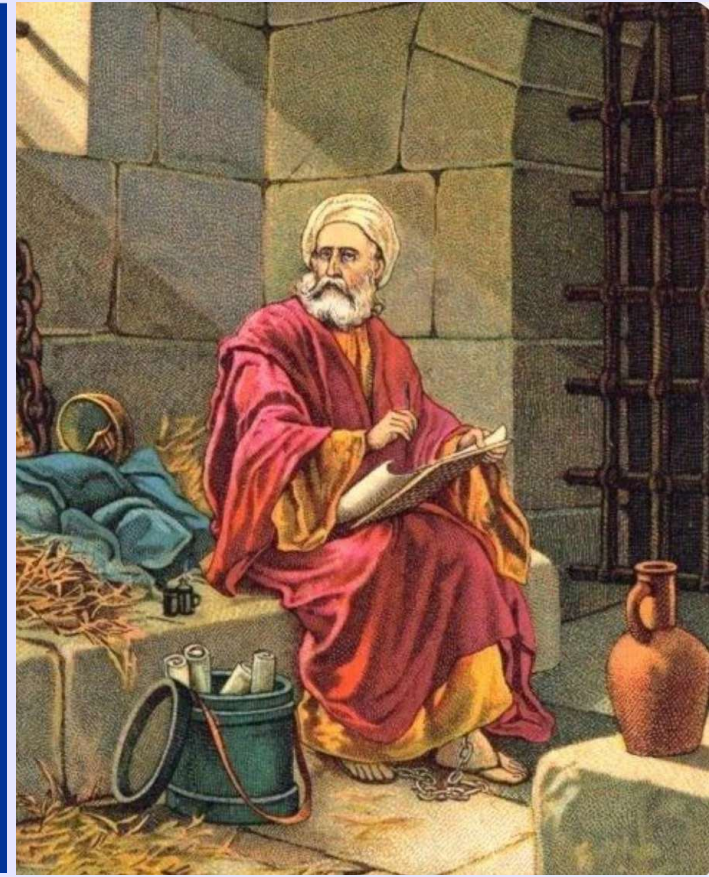
Presentation Title

- To whom would you write if you were imprisoned or otherwise confined/detained for some length of time?
- What would you write about?
- What emotions might be involved for you?

Paul wrote at least four letters from prison

- Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon
- Offered his own devotional musings
- Used his situation as a prisoner to establish his spiritual authority, and
- offered comfort and exhortation to those to whom he was writing

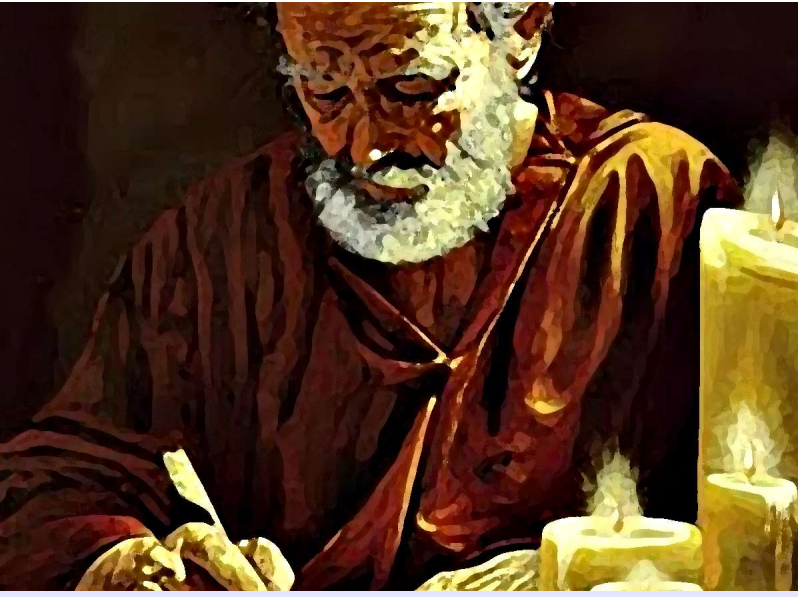
Prison experience different from present-day





