

**“WE ARE ALL KING’S CHILDREN”**

by  
J. Chester Johnson

**This sermon was given at Trinity Wall Street on Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, for the 11:15 A. M. Service; Copyright © 2015 by J. Chester Johnson.**

**A SERVICE THAT SUITABLY RESPECTS THE AMERICAN PROPHET, MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., SHOULDN’T AND CAN’T BE RUSHED. IN DEFERENCE TO HIM AND TO YOU ALSO, SINCE I CAN’T PREACH LIKE KING, I WON’T SPEAK AS LONG AS HE DID ON A NORMAL SUNDAY MORNING AT DEXTER AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH IN MONTGOMERY OR EBENEZER BAPTIST CHURCH IN ATLANTA, BUT I’M NOT GOING TO SHORTCHANGE HIM EITHER ON A DAY WE OF THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN FAITH SHOULD BE HONORING THE WORDS AND PERSON OF THIS MAN WHO LED THIS COUNTRY TO REMARKABLE CHANGE ON THE ROAD TO GOD’S KINGDOM. SO, LET’S JUST GET SETTLED IN FOR AWHILE.**

**I’D LIKE TO RECOGNIZE SOME SPECIAL PEOPLE WHO ARE HERE. THOSE OF YOU WHO RECENTLY ATTENDED THE PACKED HOUSE SYMPOSIUM AT ST. PAUL’S CHAPEL ON THE ELAINE RACE MASSACRE WILL BE ACQUAINTED WITH THE FOLLOWING TWO COUPLES.**

**SHEILA WALKER AND HER HUSBAND, IVOR, IN THE FIRST PEW. SHEILA'S GREAT UNCLES, ALBERT AND MILLIGAN GILES, WERE VICTIMS OF THE ELAINE RACE MASSACRE IN WHICH MY OWN GRANDFATHER PARTICIPATED. SHEILA AND I HAVE BEEN ENGAGED IN A PILGRIMAGE OF RECONCILIATION, AND I CANNOT IMAGINE A MORE LOVING OR CARING PERSON WITH WHOM TO BE ON THIS JOURNEY.**

**I'D LIKE TO INTRODUCE DAVID SOLOMON AND HIS WIFE, NANCY, ALSO IN THE FIRST PEW. DAVID'S FAMILY HAS LIVED FOR SEVERAL GENERATIONS IN PHILLIPS COUNTY, ARKANSAS, SITE OF THE ELAINE MASSACRE. NO MEMORIAL FOR THE MASSACRE CURRENTLY EXISTS, BUT DAVID HAS BEEN COURAGEOUSLY PURSUING A MEMORIAL TO BE COMPLETED BY THE YEAR 2019, THE CENTENNIAL.**

**BEFORE SETTING OFF FOR "FREEDOM SUMMER" AND THEN ULTIMATELY MARTYRDOM IN PHILADELPHIA, MISSISSIPPI WITH JAMES CHANEY AND MICHAEL SCHWERNER, ANDREW GOODMAN HAD BEEN A STUDENT AT QUEENS COLLEGE, HERE IN NEW YORK CITY. QUEENS COLLEGE NOW HOUSES AN EXTRAORDINARY**

**COLLECTION OF CIVIL RIGHTS ARCHIVES, AND I'M HONORED TO HAVE SEVERAL OF MY WRITINGS ON CIVIL RIGHTS AS PART OF THE COLLECTION. THE PRESIDENT OF QUEENS COLLEGE, DR. FELIX MATOS RODRIQUEZ, IS PRESENT IN THE THIRD PEW, AND WE ARE VERY APPRECIATIVE HE HAS JOINED US.**

**I WANT TO THANK FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS FOR BEING AT TRINITY TODAY.**

**TRINITY'S TASK FORCE AGAINST RACISM JUST CELEBRATED ITS 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF SERVICE IN RACE RELATIONS AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF CIVIL RIGHTS. THIS IS CERTAINLY A MORNING WHEN WE SHOULD RECOGNIZE ALL THOSE WHO ARE PART OF THE TASK FORCE AGAINST RACISM. WOULD THOSE OF YOU WHO PARTICIPATE IN THE TASK FORCE PLEASE STAND UP? THANK YOU.**

**SO, WHAT AM I DOING HERE PREACHING IN THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. BIRTHDAY SERVICE FOR WHICH THIS PULPIT, ON PREVIOUS SUCH OCCASIONS, CONTAINED MANY A LUMINARY TO GRACE TRINITY IN KING'S HONOR? WHY WOULD THIS WHITE**

