The Beloved Community

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Are there places that give you goosebumps? Our country is tortured now by debates over what shrines and obelisks and cenotaphs should do honor to the nation's dead. Confederate monuments I confess make my blood run cold. I was sad and angry to see the stone shaft honoring Union soldiers torn down from the Santa Fe Plaza, though I also understand why it was objectionable. But there are certain monuments that move me to tears. I got a lump in the throat, for instance, the first time I visited the Boston Common and saw the bronze frieze honoring Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54h. Shaw was the son of abolitionists from a prominent Unitarian family and the first to lead African American troops into battle against Fort Wagner in South Carolina during the Civil War. Though the assault was beaten back and Shaw died in the attempt, the gallantry of the men inspired thousands of other blacks to join the Union cause and helped turn the tide of the conflict. Sculpted by Augustus St. Gaudens, the monument faces the statehouse, near the old Unitarian headquarters at 25 Beacon Street, and is the first example of public art that depicted African Americans as distinct individuals rather than as representatives of a type. Maybe there are other museums or markers or battlefields that make your pulse run faster. The Vietnam Veterans memorial is like that. Whether you fought in the war or marched against it, there is a solemnity present. There are no tourists taking selfies, just the 58,000 names and the walls of black granite and the visitors all joined in mourning though each one alone with their thoughts.

I've been to Plymouth Rock. I've walked the battlefields at Lexington and Concord, circled Walden Pond and toured Seneca Falls. Your list of pilgrim altars is surely different than mine But many Americans would put the Lincoln

Memorial near the top of the sites most meaningful to who we are as a people. The edifice itself was built a century ago, a granite temple literally rising out of what was then a swamp with a colossal figure of the Great Emancipator gazing toward the capitol. In the hundred years since, the memorial has been the backdrop for contrasting visions of our country and its future. Donald Trump used it for an Independence Day "Salute to America" featuring heavy tanks on the mall and flyovers by military jets, as though the strength of our democracy could be measured in megatons or steel. The Ku Klux Klan held a rally there just four years before Martin Luther King Jr. was born. But it was Dr. King's memory that was invoked most often last August, on the anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, as Black Lives Matter gathered thousands on the steps to protest the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and other victims of police violence. It was his dream that still inspired despite being tarnished and tamed and toned down in the decades since first uttered. We are in a moment of reckoning now, long overdue, wrestling with a dream deferred.

This is the season for dreams. Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Hebrew prophet Joel described a far off day when old men would dream dreams and young men see visions, the spirit poured out on all people--men and women alike, he emphasized--when there would be wonders in heaven and earth. On the Christian calendar, this is Advent and an invitation to ponder that prophecy. We're asked, what's our vision? What marvels can we imagine? What new possibilities and civilizations are in gestation and waiting to be born? We're tired, yes. It's been a trying year. But are we merely hoping simply for a return to normality--a status quo ante--or can we see a world in need of transfiguration and our need to change along with it?

King and his cohorts shared a dream they called Beloved Community. "The dream is one of equality of opportunity," King said, "of privilege and property

widely distributed," where the needs of the many would have priority over the luxuries for a few. He dreamt of a nation where no one would go homeless or hungry, where every child had enough to eat, healthcare for the body and education for the mind and spirit. Their dream was an indictment of an economy that put profits over people and a military that funded endless war.

It was a dream rooted in the American Dream. In a recent biography, historian Jon Meacham compares the Civil Rights generation of the 50's and 60's to the founders and framers of our country. As Washington and Adams and Franklin gave birth to an independent, self-governing republic freed from a feudal past, figures like C.T. Vivian who passed away last summer on the same day as John Lewis, figures like Rosa Parks and Fanny Lou Hamer labored to bring about a rebirth of America as a modern, multi-racial society, a task that remains a work-in-progress. Obama called these activists the Moses generation; they led the people out of Egypt, but not quite to the Promised Land.

Their dream was grounded in faith. Not the phoney faith that gases peaceful protestors to stage a photo-op holding a Bible. "Beware of practicing your piety in public" warns the Sermon on the Mount. Rather, men like John Lewis took that sermon to heart and made it a creed to live by. The Beloved Community was militantly non-violent. It aimed not not merely at legal equality, but at human reconciliation and redemption from the cycle of retaliation. It's model was an unshakeable love that refused to return hatred for hatred. Because they knew they risked injury or death every time they were told "no" but defied that order to sit at a lunch counter or ride a bus or register at the polls, the practitioners of civil disobedience trained like warriors. They were disciplined (as befits disciples). And being masters of themselves, in charge of their own reactions and inner worlds, maintaining their own agency and integrity despite outward

circumstances, they felt themselves to be free men and women, even inside a jail cell.

