

Most High and Holy God  
Our Creator and Sustainer,  
As we continue our journey into this new year

We remember and praise you that all that we have that is good comes from you.

We remember and rejoice that you have taken care of us in the past, you take care of us even now.

And, we fear not because we know and we trust that you have it all in control and you will look after us and guide us in every tomorrow.

Bless in this new year,  
all your people, no matter their nature or condition.  
May we be filled always with your great compassion, your grace and your love.

May we give sisters and brothers a glimpse of love for the world.

Help us this day and everyday to be humble, gentle and kind in all our dealings and encounters.

May we be slow to anger and quick to forgive and to seek reconciliation in challenging times.

Teach us to critically examine our own lives before commenting on the conduct of others.

In all things may we be ever honest and true and obedient to you!

Challenge us,  
To face our days with courage and with fortitude

Trusting always you will provide us strength to endure all things to come.

Whatever may come our way may we always keep our eyes on the prize.

Yours is indeed our blessed assurance, because you lead us and you guide us.

May others who have turned their backs on you or who have not known you, see your precious and unconditional love shine in each and every one of us.

Grant that our words and our actions consistently point to you, that our lives may lead others to discovering you and your perfect peace.

Brothers and sisters in the continuing struggle for liberation and freedom...

Partners with all purveyors of peace...

You who journey and persevere, in unity, on the road toward justice and reconciliation...

Those who pray, with determination and with fervor, for tolerance and mutual forbearance even in trying, turbulent and challenging times.

All who seek to love neighbors as themselves, joyfully, compassionately, deliberately and un- conditionally.

All assembled, people of goodwill whose consciences will not allow them to remain silent in the face of injustice, who rather stand up and speak out when the status quo is immoral and wrong.

And we in community who relentlessly seek the strength to love, who are convinced and loudly proclaim, "The dream lives on" "We must and shall overcome." And "Ain't gon' let NOBODY turn us 'round" no turning back, no turning back...

Greetings to you all who gather in celebration of the short but tremendously well lived life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On this the 89th anniversary of his birth and in the fiftieth year since he was violently taken from our presence, we continue to marvel at what he sacrificed and what he accomplished in a very few years.

But not only that, that about which he espoused and taught, talked and walked, faithfully sought to be and whom he ultimately was, on the national and international stages, cannot, must not, be irresponsibly set aside and placed on the proverbial back burners of history.

Even now friends, particularly now, the provocative titles of Dr. King's books, "Why we can't wait" and "Where do we go from here?" are as timely and relevant topics of concern for us as they were when he wrote them.

**We are not yet, a half century and more later, where we as a global human community need to be...**

The beloved community, truly the promised land Dr. King envisioned, that special, even sacred place steeped in the higher principles of righteous humanitarianism continues to elude us.

Sadly we are acquainted with, some still espouse and embrace and perpetuate the evils of disharmony, hatred and division.

The pernicious concepts of racism and bigotry and the ugly, vicious and inhumane practices of racial segregation and discrimination and oppression that Dr. King addressed a generation and more ago, were born of, among other things, an ethos of IGNORANCE.

**We are not yet, a half century and more later, where we as a global human community need to be... We can't wait...**

Dr. King was first and foremost, he proudly admitted, a minister of the gospel. Accordingly he shared, he "loved the church, (was) nurtured in its bosom (and) was sustained by its spiritual blessing."

He was the son, the grandson and great grandson of Baptist preachers. He attended a Baptist college and was trained and encouraged by, among others, its president, the extraordinary Black theological, philosopher, educator, activist and author, Dr. Benjamin Mays.

I am preaching to the choir--most of us know all this...

The young King graduated from Morehouse College and went on to seminary in the north followed by graduate studies toward the PhD degree.

Most of us certainly are aware that following the completion of his doctoral studies, the Rev. Dr. King returned to his native South to accept the pastorate at the prestigious Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in the very shadow of the Capitol of the State of Alabama in Montgomery.

Martin Luther King, Jr., before Montgomery, a decade before Birmingham, and the March on Washington, Selma, Chicago and Memphis, could have, might have, others would have and did, stay "up north" rather than going "back south."

Rev. King looked beyond great pulpits in large northern cities, communities populated in great part by African American migration from that same hostile south in the preceding decades.

Seminary and university professorships were available to the proven scholar, the intellectual, the theologian and philosopher King.

The return to the south of the mid past century, must have been for the young pastor, nearly as important a call as the divine one of and from God to the Christian ministry itself.

And yet, still another fateful call to the service of God and humanity in its broadest sense, awaited...

Those of us who grew up in the era of Dr. King's special ministry, along with the Movement, recall and witnessed the conduct of a ministry ordained of God and validated by a movement that ultimately changed the United States and even the world. We were indeed witnesses to the radical nature of peaceful nonviolent resistance he and a host of others of the movement engaged and utilized in aggressively addressing the chronic ills of a repressive, sick and suffering society.