**SOUTHERNER, WHO STILL SPEAKS LIKE A WHITE SOUTHERNER, WITH SLAVEOWNERS AS FOREBEARS, WHOSE BELOVED GRANDFATHER, LONNIE, WAS AN ACTIVE, PRACTICING MEMBER OF THE KU KLUX KLAN AND TOOK PART IN THE ELAINE RACE MASSACRE, ONE OF THE WORST RACIAL CONFLAGRATIONS IN OUR COUNTRY'S HISTORY; WHO COMES (YES, I DO) FROM A REGION, SOUTHEAST ARKANSAS, ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA, WHERE, LESS THAN A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, LYNCHINGS AND THE BURNING ALIVE OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS HAPPENED IN SMALL TOWNS, A REGION THAT A FORMER HEAD OF THE NAACP NAMED THE HEART OF DARKNESS AND THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, NAN WOODRUFF, DUBBED PART OF THE AMERICAN CONGO, MEANING ITS CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORY RESEMBLED THOSE OF THE AFRICAN CONGO WHERE BRUTAL LABOR CONDITIONS, VIOLENCE AND TERROR AGAINST BLACKS ROUTINELY PREVAILED? WHY WOULD I DELIVER THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MESSAGE THIS MORNING?**

**BECAUSE SOME OF YOU AT TRINITY, WHICH MANY OF YOU HAVE PROCLAIMED YOUR FAMILY – IT'S MY FAMILY, TOO; BECAUSE SOME OF YOU, SOME OF YOU BELOVED MEMBERS OF OUR**

**TRINITY FAMILY, ASKED ME TO SHARE THESE REFLECTIONS ON  
AND REMINISCENCES ABOUT CIVIL RIGHTS AND RACE  
RELATIONS – ON THIS SPECIAL DAY WHEN WE HONOR MARTIN  
AND THE HISTORY HE WROUGHT AND THE MESSAGE HE  
BROUGHT.**

**BUT AS WE REACH BACK IN TIME AND MEMORY THIS MORNING,  
I IMPLORE YOU TO CONSIDER THE CURRENT AND RECENT STEPS  
AND CONDITIONS, IN THE LARGER SENSE, THAT ARE ACTUALLY  
CARRYING US IN CIVIL RIGHTS, AS A PEOPLE, BACK IN TIME: THE  
RECENT STRIKING DOWN OF IMPORTANT SECTIONS OF THE 1965  
VOTING RIGHTS ACT; THE USE OF VOTER ID LAWS AS THE NEW  
POLL TAX THAT KEPT MINORITIES FROM VOTING FOR  
GENERATIONS; LAW ENFORCEMENT IN MANY MINORITY  
COMMUNITIES BEING REGRETFULLY REMINISCENT OF FIFTY  
YEARS AGO; AND THE RAISING OF THE STANDARD BEFORE  
FEDERAL JUDGES CAN NOW GRANT RELIEF IN STATE COURT  
PROCEEDINGS.**

**A MANTRA DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA, HARKENING  
BACK TO THE CADENCE OF PSALM 13, WAS “HOW LONG?”. THE**

**MANTRA TODAY COULD BE, “HOW FAR?”, MEANING HOW FAR  
BACK WILL WE RETURN TO A FORMER TIME IN CIVIL RIGHTS? I  
WOULD FEEL MORE PLEASED THIS MORNING WITH OUR BEING  
CONCERNED ABOUT HOW FAR WE COULD NOW GO BACK  
THAN OUR BEING PLACATED ABOUT HOW FAR WE, AS A NATION,  
HAVE COME IN CIVIL RIGHTS.**

**“MARTIN, THE TRUTH IS POINTING: YOU LAID WASTE  
A PRIDE OF ARTIFICE AND TASTE  
AND CHANGED OUR LANGUAGE OF MEMORY.**

**BUT THE MESSAGE YOU LEFT BEHIND  
THE WORLD HAS YET TO FIND. . .**

**FEW COULD FATHOM  
THE TREMORS OF CHANGE PREVAILING  
ALONGSIDE GAMES AND  
THE CONSEQUENCES OF ONE FAITHFUL IRONY:  
FOR GOD SHALL SLOWLY BLESS  
THOSE WHO ARE GIVEN LESS.” (1)**