Paul's Prison Journeys

- Appealed to emperor as Roman citizen
- Long arduous journey—shipwreck, snake bite, winter storms
- Two years house arrest
- Languished for two years? More in Mamertine prison
- Beheaded

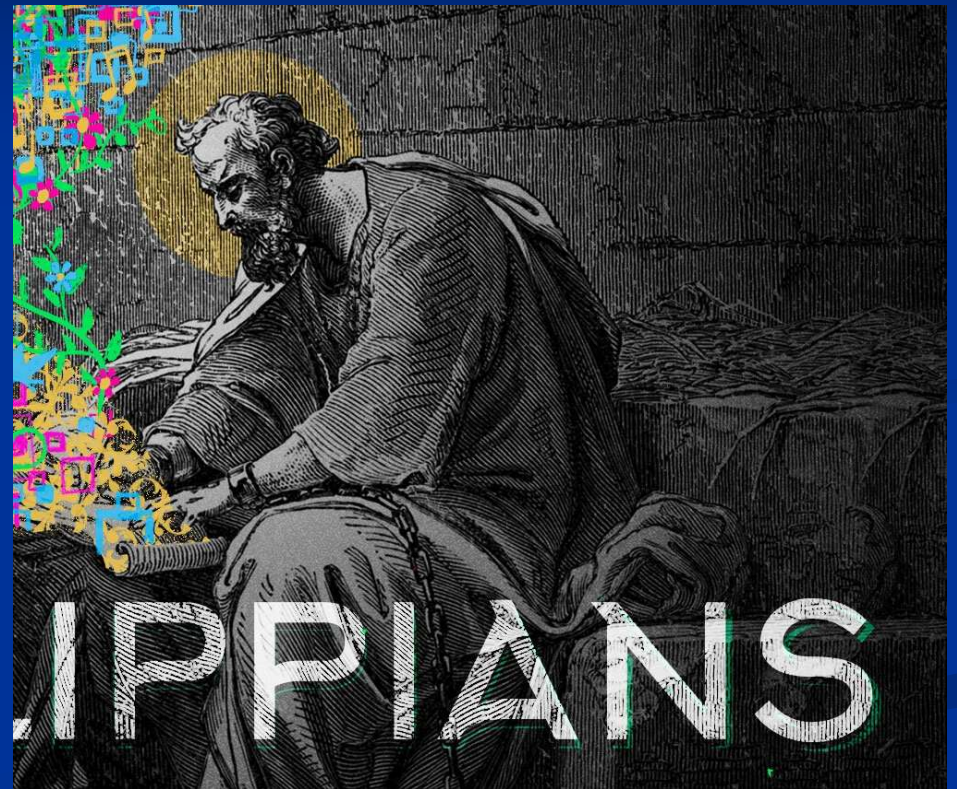


Helpful framework

- Context.
 - Paul was writing personal letters to friends
 - Culturally situated (as we always are)
- Person
 - Paul was a dedicated Jew seeking spiritual fulfillment
 - He discovered the messiah but never knew “Christianity”
 - Charisma (Jung: One who has a great light casts a great shadow)
 - Mystic?
- Liturgical
 - We read snippets on Sundays, often glaze over

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons

- I thank my God for every remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy ⁵ for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace,[☐] both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus.



Philippians 2: Imitating Christ's Humility

- If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,
- ⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