But as the numbers of us who were present and even participants in the Civil Rights Movement, naturally dwindle, is it not our responsible to educate those who come behind us?

How many still alive, as many of us were, were also in Sunday school that day in 1963 when the 16th Street Baptist Church in

Birmingham was bombed? Were you marching in Washington or Detroit or Chicago or Selma? Do you remember as I do, that day when Dr. King was shot and killed in Memphis? How many watched the funeral live from Atlanta; remember the fight to recognize this day as a national holiday?

But gentle people, How many of the young ones in our midst have read anything beyond short, truncated snippets, descriptions of the life, times, work and philosophy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in a history text book, if at all?

Do they fully understand why this day of reflection and commemoration exists?

How many of those of the next generations of individuals to whom we must pass along the symbolic baton to, have read and sought to process not through 2018 lenses, the following quote of Dr. King in his monumental essay drafted while in custody in the Birmingham Jail in 1963:

***Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dart of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her***

***beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.***

Do they know to whom the letter was addressed? Why? Even about the scrapes of paper it was written, no tablet, spell check, no external electronic assistance or influence or distraction of any nature.

Are those coming behind us aware of why Dr. King was in Birmingham, or numerous other places where injustice was confronted and attacked? Do they understand a social system that existed not that long ago--far different than this current, but yet still flawed and divided society?

Do they know and understand terms like lynching, civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance? Can they describe if called upon the concepts of gradualism, and nullification or even

boycott?" Do they understand why we as oppressed people and even the wider national community simply could "not wait" for significant change in 1963?

The Christian minister King was surely familiar with the admonitions in the Hebrew Scriptures where in the book of Proverbs we are instructed to "Train children in the right way..."  
And

Rev. King was familiar with Jesus' expression of love and concern in the Synoptic Gospels, when he directed his followers to "Let the little children come."

Too often, the contemporary "old guard," the US, the grey and white hair folks, set too often in our narrow ways, have behaved much as Jesus' disciples as they sought to push the young ones away.

Dr. King also said this in that same letter produced in the margins of cast off pages of newsprint and bits of toilet paper:

***In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.***

***There was a time when the church was very powerful in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the***

*church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators" But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.*

*Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often even vocal sanction of things as they are.*

*But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.*

One needn't look very far to ascertain:

**We are not yet, a half century and more later, where we as a global human community need to be... We can't wait, *look about you*. We can't wait.**

So my dear friends, where do we, fifty five years later go from here?

We all know there are still more battles, some perhaps monumental, to be fought; there are struggles to be faced. There are indeed some difficult days ahead.

But, as I preach to kids all the time, "No giving up or giving in allowed..."

We all know too, those of us who grew up with the movement, observed witnessed and experienced the world in the 1950's and 60's and even before that for some, are not going to be on this plain forever.

Incredible as that world we once inhabited and endured may seem to the younger generations, they need to understand the need to be eternally vigilant.

Peace, societal well-being, respect, understanding, equality, unity, community concepts that speak to and support the personhood of all people are as relevant now as they were from 1955 to 1968.

In the midst of that era of social change, in 1965, song writers Hal David and Bert Bacharach produced the song "What the world needs now is love" Still does.

A few years later Graham Nash wrote the equally popular song, "Teach your children"

Many times from the pulpit I have quoted the Rev. Cecil Williams. His call to action: to walk that walk, talk that talk, do that do and be that be, must ring loudly for us today.

If the dream is to live on, and it absolutely must, we need to teach our children and young people. They must learn to read widely, to think critically and to always ask questions. We must prepare them to be leaders, not blind followers like sheep to slaughter. We must strive to make it plain and relevant.

If we do not undertake this task, who will?

They must become acquainted with the values and vision Dr. King brought to the fore, vigorously, rigorously and with deliberate passion.

If we are going to truly make this world, this society, a better place, narrow foci must yield to broader horizons.

St. Francis prayed:

Lord make me an instrument of your peace  
Where there is hatred let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope  
Where there is darkness, light  
And where there is sadness, joy  
O divine master grant that I may  
not so much seek to be consoled as to console  
to be understood as to understand  
To be loved as to love  
For it is in giving that we receive  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Dr. King shares for us in the final chapter of his book "Strength to love"

***The past decade has been a most exciting one. In spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period something profoundly meaningful is taking place. Old systems of exploitation and oppression are passing away; new systems of justice and equality are being born. In a real sense this is a great time to be alive. Therefore, I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted that the easygoing optimism of yesterday is impossible. Granted that we face a world crisis that leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life's restless sea. But every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark, confused world the Kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men" (and women)."***

***Beloved neighbors,***

***May we as a community of veterans of the struggle, through our "faith (and our) "devotion to the principles" of humanitarianism and peace,***

those values Dr. King espoused, and committed his life's work, teach our children well, become and truly "be inspiring examples of the strength to love..."

To God be the glory!!

Amen and amen.