**LET ME SAY THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH FOR  
WHICH KING WAS ITS CONSTANT AND ELOQUENT VOICE  
SALVAGED MY JUDEO-CHRISTIAN BELIEFS. FOR THOSE OF US  
WHO WITNESSED COMPLICITY IN RACISM BY WHITE SOUTHERN  
CHURCHES OF NUMEROUS DENOMINATIONS AT THE VERY TIME  
THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT NEEDED SUPPORT FROM THOSE  
CHURCHES – WE HAD IRREFUTABLE REASONS TO ABANDON**

**THOSE INSTITUTIONS. YET, THE BLACK CHURCH WITH ITS MESSAGE OF COURAGE TO POWER AND COURAGE FOR PURPOSE BEYOND ONE'S SELF BROUGHT US BACK TO THE ABUNDANT MESSAGE OF THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION.**

**LET ME STRESS A PROPOSITION THAT THE FOLLOWING GROUPS AND GRADATIONS FOR THESE GROUPS DOMINATE THE RACE RELATION DISCUSSION AND OUTLOOK IN AMERICA TODAY. FIRST, THERE ARE THE OUT-AND-OUT RACISTS; WE RECOGNIZE THEM, AND THEY, FOR THE MOST PART, RECOGNIZE THEMSELVES. SECOND, THERE ARE THOSE WHO THINK RACIAL ISSUES IMPACT THEIR LIVES AND OTHER PEOPLES' LIVES ON THE MARGIN; THEY GO ABOUT THEIR WORK AND LEISURE ROUTINELY ACCEPTING NORMAL TRADITIONS AND PATTERNS THAT HAVE ENCOMPASSED AND WILL CONTINUE TO ENCOMPASS THEM – WITH RACE MATTERS A SORT OF SUBLIMINAL REALITY. THEN, THERE IS THE THIRD GROUP THAT HAS KNOWN ALL ALONG THE COUNTRY IS FAR FROM RESOLVING ITS RACIAL ISSUES, AND MEMBERS OF THIS GROUP TAKE STEPS, CONSTRUCTIVE STEPS, EVERY DAY, BIG AND SMALL, INSTITUTIONALLY AND PERSONALLY, TO MOVE US TOWARD A**

**COMITY OF RESOLUTION. THIS GROUP COMPREHENDS THAT WHILE IT IS NORMALLY NOT STATED IN THESE TERMS, RACIAL ELEMENTS ARE DIRECTLY ATTACHED TO THE CRITICAL ISSUES OF OUR TIME: IMMIGRATION, MINIMUM WAGE, GERRYMANDERING, VOTER ID LAWS, LAW ENFORCEMENT, INCARCERATION POLICIES. THIS THIRD GROUP CAN ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THERE IS NO END IN SIGHT TO THE DEEPLY DIVISIVE STRUGGLE BETWEEN OUR RACIST HISTORY AND TRADITIONS AND THE BEAUTIFUL PLURALISM THAT IS ALSO PART OF AMERICA, OF BEING AMERICAN, OF BEING A TRINITARIAN AS WELL – THAT WHICH WE SEE HERE AT TRINITY, AT THE COMMUNION RAIL, WHERE PEOPLE OF ALL TYPES, SHAPES, COLOR, AGE AND DISPOSITION HAVE COME FORWARD TOGETHER AT ONCE. I’LL ADD THAT IS WHAT HEAVEN WILL LOOK LIKE, I HAVE NO DOUBT; IT WILL BE THIS GREAT MESSY MASS OF TOGETHERNESS.**

**IN 1619, THE FIRST SLAVES ARRIVED IN VIRGINIA – 400 HUNDRED YEARS AGO – AND SLAVERY THEREAFTER PROVED TO BE AN ECONOMIC FOUNDATION OF THIS NATION. IT’S NOT SURPRISING**