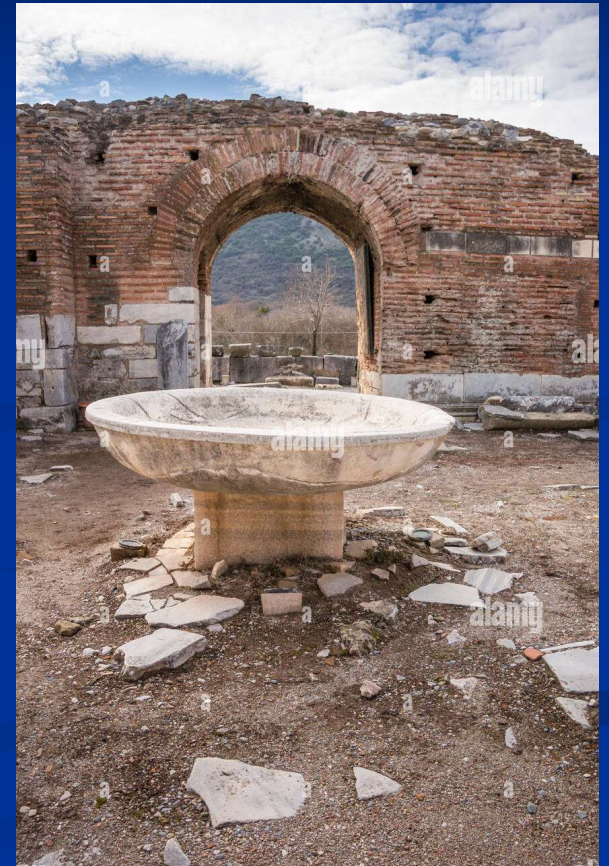
To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

- I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints... (Ephesians 1)



Ephesians 3

- ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
- ²⁰ Glory to God whose power, working I us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

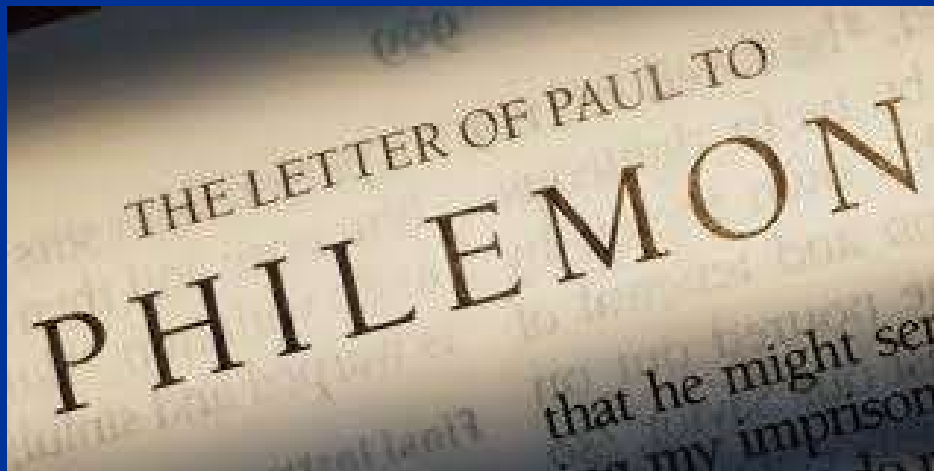


To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:

- In our prayers for you we always thank God, the¹ Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God...
- ⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.



Philemon



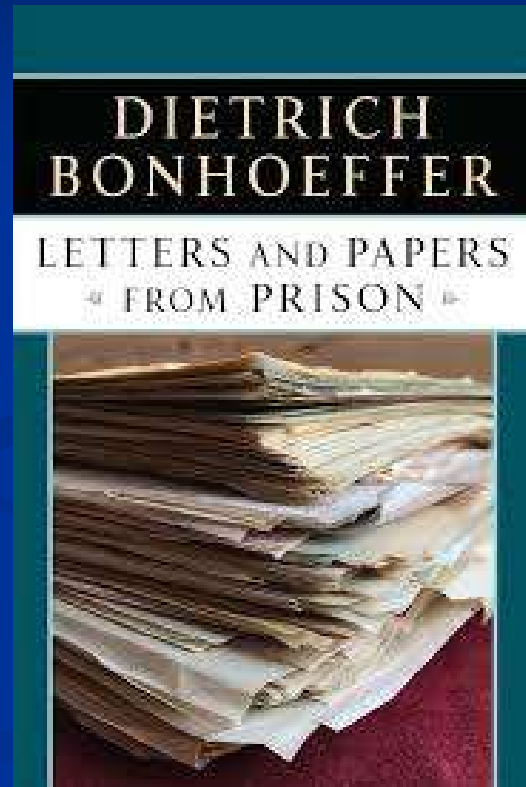
- To our beloved coworker Philemon,² to our sister Apphia, to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church in your house:
- I thank my God always when I mention you in my prayers,⁵ because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.⁶ I pray that the partnership of your faith may become effective as you comprehend all the good that we^[d] share in Christ.⁷ I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

**DIETRICH
BONHOEFFER**



Bonhoeffer in Prison

- Arrested April 5, 1943 by the Gestapo
- His first twelve days were spent in solitary confinement, shackled hand and foot, soiled linens with foul stench.
- Nights carried the sobs of his fellow prisoners broken by confinement - his new congregation.
- Once he was released from solitary and given pen and paper, he wrote prayers and blessings for his fellow prisoners.



