

SERMON
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday 2020
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

Almighty God, Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments [and Music] may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory... to the ends of the earth. Amen.

*A flower is a lovesome thing
A luscious living lovesome thing
A daffodil, a rose
No matter where it grows
Is such a lovely, lovesome thing*

*A Flower is a Lovesome Thing, Billy Strayhorn
Ephraim Dorsey, Saxophone/Mark Hardy, Keyboard*

The American Blues. Can you hear what rides beneath the words? How is it, why is it, that even when singing the praises of something as beautiful and miraculous as a flower, we are most authentic, most in touch with the truth, most faithful, when at the same time, we embrace a soulful tune that reminds us that *every flower must fade*. Blues aren't triumphant. Blues are realistic. But in them, there is a *victory in defeat*. The American blues touch something deep—and common to us all—the real experiences of life—of joy and pain, of gain and loss, of happiness and sadness, of exuberance and melancholy. We need a sub-woofer to hear it all. How is it that American Blues can evoke in us two opposite emotions at the same time? Appreciation, honor, and praise. And at the same time—loss, gloom and a sense of despair. In the mix, however, we are empowered. We know the glory of the full-blossom even after it fades! That's a pretty good understanding of hope. And, it carries us and emboldens us.

We can analyze the American Blues— its style, type of performance, musical form, and state of mind. But it accomplishes much more than its parts! We can identify its roots in African American gospel and folk music. We can dissect its repeated harmonic pattern of twelve measures' duration in 4/4 time—count it's tonic, subdominant and tonic phases. We can recognize “call and response” between vocalist and instruments. We can chart some lowered third and seventh scale steps. Hear the “blue notes.” Appreciate the improvisation. Be surprised

by its rhythmic freedom. “No wrong notes” in the Blues. But there’s more to it. The Blues approach to jazz has been called “a kaleidoscope that multiplies the lights of auditory delight.” This quote sounds like fireworks for the Season of Epiphany! It embodies new possibilities, adaptabilities—it reaches far and long.

Well, that’s my take on it, anyway. The American Blues revive the soul. My soul. I hope yours, too. Impassioned with both the beauty and the realities of living—the vicissitudes of life—the Blues carry hope. Not just “hope in the bud” but “hope in the flower and beyond the blossom.” Billy Strayhorn’s “A Flower is a Lovesome Thing,” also known under the working title of “Passion,” has drawn a wide range of jazz musicians including Ella Fitzgerald. Musicality isn’t the reason. Hope is the reason. Listen again. Perhaps, there is more than you thought. Maybe its about victory in defeat. Maybe its the pause just before the call to action. For only God can make a rose.

The Gospel of John is a musical masterpiece in its own way. A symphonic masterpiece with a glorious prelude —

In the beginning was the word
And the Word was with God
And the Word was God!

The composer of this Gospel has a challenge not unlike composers of the Blues—to reveal and offer nothing less than hope. John composed a gospel story, a good news story, for a struggling first century church painfully in touch with the realities of living, real-time experiences of life under pressure—of persecution, loss, violence—and a pervasive sense of despair. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is fear and despair. John composes for a community dogged by fear and despair. He builds his gospel around seven signs of hope—seven miracle stories of healings and risings—of life so passionate that even the death can’t contain it. There are repeated patterns in John’s story. Calls and responses. Improvisations. Freedom. “Blue notes.” See where I’m going with this? Right here in the first chapter there’s a melody by John that conjures up everything we need to carry us through the whole story. In one simple phrase he gives us everything we need

to provide hope for the journey. It's a marvel because listeners know what is going to happen to Jesus, just as we know. John tells a Blues song. He begins his story at the beginning—at the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist looks up and sees Jesus.

Jesus the "*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*"

These are the lyrics. The rest is detail.

