

January 15, 2017
Yes, We Can and Ode to Joy

Musical Prelude

Greeting: Barack Obama and Martin Luther King Jr.

First Hymn: Amazing Grace, Green 185

Readings: Psalm 137:1-4; Isaiah 61:1-3;7; "Our Liberation"

Second Hymn: There is a Balm in Gilead, Green 179

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Prayer -- We once were lost but now are found

Third Hymn: Go Down Moses, Green 294

Message: Yes We Can and Ode to Joy

Silent Worship

Fourth Hymn: Ode to Joy, Green 11

Benediction -- Let My People Go

Afterthoughts/Introductions/Announcements

Musical Postlude

Tomorrow is the day that our country sets aside to honor the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. Four days later, on Friday this week, we will mark the end of the presidency of our nation's first president of African descent. In Barack Obama's farewell address to the nation, in his hometown of Chicago, he ended his speech with a request of American citizens: he asked that we continue to believe

in the affirmation of the words “Yes, we can.” There is no question that for Barack Obama and for our nation, for people on all sides, those words are layered with meanings that they didn’t possess eight years ago. Now we hear in them not only our predilections and prejudices -- whatever those may be -- but also the tumult of all that has happened since we first heard them in 2008, and all our questions about what will happen next.

We can bemoan the gap between campaign rhetoric and the hard reality of governing. We can disagree about Obama’s policies, about the direction in which he has tried to lead us, about the ideological vantage point from which he has led, about the direction we are heading in now. But whatever our political persuasions, on this day before Martin Luther King Junior’s birthday, in the midst of a change of leadership that has found these united states deeply divided, with those three words our country’s first black president testified one last time that he belongs to the same living stream of African American political, social and spiritual consciousness that nourished the man we celebrate tomorrow. *Yes, we can* is a testament, a proclamation, a claim of faith and hope with roots in a long, arduous, and unfinished struggle for justice for our black and brown brothers and sisters. It starts with *Yes* -- a shout of joy, an affirmation, a confirmation, a declaration. *We* means all of us, together, a collective, not separate from one another, not apart *from* what is larger than us but a part *of* it, and therefore belonging to it and each other. *Can* is a statement of resolve, perseverance, hope and faith against the odds. There have been many times in the long history of the human endeavor and in the relatively short history of our nation’s story, that the odds have seemed very long, and the spirit of dogged determination in the words, *Yes, We Can*, just a desperate whisper in the face of impenetrable injustice. But if enough people take up a whisper it becomes a shout. And that has happened. It happened in Selma and Montgomery. It can happen again. Today, in fellowship with the long line of all who have come before us, who had faith against long odds, and in honor of Martin Luther King Junior, who would be 88 years old tomorrow, and who showed a nation, a people, and a world what the audacity of hope looks like, let us begin our worship by singing our *First Hymn: Amazing Grace, Green 185*

Readings

Psalm 137

¹*By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.*

²*On the willows there we hung up our harps.*

³*For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

⁴*How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*

Isaiah 61:1-7

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of justice; to comfort all who mourn; ³...— to give them a garland instead of ashes, a balm of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

⁷*Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs.*

The third reading is the story of the origin of a quotation that has become a motto for many activist groups working for racial harmony and equality all over the world. In the 1970s in Australia, Aboriginal Australians began to organize and testify against racism and colonialism and the ongoing impact and consequences of these systemic injustices in the lives of Aboriginal and Islander communities. Concerned white Australians approached indigenous groups asking, “*how can white people help? What can we do?*” Frustrated by those questions, and seeing in them reflections of persisting colonial perceptions and attitudes from which the white people needed to liberate themselves, a reply emerged from the Aboriginal community: “*If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*”

Second Hymn: There is a Balm in Gilead, Green 179

Prayer:

Holy God. God of Amazing Grace, we have been lost. We have been captive to lies and delusions, to hopelessness and fear, we have been prisoners of our own blindness. We have been lost. Spirit of the Lord, God of Amazing Grace, anoint us here, now, today, that we may proclaim release for the captives, freedom from all that binds our own hearts. We have forgotten our belonging, forgotten what it is that we have faith in, lost ourselves in confusion. Holy God of Amazing Grace, We have been lost. We come here together to be found. To remember our belonging. To seek understanding, together. To believe in joy. To practice our faith, one breath at a time, one prayer at time, one moment of silence at a time, one wavering

note of song at a time. God of grace, of joy, of hope against the odds, give us the courage of our convictions. We were blind, but now we see. Anoint us now that we may raise our voices in a new song, a song of good news to the oppressed and the oppressor, a balm of gladness for all who mourn, a proclamation of liberation for all of us, together. God of Amazing Grace, we once were lost, but now we are found. We find ourselves here this morning, one people, bound together, in you.

