

Order of Service -- January 27, 2019
Wrestling, Resilience, and Rising to the Occasion

Musical Prelude

Greeting --MLK and Adrienne Maree Brown

1st Hymn: God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens, Green 309

Readings -- Genesis 32:24-31; Cornel West

2nd Hymn: There is a Balm in Gilead, Green 179

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- There is a Balm in Gilead

3rd Hymn: Go Down, Moses, Green 294

Message: Listening to Funk: Wrestling, Resilience and Rising to the Occasion

Silent worship

4th Hymn: Amazing Grace, Green 185

Closing -- *Great Creator Still Creating, Show us what we yet may do.*

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting:

Good morning Friends. This past week we once again celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. day. He would have turned 90 this year. When he was assassinated in 1968, he was deeply unpopular because he had broadened the scope of the kind of transformation he was seeking for American society. He was questioning the deepest, most invisible and most intertwined structures of racism, poverty, economic exploitation, and militarism. He was challenging our country to change and grow in ways that many people invested in the structures he critiqued were profoundly uncomfortable with. Using words like “revolution of values,” and the “soul of our nation,” he was talking about fundamental systemic change. To listen to the speeches of the last year of his life today is to listen to the voice of a prophet, because he diagnosed with such clarity where we were headed if we *didn't* change course. And it's clear that where we were headed is here. Where the voting rights guaranteed by the voting rights act he championed are being attacked and dismantled. Where fellow citizens distrust one another's experience and attack each other over our understandings of race and racism. Where poverty, economic exploitation, income inequality and the power of a very few wealthy people are starkly evident. Where the current administration's military budget is 686.1 Billion dollars, and our country seeks alliances with violent, authoritarian regimes. It might be tempting to lose heart, to feel we have lost ground. But today I would like us to consider the words of black feminist author and social justice activist from Detroit, Michigan Adrienne Maree Brown, who said, *“Things are not getting worse, they are just getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.”* Perhaps the things that always needed revolutionary change in the soul of our nation are not getting worse. Maybe they are just getting much more difficult to ignore. Perhaps the more uncovered the tangled tendrils of racism, extreme materialism and militarism become, the greater will come the call to Martin Luther King's revolution of values. Maybe transformation is still possible, for the soul of our nation. Let's consider this possibility together today, and let's begin by singing our **first hymn, a hymn of human potential and spiritual evolution, God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens, from the Green hymnal, number 309.**

Prayer

*Great Creator, Still Creating, Show us what we yet may do. Heal our sin-sick soul. Stay with us, pull us close, teach us to struggle, to wrestle with you. Increase in us our capacity to keep going, strengthen in us our resolve to stay with you until the day breaks. Let us prevail, together. Give us a new name, oh Lord, a name that tells the world we are equal to the task of staying in your embrace. Teach us to strive with you, to strive with our humanity. Let the sun rise on us, wounded, but still striving. Give us the courage to think critically, to love resolutely, to hope, to grow in our compassion, to wrestle like Jacob **with** the wounds and the wounding ways of our human journey. Lead us closer to you, guide us forward, give us the wisdom to let suffering speak, give us the courage to hear the truth. We are lost; find us. We were blind; help us to see. Grant us your redeeming grace, Holy God. Great Creator, Still Creating, Show us what we yet may do.*

Benediction

*On the bank of this river let us wrestle the angel of the Lord.
Like Jacob, let us hold on until the blessing is given.
Let us prevail, carry on, till the day breaks and we are transformed.
May the story we belong to be one of redeeming grace.
May there be a balm to heal our sin-sick soul.
May we sing Let My People Go, and mean all of us.
Great Creator Still Creating, Show us what we yet may do.*

Readings

Genesis 32:24-31 After he had sent them all across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

²⁶Then The Man said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷The Man asked, "What is your name?" And he answered, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called that place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Cornel West -- American philosopher, political activist whose work focuses on race, gender, and class and is deeply informed by the Black Church tradition.

"what kind of human being are you going to choose to be?... love of wisdom is a way of life; ... it's a set of practices that have to do with mustering the courage to think critically about ourselves, society, and the world; mustering the courage to empathize; the courage... to love; the courage to have compassion with others, especially the widow and the orphan, the fatherless and the motherless, poor and working peoples, gay and lesbian brothers and sisters ...—and (it's) the courage to hope. So, it is a way of life, a set of practices...but, at the same time, I call it a kind of focus on the funk. ... And by funk, what I mean is, wrestling like Jacob with the wounds, the scars, the bruises, as well as the creative responses to wounds, scars, and bruises—some of them inflicted because of structures and institutions, some of them being tied to the existential condition of our humanity...losses of those we love, old age, sickness...all of these are wounds and scars and bruises. And it's at that very concrete level that my concept of philosophy operates. That's one reason why I spend as much time with poets and musicians as I do with philosophers (because)...their vocations are trying to make sense of the world at this ...very...ground-level engagement with ... the funk.. You must let suffering speak, if you want to hear the truth."