**OUR VERY CONSTITUTION WAS RACIST, FOR SLAVERY ECONOMICALLY WAS, IN MUCH OF THE COUNTRY, “THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DROVE THE FLOWER”(2) – TO STEAL A LINE FROM DYLAN THOMAS. AND, AS A CONSEQUENCE, WITH SOCIAL DYNAMICS FOLLOWING ECONOMIC ONES, WHICH THEY INEVITABLY DO, IT IS NO WONDER THAT SLAVERY’S TRADITIONS, ITS LEGACY, BOTH ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL, HAVE SHOWN TO BE SO MONSTROUSLY DIFFICULT TO BREAK. THE CASES AND PLACES OF PERSISTENT RACISM SEEM TO UPHOLD THE WORDS OF WILLIAM FAULKNER THAT “THE PAST IS NEVER DEAD. IT’S NOT EVEN PAST.”(3) THERE ARE INDEED NUMEROUS LOCALES WHERE THAT LEGACY, EVEN TODAY, HOLDS VISIBLE SWAY – IN A TOWN LIKE HARRISON, ARKANSAS AND OTHER SUCH LOCALITIES ON THE *SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER’S* WATCHLIST FOR RACIAL EXTREMISM. THESE SPOTS ARE MERELY NOTABLE EXAMPLES OF THAT LEGACY, AND IT IS NOT UNUSUAL THEY EXIST AND OFTENTIMES EVEN FLOURISH. IF YOU WERE TO GO TO THE WHITE AND BLACK CHURCHES (CHURCHES BEING, IN MY MIND, REPRESENTATIVE OF WHERE PEOPLE’S HEARTS RESIDE) IN A PLACE, ON THE CUSP OF THE MISSISSIPPI**

**RIVER DELTA, LIKE MONTICELLO, ARKANSAS, WHERE I LIVED FROM THE FIRST GRADE UNTIL I LEFT FOR COLLEGE AND WHERE I STILL RETURN FROM TIME TO TIME, YOU WOULD FIND TODAY VIRTUALLY THE SAME RACIAL COMPOSITION IN THOSE CHURCHES THAT EXISTED BEFORE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. FOR THAT MATTER, IT WOULD BE CLOSE TO THE SAME RACIAL COMPOSITION OF A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.**

**AND YET, WE KNOW WE CAN LEARN. WE HAVE THE CHANCE TO LEARN ANEW IN EACH GENERATION THAT WHICH IS GENUINELY HUMAN. WE ALONE – NOT BOUND BY THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE US NOR BY THOSE WHO COME AFTER – BUT WE ALONE CAN OPEN OURSELVES TO THE GENUINELY HUMAN; THAT IS WHAT WE CAN DO, THAT IS OUR GRACE.**

**THE MID TO LATE 1960S WAS A TIME FOR A CALL TO ACTION IN CIVIL RIGHTS, ESPECIALLY IN CONJUNCTION WITH “FREEDOM SUMMER” AND AFTER THE MARTYRDOM OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. IN 1968 – A TIME WHEN EPISCOPAL PRIESTS WOULD, ON OCCASION, STOP IN THE MIDDLE OF A EUCHARIST, LEAVE THE SANCTUARY AND GO TO THE AMERICAN SOUTH TO PRAY AND**

**PARTICIPATE IN CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE. AS A RESULT OF MUCH SOUL-SEARCHING, I CONCLUDED AFTER KING'S DEATH I COULD, AT THAT TIME, DO THE MOST GOOD BY LEAVING NEW YORK CITY AND RETURNING TO SOUTHEAST ARKANSAS, TO THE TOWN OF MY YOUTH, AND TEACH IN THE ALL AFRICAN-AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL THERE; THE SCHOOLS WERE STILL SEGREGATED, AND I HAD PREVIOUSLY, AT THAT POINT, LIVED IN MONTICELLO FOR THE BETTER PART OF MY LIFE SO THAT NOVELTY OF ENVIRONMENT WOULD HARDLY BE A PROBLEM.**

**I TAUGHT THE 6<sup>TH</sup> – 12<sup>TH</sup> GRADES, BUT IT BECAME MUCH MORE THAN THAT. I'VE DEDICATED SEVERAL OF MY LITERARY PIECES TO THOSE STUDENTS, AND I STILL TALK TO MY WIFE FREDA ABOUT THOSE MOMENTS PAST.**

**RECALLING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, I CONCLUDE THAT TOO FEW SOUTHERN WHITE ICONIC FIGURES – MINISTERS, POLITICIANS, MAJOR SOUTHERN WHITE ATHLETES AND THE LIKE – WERE WILLING TO CROSS OVER TO BE COUNTED.**

**THERE WERE EXCEPTIONS THROUGHOUT THE SOUTH, OF COURSE. FOR INSTANCE, I WAS PHYSICALLY ATTACKED ONCE BY**

**DRUNKEN WHITE RUFFIANS IN MONTICELLO FOR TEACHING AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN, WHEN, OUT OF NOWHERE, 250 POUNDS OF BLESSEDNESS I'D KNOWN SINCE GRADE SCHOOL, WHO PLAYED CENTER FOR THE DENVER BRONCOS AND WAS WHITE, JUMPED IN THE MIDDLE AND ANNOUNCED THE ATTACK WAS NOT GOING TO HAPPEN. THIS LOCAL FOOTBALL HERO CHOSE TO THROW A BLOCK AGAINST THE RACIST WALL.**