Third Hymn: Go Down, Moses, Green 294

Message, Silent Worship

Fourth Hymn: Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee, Green 11

Benediction

“Mortals, join mighty chorus.” How do we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? We keep practicing. We keep listening. We keep calling out to Pharaoh, “Let My People Go,” and we mean all of us, together.

*We hear the heartbeat of lost homelands as it whispers **Yes we can**. We understand that this is our song, too. We keep practicing though the wrong notes outnumber the right, we listen for the ode to joy, for the whispers to become a shout.*

Message

My eight year old son Cyrus has begun to take stand-up bass lessons at school this year. So, since September, we have had a new soundtrack to our home life. First it was the halting notes of *Hot Cross Buns*, and *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. And now, he is learning how to play the simple melody of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. The first couple of weeks, what he played only sporadically sounded like that familiar piece of music. Wrong notes far outnumbered the right ones, and he would get to the end discouraged and frustrated. "That was terrible," I would hear him mutter to himself, as he scratched the bow furiously across the strings. He often wasn't able to meet the challenge that that discouragement and frustration presented. One day we set the timer on our stove for one minute, 10 times, with breaks in between, the only possible way to make it through the interminable 10 minute stretch of required practice time. Now, though, after this sometimes determined, sometimes really only half hearted, and sometimes downright resistant practice -- now the notes are starting to coalesce. By fits and starts, discordant sounds are coming together, the song is starting to emerge. And the more he can actually hear himself play the song, the more fortified he is, to practice it some more.

While Cyrus has been learning *Ode to Joy*, over the last two weeks, I have been taking a January Intensive, a class called *Black Church Perspectives in Faith, Understanding and Belief*, and I hope you won't mind if I take this time today to share with you what I've learned.

The class started by defining its terms. Faith, my professor asserted, is an affirmation of relationship with God, and God is symbolic language that describes that about which we are ultimately concerned. So faith is our relationship with that to which we ascribe ultimate value. The responsibility of our relationship with what we call Sacred, what we call God, is to seek understanding -- to question, to analyze, to critique, to wrestle with difficult paradoxes, to stay with the unresolvable tensions. That seeking leads to belief -- to the willingness to live out our faith, to put into practice our relationship with God, to set our lives and hearts behind what we have faith in.

Terms defined, the class then traced the unfolding process of faith, understanding, and belief for the Black Church. In a book called *Slave Religion*, I read in detail about how Africans were stolen from their homelands and forcefully brought to this hemisphere, and once here, their cultural expressions and structures of self-

understanding -- their religions, their ritual frameworks of meaning-making -- were brutally suppressed by the European American colonists. I learned that this was part of concerted efforts to erase and eliminate anything that would suggest that these Africans were in fact people. It was important to the slave trade to dehumanize the slaves, to mitigate the cognitive and spiritual dissonance that comes with owning other people. It could not be admitted that they were people. Black lives could not be allowed to matter.

Forbidden from practicing their indigenous religions, when the African Gods were beaten out of them, slaves eventually utilized the symbols that were available to them, those of white European Christianity, to construct meaning in a foreign land. African slaves and their descendants adopted the faith of the slave masters, sometimes by forceful conversion if masters saw the cross as a way to further subjugate the slaves, sometimes by stealth if masters saw, rightly, the potential for the gospel to be radical and dangerous to the prevailing order, and sometimes with the ambivalent oversight of slave masters who tried to impart a Christianity that improved docility and limited rebellion.

I learned about how African slaves worshipped in secret, using their hands and feet to mark time and keep rhythm as they sang, because the drums of their ancestors were forbidden, but they could still feel the heartbeat of the land they lost in this one beneath their feet. In their songs, slaves crafted a new faith from the faith of their masters. They sang their sorrow and they sang their joy -- somehow, even in seemingly interminable suffering, there was a defiant joy found in this faith, and slaves expressed it in song and music that took the master's church hymns and made them their own. And in that pulse, that heartbeat that the master could not hear, was the whisper of *Yes, we can*.

