

Maya Angelou writes these words in her book *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. “The women wept and I wept. I too cried for the lost people, their ancestors and mine. But I was also weeping with a curious joy. Despite the murders, rapes and suicides, we had survived. The middle passage and the auction block had not erased us. Not humiliations nor lynchings, individual cruelties nor collective oppression had been able to eradicate us from the earth. We had come through despite our own ignorance and gullibility, and the ignorance and rapacious greed of our assailants.

There was much to cry for, much to mourn, but in my heart I felt exalted knowing there was much to celebrate. Although separated from our language, our families and customs, we had dared to continue to live. We had crossed the unknowable oceans in chains and had written its mystery into ‘Deep River, my home is over Jordan.’ Through the centuries of despair and dislocation, we had been creative, because we faced down death by daring to hope.”<sup>1</sup>

*Hope* is a word that has sustained people throughout time. It sustained the Israelites when the Egyptians enslaved them in bondage. In the midst of their cries and the agony of oppression, I somehow imagine that hope was at the core of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (New York: Random House, 1986), 207.

Israelites' very being that allowed them to survive—hope and belief in the God who said to Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...” (Ex. 3:7). In fear and trepidation Moses was called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt with assurance from the same God who said to him, “I will be with you...” (Ex 3:11).

It's not unlike the promise given to Martin Luther King, Jr., when he heard a voice say to him, “And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.” To King it was a promise of divine presence that filled him with passion for hope and love and justice—themes that were at the heart of King's faith and theology.

Hope is a central theme in black theology, and King often proclaimed in sermons, “God is able to make a way out of no way...to transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.”<sup>2</sup> King had unfailing hope in the God who sent Jesus Christ to free all people from the bondage of sin—to free all people from the bondage of whatever enslaves them. Hope and love of God sustained King in those times when even his allies failed to support him. At Ebenezer Baptist Church, King proclaimed, “When you know God, you can stand up amid the agonies and burdens of life and not despair. When you know God, you can stand up amid tension and

---

<sup>2</sup> James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 126.

tribulation and yet smile in the process.... When you know God, you have on some shoes that can help you walk through any muddy place.”<sup>3</sup>

Those are hope-filled words that ring out loudly and clearly, delivered in a sermon 46 years ago on November 15, 1964. They are words of *hope* we still need to hear today as we remember Martin Luther King, Jr., in Word and in Song. We give thanks for his life this resurrection day of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For every Sunday we give thanks to the God of *hope* who is with us always and freed us from bondage through Jesus Christ.

My eyes caught an article in this week’s *Hartford Courant* entitled “Let’s Look Beyond a Single Word.” It wasn’t to look beyond the word *hope* but rather to look beyond the word *Negro*. Susan Campbell did express some hope, for she offered the familiar phrase, “Hope springs eternal.”<sup>4</sup> She was writing about whether we have moved beyond racism these 50+ years since King’s death. It stemmed from Nevada’s Sen. Harry Reid who “was quoted in a new book saying that Obama was a plausible candidate given that he’s a light-skinned African American who uses ‘no Negro dialect’—unless he wants to.” That quote created a flurry of media frenzy with a number of voices calling for Reid’s head. Reid

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Campbell, “Let’s Look Beyond A Single Word,” *The Hartford Courant*, January 13, 2010, B1, B8.

apologized for his remark. Obama accepted the apology. And the Democratic and Republican debate continues about whether to call for his head.

Campbell went on to reflect further about this word *Negro*, which the U.S. Census Bureau has used for 100 years or so. When you get your 2010 Census forms, it still remains as a box that can be checked for one's race. Campbell said the very sad implication behind Reid's comment is that "a dark-skinned African American who uses 'Negro dialect' stands no chance of being elected president."

Pew Research Center studies reveal that many Americans are filled with hope about the future since Obama's election; however there is still much hope and justice needed for racial equality. Campbell continued in the article to cite some horrifying statistics. The November study of the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine reports 90% of black children will be on food stamps at some point in their lives. The U.S. Conference of Mayors estimates that the country's homeless population as counted in shelters includes the following: 42% African Americans, 38% white, 20% Hispanic, 4% Native American, and 2% Asian American. Something is a little askew, because that is more than 100%!

The Kaiser Family Foundation reports a 2008 study of one-quarter of Connecticut's African Americans and almost 37% of Connecticut's Hispanic Americans live in poverty vs. 8% of Connecticut's whites living in poverty.

“Whites fare better in home ownership, education and income.” And at the end of Campbell’s article she says, “So, yes, let’s debate ‘Negro.’ And then, shall we go deeper?”<sup>5</sup>

I believe that Martin Luther King, Jr. would want us to go deeper—deeper into understanding where hope and love and justice can be found in the midst of those statistics. Some profess that we have conquered racism in this country. These statistics and much more tell us the real truth. There is still a huge job to be done. I wonder about God’s words in Exodus, “I have observed the misery of my people.... I have heard their cry.... Indeed, I know their sufferings, ‘and I have come down to deliver them.’” I wonder what those words say to you and me this day as we ponder racism that is still alive and sadly raging in the world around us. We have only a few miles to go to witness that in the city of Hartford or perhaps it’s even right next door. To hear those statistics about Connecticut’s poverty is continuing to hear the story of a people still in bondage—a people still in need of a Promised Land—a people still in need of hope.

And then on this very same week of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birth, we hear of the unfathomable tragedy of the people of Haiti—a people who have been enslaved in the bondage of poverty and oppression for more years than one can say—a people who now hang on to any ounce of hope they can find.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

We still need to hear those words of assurance that Moses heard from God: “I have observed the misery of my people.... I have heard their cry.... Indeed, I know their sufferings, ‘and I have come down to deliver them.’” (Ex. 3:7). We still need to hear those hope-filled words of King: “When you know God, you can stand up amid the agonies and burdens of life and not despair. When you know God, you can stand up amid tension and tribulation and yet smile in the process.... When you know God, you have on some shoes that can help you walk through any muddy place.”

And I would add, “When you know God, you can stand up and listen to the cries of God’s children and find you have some shoes that can help you walk into the muddy places and help in some small way.”

We’re called to look more deeply into ourselves to find our way and to find the hope that is there for us all.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote the following words entitled *One Day*:

“One day, youngsters will learn words they will not understand.

Children from India (*and from Haiti*) will ask:

What is hunger?

Children from Alabama will ask:

What is racial segregation?

Children from Hiroshima will ask:

What is the atomic bomb?

Children at school will ask:

What is war?

You will answer them.

You will tell them:

Those words are not used any more

like stage coaches, galleys or slavery

Words no longer meaningful.

That is why they have been removed from dictionaries.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in Kathleen A. Guy, *Welcome the Child: A Child Advocacy Guide for Churches* (Washington, D.C.: Children’s Defense Fund, 1991), 113.