**A MEMORY OF ANOTHER EXCEPTION FLOODS BACK WITH A SCENE FROM LITTLE ROCK CENTRAL. I WAS TWELVE, AND WE HAD RELATIVES LIVING NEAR CENTRAL WHOM WE WOULD VISIT FROM TIME TO TIME. THE LITTLE ROCK NINE, AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS, WERE ATTEMPTING TO INTEGRATE THE LARGEST HIGH SCHOOL IN THE STATE. ONE OF THE LITTLE ROCK NINE, A BLACK GIRL IN SUNGLASSES, HAD BEEN CUT OFF FROM THE OTHER AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS BY A WHITE MOB, A SWARM OF YELPING HYENAS MENACING THEIR PREY, THE BLACK GIRL, BEFORE A POSSIBLE KILL – THE HYENAS, WHITE, PHYSICALLY RESEMBLING THE WAY I LOOKED. WHAT DOES A PRE-TEEN DO WITH SUCH SELF-INCRIMINATION AND DISAVOWAL? THEN, GRACE LORCH, AN OLDER WHITE WOMAN**

**WITH THE DEMEANOR OF A GRANDMOTHER, WHOM NONE IN THE SWARM WOULD EVER HAVE TOUCHED OR THREATENED, WALKED RIGHT THROUGH THE WHITE MOB, REACHED OUT HER HAND TO THE BLACK GIRL, AND SAID, “HONEY, I’LL TAKE CARE OF YOU.” AND SHE DID BY TAKING THE STUDENT AWAY AND GIVING HER COVER, THOUGH THE GIRL, ELIZABETH ECKFORD, APPARENTLY NEVER FULLY RECOVERED FROM THE EFFECT OF THE WHITE MOB UPON HER.**

**THE PREVIOUS DAY, A CALL HAD GONE TO WHITE MINISTERS THROUGHOUT THE STATE TO COME TO CENTRAL TO PROTECT THE BLACK STUDENTS FROM ANY MOB BY WALKING, IN CLERICAL ATTIRE, AHEAD OF, RIGHT BEHIND OR ALONGSIDE THE LITTLE ROCK NINE. ONLY TWO WHITE MINISTERS RESPONDED TO THE CALL TO SHOW UP AND GIVE COVER TO THE BLACK STUDENTS – ONE FROM LITTLE ROCK, THE OTHER FROM A SMALL TOWN A HUNDRED MILES AWAY.**

**THE FAILURE OF ICONIC WHITE FIGURES TO TAKE THE STEP, TO ANSWER THE CALL, WAS NOT LIMITED TO ARKANSAS, OF COURSE. ONE OF THE BETTER KNOWN EXAMPLES WILL COME**

**OUT OF ALABAMA. KING'S FAMOUS LETTER FROM THE BIRMINGHAM JAIL HAD BEEN A DIRECT REBUTTAL TO THE PUBLIC CRITICISM OF HIM BY LOCAL, WHITE ALABAMA MINISTERS.**

**I'VE OFTEN CHARACTERIZED THE TIME I TAUGHT IN THE TOWN OF MY YOUTH AS MY ATTEMPT TO FIND THOSE I HAD KNOWN BUT NOT FOUND, MEANING AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN MONTICELLO I HAD KNOWN EARLY IN MY LIFE, BUT BECAUSE OF OUR INSTITUTIONALLY SEPARATE WORLDS, I'D NEVER FOUND AGAIN. OVER THE YEARS, I'VE CONCLUDED THAT THIS LINE – TO FIND THOSE I HAD KNOWN BUT NOT FOUND – WAS FAR MORE DEEPLY TRUE THAN I HAD EVEN INITIALLY THOUGHT. FOR THE YEARS IN MONTICELLO THAT PRECEDED COLLEGE, I LIVED IN A HOUSE ON A STREET THAT PARALLELED THE STREET, ABOUT FORTY YARDS AWAY, WHERE THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PART OF TOWN BEGAN. OUR YARD BACKED UP TO A FIELD WHERE AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND I PLAYED ENDLESSLY WHEN WE WERE VERY YOUNG; IF NOT THERE, WE WERE DOWN THE BLOCK IMAGINING MUCH AND MORE AND HIDING IN THE THICKETS**