That's probably why John Lewis says he felt liberated the first time he was arrested, just one of forty-seven arrests over the course of his lifetime. He was born into a family of sharecroppers. His great-grandfather, who lived with the family when John was young, had been a slave, which is how close we remain to the legacy of slavery. There was no money for college, but a small Baptist seminary offered free tuition to students who would work for their schooling. John missed his graduation and skipped his senior sermon because by that time he was already too busy causing what he would call "good trouble."

Good trouble meant a kind of spiritual self-defense, taking the power of an adversary and turning it back on the attacker. Jesus himself may have been one of the first masters of this art. In the Gospel of Matthew he tells his listeners, "if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also." The historic context is of a two-tiered society, where the poor relied on the first century equivalent of payday loans at exorbitant interest just to put food on the table. They were trapped in debt bondage. People mortgaged whatever they had. Most owned only two articles of clothing. An outer garment served as both coat for warmth and blanket for sleeping. And anyone so dire for funds as to pawn their coat was hard pressed indeed. In Deuteronomy, there is a command not to take a widow's garment in pledge for a loan, nor to sleep in a poor man's pledge but to return it by nightfall. The commandment presumably wouldn't have been needed unless there was a real problem with landlords, for instance, literally taking the clothes off the backs of their tenants in collateral. So when Jesus describes a law court where a man is being sued for his coat, he's describing the collection agents closing in. If they come for your outer garment, he says, let them have you undergarment, too. A man without his underwear

would then be quite nude, standing naked in the courtroom. Now nudity in the Near East was and remains a mark of shame. But the shame lies less upon the naked than on the beholder. So Isaiah walked barefoot and naked through Jerusalem as a prophetic sign; but his fellow Israelites were the ones most embarrassed by the gesture. And so Jesus takes the humiliation of poverty and deflects it, denudes it, turns it back upon the rich. Shame on you, he seems to say, thereby empowering the powerless.

All of you have seen the photo of Phan Thi Kim, the nine year old girl who stripped off her clothes after they were set aflame by napalm, running screaming naked from her Vietnamese village. When the photo was published in 1972, the shame was not on the little girl. The shame was on a nation that terrorized children and all who funded that war. Similarly with John Lewis, who grew up knowing nothing but shame and fear. Fear because he was just one year older than Emmett Till. Shame because of segregated water fountains and grinding want. When Lewis at the age of twenty-five led marchers on Bloody Sunday onto the Edmund Pettus Bridge, he still knew fear. As he told his friends and followers to kneel and pray, Alabama troopers with clubs rushed toward them on horseback. When his own skull was fractured, he was afraid he would die. But Lewis felt no shame. Rather all the shame was on white America, which was stripped naked of its dress of righteousness and forced to see itself unrobed in the mirror.

Non-violence fell from favor as a tactic It was less effective at redressing economic injustice than repairing inequities in the law. John Lewis was voted out as president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee--and Stokely Carmichael voted in. Yet Lewis never wavered in his commitment to the Beloved Community. Asked in his later years if progress had been made or whether the struggle was worth it, he liked to reply, “Walk a mile in my shoes.” Sheriff Jim

Clark who chased unarmed children with cattle prods was voted out of office and finished his career selling mobile homes in Selma. John Lewis finished his career serving seventeen terms in Congress.

As President Obama said in a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday, we do a disservice to America if we say that racism is immutable, that there's been no progress. "Ask the female CEO who might once have been assigned to the secretarial pool if nothing's changed. Ask your gay friend if it's easier to be out and proud now than it was thirty years ago." But while the Moses generation got us across the bridge, he added, there's still a road to travel.

Shortly before his death last summer, John Lewis observed that "there are forces in America today trying to divide people along racial lines. There are forces today still preaching hate and division … It makes me sad for we don't want to go back. We want to go forward and create one community - one America.

"The journey begins with faith - faith in the dignity and worth of every human being. That's an idea with roots in scripture and in the canon of America, in Genesis and in the Declaration of Independence. The journey is sustained by persistence - persistence in the pressing justice of the cause. And the journey is informed by hope - hope that someday heaven and earth will come together and God will wipe away every tear."

Do we still believe, deep in our hearts? That a better world is possible? That love is stronger than hate? That justice is the only firm foundation? That brotherhood and sisterhood are the biological realities, while race and caste are the social fictions of an order intended to the perpetuation of power and privilege? Do we believe that the truth is stronger than lies, even lies told by a

President? The headlines may say no. But the moral arc says yes. The Spirit of History is with us, John Lewis would say. Keep the faith, he'd urge. The march means putting one foot in front of the other, patiently, step by step.