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TRUTH IN LOVE

Justice, Democracy, Hope, and Love

By Parris J. Baker
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Editor's note: Following are remarks made by Jefferson Scholar-in Residence Parris Baker at the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. commemorative march and program in Erie on Jan 20.

Thank you to James Sherrod and the Board of Directors and staff of the Bayfront NATO Inc. Martin Luther King Center for the invitation to speak. You remain the leaders who will set in motion the vision, agency, and legacy that will guide our community into racial, social, and economic justice throughout the 21st century.

I am honored to share some insights related to Martin Luther King Jr., our national pursuit of liberty, justice, and democracy, and why hope and love remain essential elements if we are to obtain the riches of the American dream. The theme for this year's King celebration was Justice, Democracy, Hope, and Love. These themes were fundamental to the missionary work of King and were prominent in many of his speeches. In his most recognized speech, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on Aug. 28, 1963, King delivered a mandate to our nation:

We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

Though it is one of King's most influential speeches, many Americans were unaware that a little further into the speech, he energized the audience to move from being passive listeners into active, engaged participants of change:

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

King, a Baptist preacher, changed his cadence and provoked the crowd of 250,000, with intensifying fervor as he issued a call to action to exercise their Constitutional right to vote:

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Given all the trials and tribulations in the United States in 1963, and galvanized so vividly in one state, Alabama, King wanted Americans to see the beauty and possibilities of his dream of a beloved community:

So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope.

This hope, that King spoke about, transcends time and therefore is as relevant now as it was then.

This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discord of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

It is a hope that has propelled African Americans to excel, even when faced with some of the most malevolent and degenerate environments in America's history. African Americans, from the time the first enslaved Africans were brought to Old Comfort Point, Hampton, Virginia in 1619 until now, have always sought fervently freedom and justice, and the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

With hope-filled hearts, Africans captured that desire for freedom in song and dance. Driven by an indomitable spirit of liberation, the spirit of the Lord has inspired every generation of Black people to pursue freedom passionately and persistently.

From the shanties of southern plantations to the slums and ghettos of the urban North, Negroes all over America were instructed by the Brothers Johnson^[1] to "Lift every voice and sing, 'til Earth and heaven ring. Ring with the harmonies of liberty ...Let us march on 'til victory is won."^[2]

From the Harlem Renaissance came the collective literary voices of such writers as Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. DuBois, and Langston Hughes and birthed the lyrical and iconic blues and jazz sounds of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Negro spirituals like "We Shall Overcome" and "We Come This Far by Faith" motivated marchers to keep walking and working for freedom, and Sam Cooke prophesized to America, "A Change is Gonna Come."

However, the patience of Negroes, "From sea to shining sea,"^[3] too long pacified with the prospect of freedom, became the angered and agitated voices of Afro Americans. No longer anesthetized by the "tranquilizing drug of gradualism,"^[4] and awakened to the reality of America's broken promises to guaranteed freedom, began to demonstrate Black dignity and Black pride through the expression of Black power and protest.

Gil Scott Heron notified America, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Marvin Gaye asked America, "What's Going On" and then answered his own question, "Inner City Blues Make Me Wanna Holla." James Brown taught Black people to believe, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud."^[5] These songs became anthems for Black Americans who demanded a dignity and a personhood that could only be found in freedom.

During the final quarter of the 20th century, music groups such as Public Enemy preached a social consciousness centered on the prevalent issues of Black people. Songs like "Fight the Power"^[6] and "Black Rage" by Lauren Hill offered a refrain of rage and resistance against oppression, racism, and white hegemony. The 21st century heard the harmonic, hip-hop sounds of African Americans reaffirm another well-defined, three-word message, "Black Lives Matter!" Again,

we hear the clarion call for “Freedom” from Beyonce and H.E.R. (Gabriella Wilson’s “Having Everything Revealed”) reminds America that Black skin is now legalized melanin, with her pain-filled lyrics, “I Can’t Breathe.”

As we enter the second quarter of the 21st century, Americans have made considerable progress, but America still has recurrent systemic policy problems. Policies still reward the pursuit of profits, regardless of potential injury to people. Wealth and income gaps have increased with individuals in the top 1 percentile controlling 30.8% of net wealth.[7] The majority of Americans do not trust the U.S. Supreme Court to act in their best interests.[8] The need to pass H.R. 4, The John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2021[9] has never been greater.

I want to leave you with this positive take-home message. At most civil rights marches and protest rallies, the Negro spiritual “We Shall Overcome” has galvanized marchers for decades and hopefully it will remain a spiritual rallying song for future activists. It is essential to remember, to remind others, and to teach the next generation:

You cannot sing ‘We Shall Overcome’ all day, every day. ‘We Shall Overcome’ **must become** ‘We Have Overcome’ by the end of the day. Tomorrow when you wake up, there are new challenges to be met, but we are given new grace and mercies.

‘We Shall Overcome’ at the beginning of the day will become ‘We Have Overcome’ by the end of the day. We are overcomers!

For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it who overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. We have come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord.

Editor’s note: Essays by Jefferson scholars are the products of their own research and views.

References

[1] The Brothers Johnson was the name given to R & B and Funk recording artists George and Louis Johnson. Recorded for A & M Records and Capitol Records between 1975-1982 and 1984-2015.

[2] Lift Every Voice and Sing. (1900). Composed by James Weldon Johnson (wrote lyrics) and John Rosamond Johnson (composed music).

[3] America the Beautiful, written by Katherine Lee Bates (1859-1929). The poem was inspired during a trip to Pikes Peak in 1893. The poem first appeared in print on July 4, 1895, in *The Congregationalist*. The poem was set to music in 1910 by Samuel Ward of Grace Episcopal Church, Newark, NJ

[4] King, Martin L. "I Have a Dream. Speech presented at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,

Washington, D. C. August 1963. [Here](#).

[5] Ellis, Alfred "Pee Wee (writer) and Brown, James (performer) In 1968 Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud was number one single on national R & B charts.

[6] Public Enemy, Fight the Power. Released as a single by Motown Records on July 4, 1989.

[7] Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System (US), Share of Total Net Worth Held by the Top 1% (99th to 100th Wealth Percentiles) [WFRBSTO1134], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; [Here](#) on January 14, 2025.

[8] Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania (October 2, 2024. Retrieved on January 14, 2025. [Here](#).

[9] John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2021. This bill establishes new criteria for determining which states and political subdivisions must obtain preclearance before changes to voting practices may take effect. Preclearance is the process of receiving preapproval from the Department of Justice (DOJ) or the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia before making legal changes that would affect voting rights. [Here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Parris J. Baker is an Associate Professor at Gannon University, where he is the Social Work, Mortuary Science and Gerontology Program Director. An alumnus of Gannon, Baker received his graduate degree from Case Western Reserve University, Jack, Joseph, & Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. Presently, Baker serves as the Senior Pastor of Believers International Worship Center, Inc. He is married and has five children.



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