**FROM EACH OTHER ALONG THE GODFREY SEWAGE DITCH. AFTER A FEW SHORT YEARS, THESE FRIENDS RECEDED WITH SEGREGATED SCHOOLS OUR NEMESIS. ON ONE JOY-FILLED OCCASION I STILL RECOLLECT, WE WERE REUNITED FOR AN AFTERNOON WHEN THE TWO BOY SCOUT TROOPS – ONE BLACK, ONE WHITE – CAME TOGETHER TO DISTRIBUTE CIRCULARS IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD. FOLLOWING THAT BRIEF MOMENT, I DON'T BELIEVE WE WERE EVER ABLE TO COME TOGETHER AGAIN. FOR THOSE I HAD KNOWN BUT NOT FOUND.**

**IN 2008, I WAS ASKED BY THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH TO WRITE THE LITANY OF OFFENSE AND APOLOGY IN PROSE AND POETRY FOR THE NATIONAL DAY OF REPENTANCE, WHEN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH FORMALLY APOLOGIZED, WITH THE PRESIDING BISHOP OFFICIATING, FOR ITS ROLE IN TRANSATLANTIC SLAVERY AND RELATED EVILS. ONCE I STARTED ON THE LITANY, I RE-READ AND RENEWED MY FAMILIARITY WITH WRITERS LIKE W.E.B. DUBOIS, LANGSTON HUGHES, JAMES BALDWIN, GWENDOLYN BROOKS, AMONG OTHERS. BUT IT WAS IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT, THE ANTI-LYNCHING ADVOCATE AND HISTORIAN, WHO BROUGHT ME TO STARTLEDOM WHEN I DISCOVERED A SMALL**

**VOLUME OF SIXTY PAGES SHE HAD AUTHORED ON THE ELAINE RACE MASSACRE. YES, IN ARKANSAS; YES, IN NEARBY ELAINE, SOME SIXTY MILES AWAY FROM MONTICELLO. SHE DESCRIBED THE DEATHS OF SO MANY AFRICAN-AMERICANS (MORE THAN A HUNDRED – MOSTLY SHARECROPPERS AND THEIR FAMILIES – AND PERHAPS HUNDREDS), THE SUBSEQUENT SPEEDY AND UNFAIR TRIALS, THE VERDICTS AND PENALTIES METED OUT BY LOCAL COURTS TO LOCAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN SHARECROPPERS. I CONTACTED FORMER HIGH SCHOOL CLASSMATES AND ASKED THEM WHAT THEY KNEW ABOUT THE MASSACRE. NOTHING. I HAD NEVER HEARD IT DISCUSSED IN FAMILY CIRCLES OR IN CASUAL CONVERSATIONS AT CAFES OR COFFEE SHOPS OR AT CHURCH OR SOCIAL GATHERINGS. NOTHING.**

**OF COURSE, THERE HAD BEEN REASONS TO KEEP SILENT ABOUT IT – ON BOTH SIDES. THE OLE SAW THAT “THE MORE ONE PICKS AT A SCAB, THE WORSE IT BLEEDS” WAS EMPLOYED FOR NOT REVISITING THE MASSACRE; ENOUGH BLOOD FLOWED FROM THE SCAB OF RACISM. LATER, I READ BOB WHITAKER’S VOLUME**

**ABOUT ELAINE, ON THE LAPS OF GODS, THAT HELD STUPEFYING EFFECTS, INCLUDING THE GRAVE ROLE THE MISSOURI PACIFIC RAILROAD PLAYED IN THE MASSACRE, A FACT THAT PROVED TO BE A MEANINGFUL CLUE FOR A PERSONAL REVELATION. A BOOK THAT BEGAN TO UNLOCK WELL-KEPT SECRETS. WELL-KEPT SECRETS – SOME MAYBE I COULD HAVE PREFERRED STILL BURIED; HOWEVER, IF I WEREN'T INTERESTED IN SEEING THEM ALL UNBURIED, THEN WHAT MADE ME ANY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHO HAD THOUGHT FOR DECADES THAT ELAINE, LEFT ALONE, CONSTITUTED THE BEST COURSE? PIECES COMING TOGETHER.**