CIRCUMSTANCES DON'T CREATE OUR SPIRIT, THEY REVEAL IT!

- During the two years between his arrest and death, Bonhoeffer never stopped writing - letters, poems, prayers, drafts of novels, plays, stories outlines of future books and essays, aphorisms and exegeses of scripture, as well as sketches on various themes.

Moral (and religious) decay...

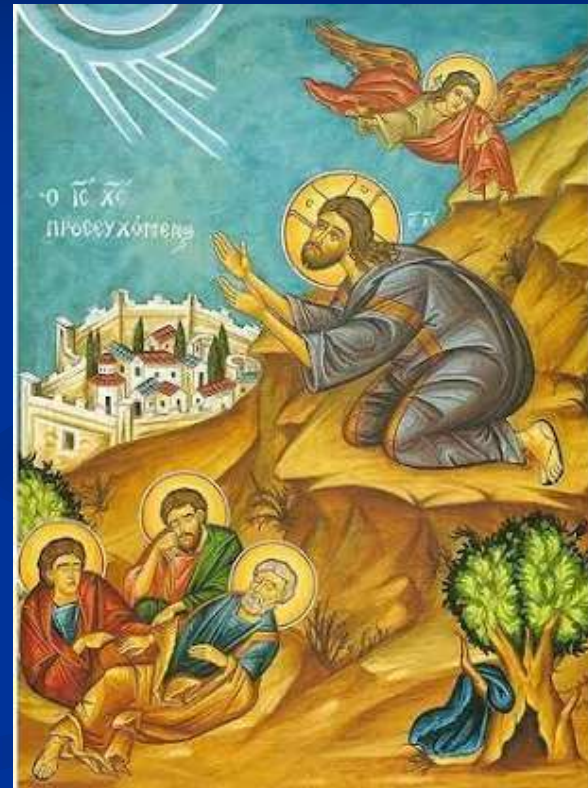
- Bonhoeffer suggests that the God of the religious is needed less and less with every advancement and discovery. This understanding of God diminishes God to a sacred object that we reach for when we feel confused or our courage fails us.
- That is not God!
- Bonhoeffer says people now live in a world “etsi deus non daretur” (as if God did not exist). That there are enough answers to push God (as the religious have defined him) to the edge of non-existence and that is now the reality.

The Rub for Bonhoeffer

- The German Church had been complicit with the Nazi regime, and he felt a reckoning was needed.
- “Even those who honestly describe themselves as ‘religious’ do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by ‘religious.’”
- “If religion is the only garb in which Christianity is clothed - and this garb has looked very differently in different ages - what then is religionless Christianity?”

Seeing God's suffering in the world

- *“It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life....Jesus calls men [sic], not to a new religion, but to life.”*



Transferred to Buchenwald Conc. Camp

- How could one be a disciple, clothed not in the garb of tradition, but having “put on Christ, clothed yourselves with Christ”, as Paul tells the Galatians?
- How does one stand against fascism in all its violent, hateful momentum?
- When and how to resist?



Brief Reflection

- How are Bonhoeffer's reflections apt for us in our time?
- Has Christianity become largely “irrelevant” in its “religionless” expressions (i.e., diminished place for God)?
- What are the virtues that guide us?
- What would it mean for Christians to have courage to place God (and God's sufferings) at the center of life?

MARTIN
LUTHER KING,
JR.



