II  The second meaning of witness comes from Paul. For him witness means living a triumphant life. It's not enough to talk about it but we must live about it (Quote Edgar Guest) The most indisputable fact in all the universe is a personal example. As we look around we see divorces rampant, the liquor traffic on the march, gambling almost legalized, sex turned into an immoral plaything. And involved in all of these is Christians—
(a) The Church has been too soporific
(b) The ministers are not to be excused

(Preached at Dexter Sept 10 1954)5

ADf CSKC Sermon file, folder 55, “Propagandizing Christianity”

4 King probably refers to Edgar A. Guest's poem “It Couldn't Be Done” “Somebody said that it couldn't be done / But he with a chuckle replied / That 'maybe it couldn't,' but he would be one / Who wouldn't say till he tried / So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin / on his face / If he worried he hid it / He started to sing as he tackled the thing / That couldn't be done, and he did it!” (Guest, Breakfast Table Chat [Detroit n.p., 1914], p. 148)
5 King wrote this date, a Friday, next to the sermon's title. He probably preached this sermon on Sunday, 12 September. He was also scheduled to deliver a version of this sermon on 2 July 1950 (“Ebenezer Baptist Reveals Slate,” Atlanta Daily World, 1 July 1950)

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

“Creating the Abundant Life,”
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

26 September 1954
Montgomery, Ala

In this handwritten text, King explains that each person can have a meaningful life. “Discover your calling. Then give your heart, soul and mind to it. And thereby life will present you with meaning that you never thought was there. You are on the road to creating the abundant life.”

Subject: “Creating the Abundant Life”

Text I come that you might have life John 10 10

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1 King filed several outlines and illustrations in the same file folder, all of which contain themes found in “Creating the Abundant Life.” These themes included the importance of dreaming, the value of persistence and hard work, and the worth of every human life (see King, Creating the Abundant Life, Sermon outline, 1948–1954; King, Be the Best of Whatever You Are by Douglas Malloch, 1948–1954; King, Notes on Clarence Darrow, 1948–1954; King, “A Moment of Difficult Decision,” 1948–1954)
It is a very common thing to see people wandering into the world looking for life. They never get it. What they get is existence. Existence is something that you find, life is something that you create. Existence is the mere raw material from which all life is created. Therefore if life ever seems worth while to you it will not be because you found it that way, but because, by the help of God, you made it so. Life is not something that you find. Life is something that you create.

It was always Jesus' conviction that life is worth living and that men through the proper adjustment and attitudes could create a meaningful life. On one occasion Jesus said "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." In other words Jesus is saying that a part of his mission on earth is to help men create the abundant life. He came not to negate life but to affirm it.

Yet in spite of Jesus' words we are confronted with the tragic fact that so many people today are disillusioned about life, feeling that life has no meaning. Suicides are quite prevalent and frustration and bewilderment are on the march. So many people today have decided to cry with Shakespeare's MacBeth:

Life is a tale told by an
idiot, full of sound and
fury signifying nothing.

Others have decided to cry with Paul Lawrence Dunbar,

A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
A pint of joy to a peck of trouble,
and never a laugh that the mourns
came double, and that is life.

Still others have decided to cry with the philosopher [Arthur] Schopenhauer that "life is a tragic comedy played over and over again with slight changes in costume and scenery."

Why is it that so many people have taken this attitude? Why is it that so many people have concluded that life has no meaning and that their names are written in the diary of fate? I think that one reason among others is that many of us fail to see that life is largely what we make it, by the help of God. Many of us are unhappy and disillusioned about life because we are trying to find life ready made. We are looking for it to be handed to us on a silver platter. But it doesn't happen like that. Life is not something that you find. Life is something that you create.

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2 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, sc 5
3 Dunbar, "Life" (1895)
4 King distills a number of ideas from Schopenhauer's chapter "On History" in *The World as Will and Idea*, 3:224–227
Now we may well ask how do we create this abundant life that Jesus came bring? What should we do and what attitudes should we develop to make life worth living?

