

MLK Community Service
January 15, 2023
Hope for What You Imagine, Despite What You See
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I am touched and honored to be invited to add words of thought and prayer in the sacred space we have created here, together. It feels powerful to join our hearts in reverence and in gratitude for the life and work of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I can think of no more important commemoration for our country than the day–now weekend–that we dedicate to his memory and his life’s mission. It is a living testimony to the yet unrealized call of freedom in this country.

The biblical narrative of the Exodus from Egypt is my people’s foundational story, laying the path we have tread ever since, lifting us up and holding us in faith in our darkest moments. I believe that my ancestors’ liberation comes to teach all people that God demands freedom for us all. It is not only a Jewish story; it is a symbol for all of humanity. When God says, “I will free you,” “I will deliver you,” “I will redeem you”, and “I will take you to be my people,” God is talking to all of us, about all of us, calling us into the divine dream for humanity. When God makes these holy promises, we hear that none of us is meant to be oppressed, held in confinement, or fear for our safety.

People of all faiths have struggled to grasp this essential truth.

As a Jewish person, I carry the traumas and fears unique to an ancient people that by God’s grace has survived. Our experience has shown that the path to Freedom Land is not a straight one. We have been subjugated, persecuted, kicked out of country after country, and nearly destroyed by murder and torture. But our collective memory of the Exodus forever changed us.

Four years ago I was graced with the privilege of speaking at this service. I have learned many painful truths about racism, racial justice, antisemitism, allyship and disunity since then. So much has happened. None of us is the same.

After the murder of George Floyd, I was struck by the sight of myself, on the new,s preaching into Reverend Mitchell’s megaphone. You know, when you see someone on a screen or in a photo, you only see them on the outside. But when you see yourself perched on a ladder praying your heart out, you see double. You see who you are in that place at that moment, and you also see your internal journey. I looked at myself there on the screen and felt hope about the potential and power of the cross cultural

friendships and mutual accountability my community and I have been working on. I asked myself if I had truly earned my place on that ladder, and about how others might feel about climbing a ladder like that for *my* people. I asked myself ***what took me so long*** to get on that ladder, what were next steps for me and my community, and what God needed *me* to do next. I vowed never again to send out “hopes and prayers” if I wasn’t ready to act on them and do my part to make them real.

Here in this country, we sometimes forget that we are one in God. We let ourselves be misled and alienated from one another. We draw ranks around our own and we forget that we are all *God’s* own. Some of you may see a white person up here, with all the privilege whiteness has given me, and wonder, when I say that we are one, how I can possibly understand what I’m saying, when I don’t know what it’s like to live and breathe Black. You may see a Jewish person and wonder, based on the stories you might have been told, what I have to complain about. And *I* wonder what you believe about so-called Jewish power, if you associate me with injustices over which I have no control, and why the Black Lives Matter movement, which I support, endorse, and defend, tolerates anti-semitism. So, I’m not shy—but these are fair things for us to ask each other, because we are *all in this together*. As God’s people we need to be having these conversations. As a religious leader in Madison I understand that my liberation is bound up in your liberation and your liberation is bound up in mine. I believe we share this sacred truth.

And we *are* beginning to do the work of seeking to understand one another, stand together as true allies, and work together to dismantle racism. As I stand before you today I feel blessed by the friendships we have made amongst ourselves and alliances we are building in the effort to combat racism. I am grateful to those who have taught and guided me, patiently and impatiently. I am humbled by the challenges we face together. It takes courage to trust what our hearts know is possible despite what we see. For a person of faith there can be no other choice.

So, to be here together, in a house of God, our hearts open to that sacred dream King preached so prophetically, to commit to walking down to Freedom Land *together* feels profoundly important. And though we may do this year after year, it is vital to raise our spirits in commitment in this way. I pray that this moment binds us closer to one another and that we will carry God’s abundance with us back to our own homes and communities.

Another truth which has become crystal clear to me is that none of us will be free as long as white, straight, Christian supremacy is allowed to rest as the bedrock of this country. All people who have been marginalized, vulnerable, disadvantaged and

disenfranchised will need to look over our shoulders, always on guard and never free until we undo that wrongful idea, together, for all of us.

Dr. King taught us: "Courage faces fear, therefore mastering it. Cowardice represses fear and is thereby mastered by it." So let us be courageous together. Let us keep seeking answers from our hearts and from one another. Let us hold each other accountable to the work God has commissioned us to do.

You know, our biblical ancestors hadn't a clue how to get liberated. It took them 200 years just to cry out to God from their oppression. They weren't even asking for freedom; they just knew something was fundamentally wrong. God had to help them imagine what their hearts could not conceive of.

So God set the stage for them to learn to hope beyond what they could see. Ten plagues taught the Israelites *and* the Egyptians that God is invested in freedom and showed that what lies before us, however entrenched it appears, can be moved. After the Israelites cross through the parted Sea and are saved, they sing: This is my God, the One I will praise. God is a warrior who casts down the enemy, acting with strength to crush the foes of freedom. God's anger rails against those who would plunder the liberation of others. God moves wind and water and earth to change the way things are.

Now, we all prefer a loving Godly image to a plague-making warrior, I know. But the story and the song empower us. If God is so determined to act like a warrior for justice, we know that God must be trying to teach us something. As God's image on earth, as we are, we realize that there must be some good we can do. And if a loving God can fight so fiercely for freedom, cannot we ally ourselves for liberty with the best tools we have? Can we not take up the holy weapons of care and common cause and march down to Freedom Land with that same fierce determination, together? I believe that we can, if we hope for what we imagine, despite what we see.

Like the prophet Isaiah preached: "You will indeed go out with joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands" (Isaiah 55:12).

The Reverend Dr. King took up this Divine theme. He preached it, led people to march for it, sit in for it and make it visible. A Divine warrior, Dr. King opened hearts and minds to God's dream and made palpable the notion that we can hope for what we imagine, despite what we see.

And so, I invite you to join me in prayer (and with this I will conclude):

Creator of All, Source of love and goodness,
give us strength and fortitude to hope in your dream for all of humanity.
You know the road is long and winding.
Encourage us when the way feels impossible and we feel we cannot go on.
Help us see ourselves as links in Your unbroken promise of redemption.
Though our lives will always be unfinished, help us, as Dr. King taught, to “accept finite
disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”
Open our eyes to see our fellow travelers in the light of Your glory.
Unite us in courage and the joyful abundance of Your unbounded love.
May we join hands and walk together into Your dream, expressed so truly by Dr. King:
“Free at last, Free at last, Thank God almighty we are free at last.”
This is our prayer. We pray this in Your great and holy name.
Amen.