The Run-up to Being Jailed



- Birmingham, AL, campaign began April 3, 1963 with coordinated marches and sit-ins
- April 10—judge issues blanket injunction against "parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing and picketing".
- April 12—Good Friday!!—MLK and others arrested, treated harshly

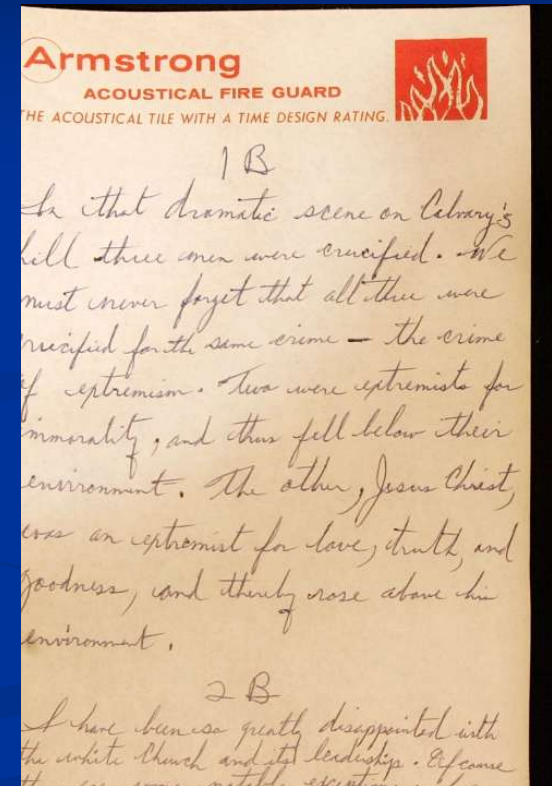
Birmingham Civil Rights Campaign 1963

- Open letter published by white clergy April 12, 1963: “A Call to Unity”
 - Included Episcopal Bishop of Alabama and the Bishop Coadjutor
- They were arguing:
 - Let change unfold over time peacefully
 - Don’t get caught in foment led by “outsiders” (thinly veiled reference to MLK)
 - Use the courts to navigate for the change

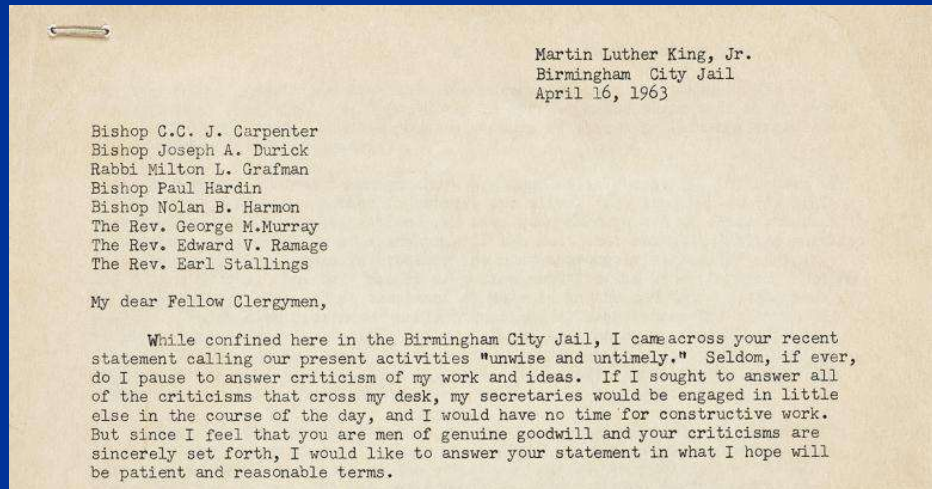


Civil Disobedience and Christian Theology

- MLK countered the clergy's claim that sit-ins and marches were illegal...arguing that civil disobedience was not only justified in the face of unjust laws but also was necessary and even patriotic:
- "The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all.'"



Clergyman writing to other clergymen



- MLK: "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law."

Also cited theologians Buber and Tillich

- citizens have "not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws" and also "to disobey unjust laws".
- Segregation laws are immoral and unjust "because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority."
- It is wrong to use immoral means to achieve moral ends but also "to use moral means to preserve immoral ends".

Breakout Groups

- What themes from these three writers stand out for you?
- How are they speaking to us even today? As people of faith? As citizens faced with unjust laws and expressions of them?
- What are you looking for in your faith tradition that might inform who you are as a citizen?

