

constantly adapting as it encounters new citizens, new ideas, and new realities. We are not perfect, but we strive for a brighter future; and we struggle against systemic inequities in the belief that things will change.

And in this endeavor, we are supported by God who seeks justice and mercy for all people. In our reading, God promised King Solomon that the nation which calls upon God and turns from their wicked ways *will* be healed. God also promised that God's eyes would always be on the people and God's heart would always be for the people. In his parable, Jesus promises that God's justice *will* come to the oppressed. I have hope that the current unrest in our country will point us to the way that leads toward a better society, where all people get justice, and quickly.

Echoing the hopeful tone of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," I believe that our nation may yet become the "shining city on a hill" of which Jesus spoke (Matthew 5:14). We are not a perfect nation. We are not perfect people. But scripture shows again and again, what imperfect people can do when they align themselves with the God, seeking compassion and equity to ensure a brighter future for all.

Sources:

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Lift Every Voice and Sing

Sunday, July 5, 2020

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

2 Chronicles 7:11-16

Luke 18:1-8

On February 10, 1900, Abraham Lincoln's birthday, the great educator and reformer Booker T. Washington spoke to students at the Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida. The school made special preparations to welcome their esteemed guest, including a poem written by James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), a member of the faculty. As part of the festivities, 500 school children would recite Johnson's poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Johnson was an innovative educator. He studied law and literature. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him as U.S. consul to Venezuela. Johnson led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), campaigning tirelessly for civil rights, organizing silent marches and peaceful protests, and seeking to change oppressive racial policies a full generation before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

John's accomplishments are indeed impressive, but his greatest contribution might just be this hymn. His brother, John Rosamund Johnson (1873-1954), a composer, set the poem to music. Over time, the hymn became a classic. Sometimes called "The African American National Anthem," this hymn gives voice to the hopes and heartaches of many.

Shana Redmond, professor at UCLA who studies music, race, and politics, says this is a song about transcending difficulties. "Black communities across the globe continue to be vulnerable in very unique and unsettling ways," Redmond says. "To sing this song is to revive that past — but also to recognize, as the lyrics of the song reveal, that there is a hopeful future that might come of it."

The first verse opens with a call for optimism, praise, and freedom: *Lift every voice and sing - Till earth and Heaven ring - Ring with the harmonies of liberty.*

The second verse cautions us to never forget the suffering and obstacles of the past: *Stony the road we trod - Bitter the chastening rod - Felt in the days when hope unborn had died.*

The third stanza is a challenge to meet the future with courage, perseverance, faith, and trust in God: *Thou who hast by Thy might - Led us into the light - Keep us forever in the path, we pray.*

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" became a rallying cry for Black communities, especially in the American South, but its influence reached well beyond those boundaries, writes Timothy Askew, an English professor at Clark Atlanta University and scholar of the song's history. The song's popularity faded toward the end of the civil rights movement in favor of songs like "We Shall Overcome." Askew says the song's recognition as a black national anthem is one of the reasons it moves in and out of favor. "There were many African-Americans who were in conflict with that idea," he says. "They were saying, 'Well, if we have marched, and we have attained what we hope to be equality, we can't have a black anthem. We need an anthem that links us all together.'"

The song which *should* link all Americans together, "The Star-Spangled Banner," was missing something, says Shana Redmond: "it was missing a radical history of inclusion...an investment in radical visions of the future of equality, of parity." In her view, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" provides a counterpoint to those deficiencies, allowing Americans "to acknowledge all of the brutalities and inhumanities and dispossession that came with enslavement, that came with Jim Crow, that comes still

today with disenfranchisement, police brutality, dispossession of education and resources...[and] it continues to announce that we see this brighter future, that we believe that something will change."

This hope for a brighter future is what led our Founding Fathers to secede from Great Britain. They charged ahead with little more than the belief that things can always change for the better. When Thomas Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence, the great American Experiment was a unique event in history, but its outcome was far from certain.

According to Helle C. Dale, a Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, "The self-evident truth that 'all men are created equal; endowed by their creator with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' remains the powerful philosophical and moral foundation of a successful foreign policy no less than it is the foundation of the American republic itself. Yet, as we are seeing today, the advance of freedom and democracy is not a straight path, but one that also sustains setbacks."

In this, she echoes Ben Franklin's assessment of the U.S. Constitution: "...when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views." Franklin thought it impossible to expect a "perfect production" from such a gathering, but he believed that the Constitution they drafted, "with all its faults," was better than any alternative that was likely to emerge.

I highlight this hymn and its history on this Fourth of July weekend, to remind us that our nation is once again in turmoil and transition. Our republic is a living, breathing entity which is