**MY FATHER DIED WHEN I WAS ONE, AND MY MOTHER DIDN'T COPE PARTICULARLY WELL THEREAFTER UNTIL ABOUT THE TIME I WAS TO ENTER THE FIRST GRADE. DURING THOSE INTERIM YEARS, I LIVED WITH MY MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS, HATTIE AND LONNIE BIRCH. LONNIE HAD RETIRED FROM THE MISSOURI PACIFIC RAILROAD AND OCCUPIED HIS DAYS CARING FOR AND BEING WITH ME. THERE IS A SINGLE, DOMINANT FIGURE IN MY MEMORY FROM THOSE EARLY YEARS – LONNIE. I**

**NEVER ONCE REMEMBER HIS RAISING HIS VOICE OR  
CORRECTING ANYTHING I EVER DID.**

**IN 1919, AT THE TIME OF THE ELAINE RACE MASSACRE, LONNIE  
WORKED AS A RAILROAD ENGINEER FOR THE MISSOURI PACIFIC  
RAILROAD IN MCGEHEE, ARKANSAS WITHIN DESHA COUNTY,  
IMMEDIATELY SOUTH OF PHILLIPS COUNTY, SITE OF THE  
MASSACRE. IT HAD BEEN NO SECRET THAT LONNIE BELONGED  
TO THE KU KLUX KLAN; STORIES CIRCULATED WITHIN THE  
FAMILY HOW HE ROSE SOME NIGHTS AND PUT ON HIS SHEET AND  
HOOD, COMING BACK SEVERAL HOURS LATER, NEVER  
DISCUSSING WHAT HAD TRANSPIRED. I LEARNED, AS PART OF  
MY RESEARCH RESULTING IN A LONG ARTICLE, PUBLISHED IN  
2013, THE UNFORTUNATE FACT THAT MY BELOVED LONNIE HAD  
JOINED IN THE ELAINE RACE MASSACRE.**

**DURING MY STUDY OF THIS PERIOD WHEN ELAINE OCCURRED  
AND THE TIME FOLLOWING, I ALSO TOOK THE CHANCE TO  
EXPLORE YEARS IN AND YEARS JUST PRECEDING THE LIFE OF  
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. THAT SOMEHOW COLLATERALLY**

**RELATED KING AND THE MASSACRE AND THAT ARE OFTEN FORGOTTEN OR OBSCURED, BUT WHICH FORMED MUCH OF THE MAN. POPULAR HISTORY WOULD HAVE US OBSERVE THAT HE SUDDENLY ERUPTS ONTO THE NATIONAL SCENE IN THE AFTERMATH OF BROWN V TOPEKA BOARD OF EDUCATION AND THE DECLINE OF THE SEPARATE BUT EQUAL DOCTRINE OF PLESSY V FERGUSON OUT OF WHICH THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT EMERGES WHEN HE IS ONLY 26. THERE HAS BEEN LESS INTEREST IN HIS DAYS IN ADVANCE OF THAT BOYCOTT, BUT KING WAS BORN ONLY TEN YEARS AFTER THE ELAINE MASSACRE, AND THE PROXIMATE, SUBSEQUENT ERA OF AMERICAN HISTORY STRUCK HIS FORMATIVE YEARS AND THE CONTEXTUAL WAY HE WOULD COME TO VIEW HIS OWN COUNTRY. ACCORDING TO KING'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY, HE PERSONALLY WITNESSED OR WAS VICTIMIZED BY EVENTS AT AN EARLY AGE THAT HELPED SHAPE HIS LANDSCAPE: THE SLAPPING OF MARTIN, AT THE AGE OF EIGHT, BY A WHITE WOMAN IN AN ATLANTA DEPARTMENT STORE WHEN HE UNWITTINGLY STEPPED ON HER TOE; THE BEATING, RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOUNG MARTIN, OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN BY THE KU KLUX KLAN; AND THE PASSING OF PLACES**

**IN ATLANTA WHERE AFRICAN-AMERICANS HAD BEEN SAVAGELY LYNCHED.(4) WITH THESE TRAUMAS AS BACKDROP, IT IS DOUBLY ASTONISHING THAT HE CAME TO FAVOR NON-VIOLENCE, FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION INSTEAD OF OTHER FORMS FOR RESOLUTION.**

