

[Opinion](#)



People gather around the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington at dawn April 4. The day marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of the civil rights leader in Memphis, Tennessee. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Bill Tammeus

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Christians live in what we understand to be "meanwhile." Which is to say that God in Christ already has defeated death and ushered in the long-awaited age of peace and redemption. But that age isn't yet fulfilled, so this is meanwhile, the time between the times.

Both Catholic and Protestant sources assert that the reign of God has started but hasn't yet reached full bloom on Earth.

For instance, the [Handbook for Today's Catholic](#) asserts that "The day has already begun when God 'will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning.' ... Meanwhile, we work and pray for the full flowering of that kingdom to come."

Similarly, the "Confession of 1967" in the [Book of Confessions](#) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) proclaims this: "Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in men and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption."

So we hope, work and pray in this sometimes-frustrating interim.

[The Rev. Sam Mann](#), a white Protestant who grew up in Alabama and later spent decades as the activist pastor of a black church in Kansas City, thinks it's time to use that interim idea to change how we think about the advances that various liberation movements have achieved.

[I was talking with Sam](#) recently about his memories of the riots in Kansas City 50 years ago after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., when he declared this:

"Here's my take on today. We have won. The progressives, the liberals, those who have sacrificed, who have been involved with the civil rights movement, been involved in the women's movement, been involved in the immigration-Latino

movement, involved in the Native American movement — those who have been involved in these movements, we have won. I think we have won."

But, I replied, there are lots of people against all that who don't know they've lost.

True, he said, but that doesn't discount the victories: "I think we have won the hearts and minds of white progressives and we have built a coalition. But we don't know how to take the ground. I don't think we can trust the Democratic Party. All this has not been in vain and has been very successful. Even if you look at the last election, the liberal-progressive side won the popular vote. I think we have won and we need to declare victory and strategize about how to take the ground. But nobody's looking at that."

"If I'm strategizing because I've won, it's different from strategizing because I've lost. We will lose an opportunity if we don't claim what we've got."

—Rev. Sam Mann

What, I asked, would taking the ground look like? He was ready:

"It looks like loving the stranger. For the first time in the history of this world we have the capacity to feed everybody, clothe everybody, employ everybody and at the same time destroy everybody. I would say it looks like what King was talking about.

"But we don't feel like we've won. We feel like they've won. Part of establishing the ground is claiming the victory. That's a whole different strategy. If I'm strategizing because I've won, it's different from strategizing because I've lost. We will lose an opportunity if we don't claim what we've got."

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I've decided that Sam Mann is right. Our Christian faith created the pattern for this. Christ's resurrection meant the dawning of a new era, which the apostle Paul saw clearly. Paul wanted to invite the whole world — Jews, gentiles, everyone — to celebrate this by living as if the kingdom, or reign, of God were here today. In other words, to see the world through the eyes of faith.

And that's exactly what Jesus himself proclaimed, as recorded in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark: "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near."

It seems to Sam — and to me — that we'll act differently and maybe even more joyfully if we believe liberation, justice, compassion and love already have won.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "[Faith Matters](#)" blog for *The Star's* website and a column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book is [The Value of Doubt: Why Unanswered Questions, Not Unquestioned Answers, Build Faith](#) . E-mail him at wtammeus@gmail.com.]

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