Message

Two conversations have been happening in our family's life over the last couple months. The first is an ongoing exploration of the history of late 20th century

African American music, stemming from my ten year old son Cyrus's discovery of 1970's funk. When we are home as a family, Pandora radio has often been tuned to the 70's funk station at Cyrus' request. I'm no musical historian or expert, but we've tried, as we listen, to trace some broad strokes of the musical legacy that informs funk, from the forced importation of African senses of rhythm through the slave trade, to the important role that those cultural traditions from Africa played in fostering community, spiritual resilience, and resistance for slaves and their descendents, and how that cultural re-creation after and in the midst of great trauma over the last 400 years yielded spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, R and B, soul, funk, hip hop, and rap. How all of these genres distill ways of expressing something about the African American experience of being human in a culture that began by dehumanizing them. How so much of African American music takes the experience of undeserved hardship, of the long despair and intractable sorrow, what Cornel West called "the funk" of life: the deep, dark, filthy blues -- and channels this complex lived reality into rhythm and song. It turns out I have a son who likes his funk, and the funkier, the better.

Meanwhile, the second ongoing conversation we've been having is with my younger son Cazimer, whose natural empathy and sensitivity make him aware of some of the crises and challenges facing our country and our species in this planetary moment, when he is eight years old and much too little to lift that heavy weight. While the last century's R and B and motown hits play in the background, Caz worries about the state of the world, here and now. He tells me seriously of poisons in the air and water, and of how poor brown skinned people on the border are not allowed into our country, how our President wants to build a wall to keep them out and how children his age and younger have been taken away from their parents. And he says, in a small voice, "I wish I wasn't a human being." He says he just doesn't want to be on the bad guy team. In answer, I say that of course he doesn't, that nobody wants to be on the bad guy team. And I try to impress upon him the possibility that the extent of our humanity is not the choice to either capitulate to joining the bad guy team or to despair completely of our human-ness. I say that I think humans are still learning and still expanding our understandings of what it means to be human, and that one thing we can say is that we **have been known** to love a challenge. That we've always and still got the opportunity to choose what kind of human beings we want to be, as Cornel West put it. And in addition to the capacity for choice, we're also given a capability for courage: courage to love, to seek wisdom, to empathize, to think critically, to wrestle. To wrestle with and make songs and works of art from all these wounds, scars, and bruises that come from being alive, from *being* at all ~ from being, particularly, human. I tell Caz that he's right. we do have many challenges ahead, **and**. being

human could mean expanding what we think we're capable of. It could mean discovering and harnessing our ability to meet those challenges.

My two beloved boys are growing up at a time in our country and on this planet when the lifted veil shows us we have reached an absolute evolutionary edge, between what we *have* understood about how to be human, and the understandings we *must build about what being human could mean* -- in many realms: ecologically, for example, but also particularly around the ways we have structured our societies around previously invisible -- to us -- assumptions about race and racism. the most pervasive ways we've enacted our dominant understandings -- our theologies, our political and economic ideologies -- are not now equal to the task of attending to the consequences of having enacted *those dominant understandings* over all these preceding millenia, centuries, and decades. Meanwhile, our technologies and weaponries have gotten out ahead of our spiritual and emotional maturity, our social and civic skills, and have outpaced both the responsiveness of those theologies and economies **and** our ability to reexamine them such that they become sufficient for *this* moment. They're due for an upgrade, that's all. Pulling back the veil, we see that it's time to update our operating systems, right now. Without downplaying the true peril of this time, let us consider the possibility that rather than getting worse, racism, injustice, cruelty, greed, and the impulse to divide, dominate and dehumanize are becoming **more impossible to hide** in their ubiquity and in their baked-into-the system, business-as-usual quality, in the way they have undergirded our operating systems and been reinforced by those systems in turn. So our opportunity is to ask how we turn toward one another, hold each other tight, bring each other close, as those who wrestle do. How do we build our perseverance, how do we hold on, like Jacob, have the stamina to stay locked in an embrace through the whole night long until the coming break of day? How do we put our arms around this Being who refuses to be named, and **strive** -- not to win, and not to defeat, but to prevail, to continue, to carry on. until the sun rises upon a new day and **we** are given a new name to tell of the transformation we have undergone, becoming a people with the capacity to struggle with what is most Holy, most Sacred, in order that our very life might be preserved.