**IT IS A CURIOUS FACT THAT AT AROUND THE TIME OF THE MASSACRE, SHARECROPPERS IN ELAINE HELD LIFESTYLES THAT WERE QUITE SIMILAR TO KING'S OWN PATERNAL FAMILY, MARTIN'S FATHER AND GRANDFATHER, BOTH OF WHOM WORKED SHARECROPPER FIELDS IN GEORGIA ONLY A FEW YEARS BEFORE KING'S BIRTH. MARTIN LUTHER KING, SR. LEFT THE SHARECROPPER FARM ROWS AT AGE EIGHTEEN TO PURSUE AN EDUCATION.**

**LAST YEAR, THROUGH THE GOOD AND KIND EFFORTS OF BOB WHITAKER, AUTHOR OF ON THE LAPS OF GODS, SHEILA WALKER AND I MADE CONTACT FOR THE FIRST TIME. BOB THOUGHT SHEILA AND I, WITH OUR RESPECTIVE ANTECEDENTS REPRESENTING THE TWO SIDES OF THE MASSACRE, SHOULD**

**TALK. AND TALK WE DID. OUR INITIAL CONVERSATION, A TELEPHONE CALL, LASTED ABOUT TWO HOURS. IT DID NOT TAKE US LONG TO RECOGNIZE WE MEANT AT THAT MOMENT AND IN OUR JOURNEY OF RECONCILIATION TO BE KING'S CHILDREN. I COULD HEAR IN SHEILA'S VOICE THAT FORGIVENESS IS THE ANTIDOTE TO CONSPICUOUS GENERATIONAL FAILINGS.**

**TOGETHER, WE COULD HEAR MARTIN IN ECHOES FROM THE STEPS OF THE STATE CAPITOL IN MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE SELMA MARCH: "WE ARE NOT ABOUT TO TURN AROUND. WE ARE ON THE MOVE NOW. YES, WE ARE ON THE MOVE AND NO WAVE OF RACISM CAN STOP US."(5)**

**BY THE TIME WE HUNG UP THE TELEPHONE, I THINK WE BOTH REALIZED WE HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR A HUNDRED YEARS. I KNEW SHEILA'S FAMILY, WHO RESIDED IN THE AREA THAT HAD BEEN PART OF THE MASSACRE'S KILLING FIELDS: SALLIE GILES, SHEILA'S GREAT GRANDMOTHER AND SALLIE'S TWO SONS, ALBERT, WHO HAD BEEN HUNTED DOWN AND SHOT SEVERAL TIMES, AND FIFTEEN YEAR OLD, MILLIGAN, WHOM SMIDDY, A SECURITY OFFICIAL FROM THE MISSOURI PACIFIC RAILROAD, SHOT IN THE FACE. I KNEW THOSE IN SHEILA'S FAMILY WHO**

**COULD NOT BEAR TO TALK ABOUT THE ELAINE RACE MASSACRE WITHOUT TREMBLING AND SOBBING. BY THE END OF OUR CALL, SHE DISCERNED AND ACKNOWLEDGED THE TWO SIDES OF LONNIE, ALTHOUGH SHEILA HAD SEEN HIM BEFORE IN A THOUSAND DIFFERENT COSTUMES AND SETTINGS. A FEW WEEKS LATER, WE MET IN PERSON AT THE HOME OF HER SON, MARCUS, AND HER DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, FRANZI, IN BOSTON. AS SOON AS I WALKED IN THE FRONT DOOR, SHEILA AND I EMBRACED FOR A VERY LONG TIME. YES, WE HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR A HUNDRED YEARS, AND WE NOW HAD REASON TO DREAM, TOO, HEARING MARTIN AGAIN – THIS TIME, IN ECHOES FROM THE STEPS OF THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL:**

**“WHEN ALL OF GOD’S CHILDREN – BLACK AND WHITE, JEWS AND GENTILES, CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS – WILL BE ABLE TO JOIN HANDS AND SING, IN THE WORDS OF THE OLD SPIRITUAL, ‘FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST, THANK GOD ALMIGHTY, WE ARE FREE AT LAST.’”(6)**

**#**

**#**

**#**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1. Excerpt from the poem, "Martin"; copyright © 2014 by J. Chester Johnson
2. The Poems of Dylan Thomas, New Directions Publishing Corporation, New York, N. Y., 1967, p. 77
3. "Requiem For A Nun," A William Faulkner Encyclopedia, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1999, p. 326
4. Clayborne Carson, Editor, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., Grand Central Publishing, New York, N. Y., 1998, pages 8-10
5. James M. Washington, Editor, I Have A Dream: Writings And Speeches That Changed The World, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, N. Y., 1992, p. 122
6. Ibid, pages 105-106