Jesus the "*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*"

Perhaps these words have lost their meaning for you or maybe you never knew their meaning. The *lamb* is a significant word for the People of Israel. The *lamb* is at the center of the story of God rescuing His people—from oppression, from death, from the enemy—over and over. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God instructed the people to take the blood of a lamb and spread it on their doorposts. When the angel of death came through the land to kill the firstborn sons—when it saw the lamb's blood on the doorposts it *passed over* the house and spared the child. The *lamb* is the symbol of God's faithfulness and deliverance. Years later, when the people of Israel were exiled in Babylon, the prophet Isaiah said that God would raise up a servant to deliver the people. He would be a *suffering servant*. In Aramaic the word for *lamb* means both *lamb* and *servant*. John proclaims—

Here is the lamb, God's promise of deliverance!

Here he is!

At the same time, we know, they knew, what happened to Jesus. Can you hear the deep undertones? This story is written a hundred years later. They all knew Jesus had been killed. Yet John continues to proclaim,

Behold the lamb of God.

When John the Baptist calls Jesus “the lamb of God,” he touches our core—our common need and desire for God’s deliverance. This is a soulful song.

Can you hear the music of John’s Gospel? It frees us and revives us—the glory God in Jesus—God’s faithfulness and deliverance even after his crucifixion. Listen again.

Perhaps, John’s song is more than you thought. Maybe it is about victory in defeat. Maybe its the pause just before the call to action. For only God can make a rose.

On this Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday we honor and celebrate Dr. King’s life and ministry with Gospel and with Song. Thank you, Mark and Ephraim, for helping us to hear a soulful tune—*A flower Is a Lovesome Thing*. Thank you for keeping us mindful of the mystery of God—the source of our hope and deliverance.

Here is another soulful tune— the speech, given by Dr. Howard Thurman on the very evening of King’s assassination on Radio RKO in San Francisco.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is dead.

This is a simple and utter fact.

A few brief hours ago his voice could be heard in the land.

From the ends of the earth, from the heart of our cities,

from the firesides of the humble and the mighty,

from the cells of a thousand prisons,

from the deep central place in the soul of America

the cry of anguish can be heard.

There are no words with which to eulogize this man.

Martin Luther King was the living epitome of a way of life

that rejected physical violence

as the life style of a morally responsible people.

His assassination reveals the cleft deep in the psyche

of the American people.

... in him, the informed conscience of the country
became articulate.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to our times
and to the creative process of American society
is not to be found in his amazing charismatic power
over masses of people,
nor is it to be found in his peculiar and challenging courage
with its power to transform the fear-ridden black men and women
with a strange new valor,
nor is it to be found in the gauntlet which he threw down
to challenge the inequities and brutalities
of a not [yet] quite-[humane] people—
but rather in something else.

Always he spoke from within the context his religious experience,
giving voice to an ethical insight
which sprang out of his profound brooding
over the meaning of his Judeo-Christian heritage.

And this indeed is his great contribution to our times.

He was able to put into the center
of his own personal religious experience
a searching ethical awareness.

Thus organized religion as we know it in our society
found itself with its back against the wall.

To condemn him, to reject him,
was to reject the ethical insight of the faith it proclaimed.

And this was new.

Racial prejudice, segregation, discrimination
were not regarded by him as merely un-American, undemocratic,
but as a mortal sin against God.

For those who are religious it awakens guilt;
for those who are merely superstitious it inspires fear.

And it was this fear that pulled the trigger
of the assassin's gun that took his life.
...[Perhaps] What he was unable to bring to pass in his life
can be achieved by the acts of his dying.
May he live because all of us in America
are closer to becoming human than we ever were before.

On this day of remembrance and honor, let us sing the American Blues — together.
When we sing the praises of a life as beautiful and miraculous as Dr. King, at the same time,
let our souls be touched by the lives of thousands for whom justice and mercy have not yet been
realized. In the end, let us never give up hope — for deliverance of all God's people and for the
world. In Christ we have seen the glory of the full-blossom, a *lovesome thing* beyond words —
a song of redemption for the soul of the world. Listen again. Perhaps Martin's song is more than
you thought. Maybe it's about victory in defeat. Maybe it's the pause and the assurance, just
before the call to action. For only God can make a rose.

Amen.