(The miserable life is the unextended life)

(1) First if we are to create the abundant life we must give ourselves to some great purpose and some great cause that transcends ourselves. This is what Jesus meant when he said he who loseth his life shall find it. In other words he who loseth his life in some great purpose or cause transcending himself shall find his life.

This giving of oneself to some purpose transcending oneself might take place through one's life's work, provided that this life's work is decent and honest. Every man should learn to love his job. And there is a joy and an eternal satisfaction that comes out of a job well done. Whatever your life's work may be do it well. Do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it. Do it so well that nobody could do it any better.

Whatever your life's work may be I admonish you to consider it significant. If God has endowed you with some great and extraordinary talent, use it well. If God has endowed you with just ordinary talent use that well, for ultimately God's standard of measurement is not in terms of how much we have but what we do with what we have. If your life's work is street sweeping, sweep them well. Be determined to sweep streets like Michaelangelo painted pictures, like Beethoven composed music, like Shakespeare wrote literature. Sweep streets so well that all the heavenly host will have to pause and say, "Here is a job well done and a life well lived." The words of Douglas Malloch are relevant still:

If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill,
Be a shrub in the valley. But be
the best shrub on the side of the
hill, be a bush if you can't be a tree.
If you can't be a highway, just be
a trail. If you can't be the Sun,
be a star. It isn't by size that
you win or you fail. Be the best
of whatever you are.

Discover your calling. Then give your heart and soul and mind to it. And thereby life will present you with meaning that you never thought was there. You are on the road to creating the abundant life.

(2) A second thing that is necessary to make life worth living is to live everyday.

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5 Cf Matthew 10:39
6 Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
7 At a January 1957 rally in Atlanta, King attributed this illustration to Benjamin Mays (see King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," in Papers 4:79)
8 Malloch, "Be the Best of Whatever You Are" (1926)
to our highest and best selves. We don’t have to go very far in life to see that it is possible to live to our lowest and worst selves. We all observe within ourselves something of what psychiatrists and psychologists call schizophrenia or split personality. We see a conflict between what we actually are and what we ought to be. The “isness” of our present natures is out of proportion with the eternal “oughtness” forever confronting us. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he talked of the conflict between flesh and spirit. This is what he meant when he “the good that I would, I do not, and the evil that I would not, that I do.” This is what Ovid, the Latin poet meant when he said, “I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do.” This is what Plato meant when he compared the personality to a Charioteer with two head strong horses each wanting to go in different directions. This is what Saint Augustine meant when he said, “Lord make me pure, but not yet.” The conflict between what we know we ought to be and what we actually are is one that confronts us all.

The wider the gap is between our higher selves and our lower selves, the more disintegrated we are; the less meaning we find in life. The more we live up to our higher natures, the more integrated we are and the more meaning we find in life. No man can be permanently happy who lives on the low planes of existence. Any man who lives out of harmony with his higher nature, is living out of harmony with his true essence, and such disharmony bring unhappiness and cynicism. Such with the plight of that Prodical Son who had gone into a far country and wasted all, living on the low and evil planes of existence. But then one day out in a swine pasture he came to himself. He came to see that the life that God had given him was precious to throw away in low and evil living, and he knew that so long as he remained there he would be frustrated and disillusioned, finding no meaning in life. My friends we must come to see that we are not made to live on the low planes of existence. When I see how the nations of the world fight wars and destroy hundreds and thousands of lives on battlefields I find myself saying, man isn’t made for that. When I see how we often live our lives in selfishness and hate envy and jealousy I find myself saying, man is not made for that. When I notice how so many of us throw away the precious lives that God has given us in riteous living, I find myself saying, man is not made for that. Man is a child of God, [strikeout illegible] made for the stars, created for eternity, born for the everlasting, and so long [strikeout illegible] as man lives out of harmony with this high called he will find life a frustrated and meaningless drama played over and over again with slight changes in costume and scenery. Go out and choose my friends to live up to your highest and best self, and