When I was a student in divinity school, I was a white minority in many of my classes, including classes about the history of the black church in America, and the history of European Christianity. In these classes, it was a revelation to me to simply let suffering speak, as Cornel West advises, to hear the truth from real people, my fellow learners, about how the plurality of Christian faiths of people of color, all over the world and here in the United States, is deeply informed by a

specific kind of struggle, because of where they are located within theological and societal structures built on and sustained by systemic racism, white supremacy, and colonial imperialism. What I learned from my colleagues of color was how deep a spiritual well they have had to dig, by hand, through centuries of slime and funk, and that they have the spiritual resource of this deep well to draw upon for sustenance because *they* carved it, forged it and then carried that water bucket by bucket, passed it from hand to hand, telling each other and their children the stories of their endurance and its meaning and purpose through centuries. They have had *to wrestle*, and it has strengthened their capacity to prevail. On the other hand, I truly understood for the first time how my faith journey as a North American middle class white woman, as a convinced Quaker -- yes, as someone who likes to think of herself as one of the good guys -- didn't require of me to build the same kind of resilience and endurance. I saw that being white folks means that despite our best intentions, we are part of the machinery of a long story of conquest. And pulling back that veil now means we have the opportunity to wrestle like Jacob with what is revealed to us. If African American theology and spirituality has necessarily been built on needing to be human despite dehumanization, then it's on white folks now to craft a spirituality of being human in the face of having been part of, intentionally or not, the apparatus of dehumanization. It means, like my son Cazimer, admitting the despair inducing, even terrifying, maybe even enraging feeling that we don't want to be on the bad guy team, that we didn't ask to be on the bad guy team. Of course we don't. And of course we didn't. So, as we look to the traditions we are part of and see the patterns of thought and behavior that have been previously invisible to us, the ways that the gospel of empire, of conquest, has been the scaffolding and the structure for our best understandings about our own humanity, how do we redeem our story? What is the redeeming grace? What do we need when we fervently sing let my people go? What might we identify as our spiritual resources for evolving an enriched humanity equal to the unveiled and evolutionarily enormous tasks ahead of us?

I submit that resources are here for us in the same tradition that was co-opted 1500 years ago by empire, by that impulse to dominate and dehumanize. We have, for example, the prophetic witness of the Hebraic tradition, speaking truth to power, imperfectly and very humanly, and often at great cost, for thousands of years. That's a long tradition to draw upon. It's the tradition that Jesus of Nazareth stood within, and also George Fox and Lucretia Mott and A.J. Muste and enumerable others, offering a critique of violence and coercive power, and an example of how to live and die that were radical then, are radical now, and are rooted in an experience of the Living God that proclaims a love stronger than death, and a power that inverts weakness and subverts strength, that brings the high low and the

low high so that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. This is the tradition that asks what good it is to gain the world but lose your soul, that advises the rich man that salvation is found in giving all he has to the poor, that preaches with perfect clarity that the greatest of all the commandments is to love, that we are to take up our cross and follow, and that God will be with us, yea, even in the midst of the worst possible suffering, all the way through to the end and beyond, so we are *to fear not* when we stand against the powers and principalities of this world. For though they promise us much, they have neither the final reward nor the final dominion. This tradition and its spiritual resources is every bit as authentic and native to us as the one built by supremacy and violence. It takes courage, though, and a willingness to wrestle. The good thing is that taking our place in this long story means we get to walk through the desert, toward the promised land, kingdom bound, side by side with our brothers and sisters of color. And I think, if we ask them, walking shoulder to shoulder, they might be willing to share with us some of what they know about this long march for freedom. Because they know something about endurance, about the long haul of soul building through an interminable night, with eyes on the coming dawn. They know something about how to wrestle, how to pull closer to the one we embrace, in struggle or in love, or both. They know something about stamina, about keeping faith through woundings that we know will cause us to limp for the rest of our days. They know what it means to prevail, to carry on, to have faith, to have the audacity to ask for God's blessing. They know how to reach down into the muck and the slime on this riverbank on the edge of the land of Canaan, how to dig up all the filthy blues, to reach out to God with all the humanity it was said we didn't have in us, how at last to make music out of the worst imaginable funk. They know about long odds and having to be equal to a seemingly impossible task. We could ask them to teach us what they know. We could rise to this occasion.