From the 1600s through the first half of the 20th century, Americans of African descent modified and appropriated white supremacist Christianity. They found in its symbols and stories of crucifixion and resurrection, of exodus and return, of bondage and freedom, and of a God who suffers with those who suffer ample spiritual resources to craft faith, to forge understanding, and persevere in belief. Through the brutality of the century after the Civil War, when the more than 5000 recorded lynchings were a terrorizing form of social control, to the Civil Rights Era, when the Black Church became a radical force for social, economic, and political critique, and on into the present era, when our country uneasily shifts around the words *race, racism, and post-racial*, I learned how spiritually resilient African Americans have been in our country, how spiritually resilient they have had to be, and how different Christianity feels, and functions, in a community that sees *itself* in the crucified Jesus, reads *its own* story in the story of Israel in exile,

and dares to believe that the God who holds them, who is *with them still* is the same God who *proclaimed release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, who commanded Moses to tell Pharaoh 'let My People Go', and who was there with his people as they were led out of Egypt, freedom bound.*

One of the requirements of the class was to prepare a presentation that explored this subject in the context of my ministry. I found that Quakers cherish our own history as people who worked for and with our black brothers and sisters for their liberation. We know that George Fox wrote as early as 1657 that *Christ died for all people*, of all races. He argued that slaveholding Quakers should let their slaves “go free after a considerable term of years,” and with some compensation for their labor. In the mid seventeenth century, the fundamental equality of all people before God, the injustice of slavery, and paying restitution for the stolen labor of slaves were radical notions. But it took a century after those statements by George Fox for the Society to come to unity on the incompatibility of slavery with the Quaker conviction that there is That of God in everyone. Contentious meetings for discernment found Friends unable to come to consensus because **despite our forebears’ deep faith in the true light of Christ in everyone**, Quakers of European descent in every yearly meeting benefited economically from the slave trade, and there were wealthy Quaker merchants who were importers of people, who stood to lose considerable economic benefit and social standing if the Society of Friends renounced slaveholding. For a century Friends sought understanding in that unresolvable tension, opposing the prevailing norms on the one hand and capitulating to and profiting from them on the other.

When at last we reached consensus, Quakers ceased to be slaveholders, and became visible and vocal opponents of the institution of slavery, devoted as individuals and as a corporate body to abolition. Faith, understanding and belief are a process, a continual unfolding. For us it took time to develop the courage of our convictions. In the centuries since we are still learning, over and over it seems, that being part of a system that dehumanizes some of its members costs the humanity of everyone, that there is no release of the captives without release of the captors from the illusion of our separation. It is a truth that those on the receiving end of injustice understand deeply: our liberation is bound together.

For two weeks I read and learned about African American history and Quaker American history, and about how those histories intersect, live in, and inform the present. Meanwhile, Cyrus practiced *Ode to Joy*.

Ode to Joy is a European musical piece if ever there was one. The words come from a poem written by German poet, playwright and historian Friedrich Schiller

in 1785. It is best known by its use by Beethoven in the final movement of his Ninth Symphony, composed in 1824. Among critics, this is almost universally considered one of Beethoven's greatest works, and many consider it one of the greatest compositions in the western musical canon. Today, it stands as one of the most performed symphonies in the world. It was adopted as the Anthem of Europe by the Council of Europe in 1972, and subsequently by the European Union. In our house, as the quintessential European hymn rose more and more clearly and beautifully from Cyrus' strings, so did the story of broken black bodies and the audacity of unbroken hope, so did the power of endurance, so did the fortitude of faith, understanding and belief expressed in the African adoption of European Christianity in America.

And then, Barack Obama said, *Yes, we can*, one last time.

Sometimes, Friends, discordant notes come together. Sometimes children learn things; sometimes people learn things, despite ourselves. Even when we are reluctant, change happens; wrong notes are played over and over again and somehow are made right -- by fits and starts, discouragement and grim determination, unbreakable faith, audacious joy, and occasional moments of harmonious conversion. *Yes we can* whispers through the tumult, the frustration, the terrible odds. Disjointed people -- captives, all, prisoners, all of one sort or another -- start thinking of ourselves as "us" and "we." The heartbeat of stolen homelands can be found in a strange land, still pulsing, can lend its steady beat to new songs. Justice quickens. The whisper becomes a shout of acclamation, the furious slashing yields a sudden pure clear note of Everlasting Joy. Sometimes the *yes we can* and the *ode to joy* weave together a new song, a song of liberation bound together. Sometimes, the more we hear the song, the more we practice playing.