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9 Cf Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, pp 137–138  
10 Cf Romans 7:19  
11 Ovid Metamorphoses 7:20  
12 Plato Phaedrus 2:46a–2:47c  
13 Cf Augustine Confessions 8:7  
14 Cf Luke 15:11–32  
15 King paraphrases segments of Schopenhauer’s chapter “On History” in The World as Will and Idea, 90 224–227
thereby create the abundant life. John Oxenham’s words at this point have become immortal:

To every man there openeth a way
and ways and a way. The high
soul climbs the high way, and
the low soul grasps the low
And in between on the midst
flats the rest drift to and
fro. But to every man there openeth
a high way and a low a way. Each
man decideth which way his
soul shall go.¹⁶

(3) The third thing that we must do to create the abundant life is to choose to have an abiding religious faith. In other words we must have a lasting faith in God. H. G. Wells was right, “the man who is not religious begins at nowhere and ends at nothing, for religion is like a mighty wind that breaks down doors and knocks down walls and makes that possible and even easy which seems difficult and impossible.”¹⁷ It is religion which gives meaning to life. Religion keeps alive the conviction that life is meaningful and that there is purpose in the universe. Religion gives the individual a sense of belonging. It instills the awareness that in all of his struggles man has cosmic companionship.

On the surface it might appear that religion is a sort of unnecessary past time, which we can really do without. But then one day the tidal waves of confusion roll before us, the storms and winds of tribulation beat against our doors, and unless we have a deep and patient faith we will be blown assunder. You see religion doesn’t guarantee us that we won’t have any problems and difficulties. What religion does is to give us the power to confront the problems of life with a smile. Religion does not aim to save us from the troubles and reverses of life, these come alike to all, but it aims to support us under them and to teach us the divine purpose in them. Religion does not say that everything which happens to us is good in itself, but it does say that if you love good properly all things work together for good.¹⁸ It assures us that although we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is there.¹⁹ It assures us that life has meaning because God controls the process of life.

In our scientific age there is a great temptation to usher God out of the universe. We are prone to believe that only that exist which we can see and touch and feel, i.e., things which we can apply to our five senses. But my friends this is certainly false. Science can never make God and unseen realities irrelevant, for in a real sense the everything that we see owes its existence to something that we do not see. You may see my body, but you can never see my personality. You may see the beautiful archi-

¹⁷ Wells, Mr. Britling Sees It Through, p. 442.
¹⁸ Cf Romans 8:28.
tecture of this building, but you can never see the mind of the architect who drew
the blueprint or the faith and hope and love of the individuals who made it so. You
may see the stars at night, but you can never see the law of gravitation that holds
them there. Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see. The
visible is a shadow cast by the invisible.

So this morning let us go out with the conviction that God is still most certain
Fact of the universe. Let us realize that all of the advances of modern science and all
of the comforts that it has brought about can never be substitutes for God, as
significant as they are. Televisions and radios, airplanes and subways, dollar and
cents can never be substitutes for God, for long before any of these came into exis-
tence we needed God, and long after they have passed away we will still need God.
Have faith in God, the God of the universe, the God who is the same yesterday,
today and forever, the God who threw up the gigantic mountains kissing the skys,
the God who threw up the stars to bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of etern-
ity, the God in who we live and move and have our being, the God who has been
our help in ages past and our hope for years to come, our shelter in the time of
storm and our eternal home.

This is the God that commands our faith, and only
by have faith in him do we create the abundant life.

III

The privilege and responsibility of creating life is one that confronts us all
Who this morning will start out on this great creative work, by giving oneself to some
great purpose that transcends oneself, by living up to ones highest and best self, and
by having an abiding faith in God.

The story goes

Preached at Dexter, Sept. 26, 1954

AD. CSKC Sermon file, folder 71, "Creating the Abundant Life" / "A Moment of Difficult Decision"


"New Wine in New Bottles,"
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

17 October 1954
Montgomery, Ala

King warns that throughout history, "new and creative ideas" were not accepted
when the "historical atmosphere at that time was not sufficiently new and strong
to contain them." He cites Henry Wallace's "vision of Racial equality" as a recent
example of an idea ahead of its time and, in contrast, highlights the timeliness of
Martin Luther, Abraham Lincoln, and Jesus Christ.