

Mabuhay, Bienvenido, Willkommen, Swagat, and Jambo!

Welcome by the grace of God. Welcome to our church, our spiritual home. We're glad to have you come and join us. This is a safe place. It's a place where we can come and be ourselves, accepted for who we are. It's a place where we can rest in the presence of God, who loves us.

We pray for you to know and experience God's love and grace today and always. If I can help you take a step on your spiritual journey, please contact me during the week.

We celebrate and remember the life and legacy of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on this day. I've included a letter from Bishop Woodie White that speaks to our heart, mind and spirit (see following page).

The sermon continues after the letter....

A Letter to Martin Luther King Jr.

Bishop Woodie W. White (January-February 2015)

“Dear Martin:

I begin this letter mindful of the events that took place in our nation 50 years ago, events that changed the United States.

As you and other leaders of the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** accelerated the challenge to the discriminatory practices prohibiting black people from registering and voting in several Southern states, a special campaign was launched in Alabama.

A march from Selma to Montgomery was planned. At the end, the demonstrators were to present the governor with a list of practices encountered by black citizens of the state. Hundreds gathered on Sunday, March 7, 1965.

State officials had determined the march would not occur and banned the planned demonstration.

As the marchers began to move across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, they were met by a sizable police presence on the bridge. Some of the police were on horses. When the peaceful marchers refused to disband, they were attacked by the police, beaten and trampled by horses. Mass hysteria erupted. Wounded and bloody, the nonviolent, peaceful protesters were turned back.

Millions witnessed the brutal attacks on television and in newspaper photos. So vicious were they that the day became known as **Bloody Sunday**. The nation was horrified to see peaceful citizens so brutalized as they sought to be granted the right to vote in their own country.

Only days later, Martin, you called for a second march. This time thousands responded. Celebrities, church leaders, pastors and ordinary citizens gathered - and the march was fully racially integrated. It ended on the steps of the Capitol in Montgomery, with leaders presenting their concerns, grievances and demands.

Five months later, in August, what is commonly called the **Voting Rights Act** was law. Congress passed the **1965 Civil Rights Act** because of the bold leadership of President Lyndon B. Johnson. For the first time, black citizens anywhere in America had the right to register and the right to vote protected against intimidation, unfair and discriminatory regulations, fear of reprisals or violence.

Imagine, Martin, it was only 50 years ago, that the most basic right of a democracy, the right to vote, was guaranteed to black American citizens! Only 50 years ago!

In a few months, thousands of us will again gather at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. We will remember those who led the way, some even giving their lives, that we might today exercise the right to cast a ballot freely.

Sadly, we will do so in the face of new threats to that right, as many state legislatures enact laws to make it more difficult for citizens to exercise that right.

The struggle continues.

Martin, we are again reminded of the deep racial divide in America. The deaths of a number of unarmed black youth and men at the hands of police have drawn national attention. Those who died in Brooklyn, N.Y.; Cleveland; and Ferguson, Mo., were males in their teens. Two of the deaths — one in Ferguson and the other in Staten Island, N.Y. — went before a grand jury. Neither resulted in an indictment against the police involved. The failures to indict have resulted in thousands demonstrating in major cities across the nation. There is general outrage and anger in the black community and beyond.

Is America again to have two societies, one black (or non-white), and one white, separate and unequal? And composed, as many hold, of two justice systems, one for white citizens and one for non-white citizens?

Is there the belief that black life is not as valued in our nation as white life? Indeed, a new slogan has emerged: "Black Lives Matter."

A national conversation on race is emerging. With it is coming the revelation that white and black citizens view race dramatically

differently. Even in these two widely known incidents of unarmed black young men meeting death as the result of police action, a significant number of white citizens conclude the deaths were clearly the fault of the black men, while black citizens believe they were caused by an underlying racism that views white and black people differently. White life is valued more than black.

Perhaps, Martin, that is still what is at the heart of the great racial divide in America. Still, it appears, the matter of one's worth as a human being is finally about the color of one's skin - not the content of one's character, morality, ability or competence. Indeed, there seems no correlation between scoring a winning touchdown or basket, or between one's abilities, political positions or party and one's determined ultimate worth as a human being. Could it be that in the minds and hearts of so many, skin color determines worth and value?

We continue to face a lot of work in this nation on the issue of race. At times, we appear to move backward and forward simultaneously. The truth is, Martin, the events of the last 50 years are evidence of how far we have come on our journey to become "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." But, the last 50 days are evidence as well of how far we have yet to go!

But, I still believe, Martin.

We shall overcome!

Woodie”¹

Note: Each year, retired UM Bishop White writes a “birthday letter” to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Bishop White is the Bishop at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, GA. He was the first general secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race.

On this MLK day, I invite us, as a congregation, to engage in holy conferencing with one another and to join in a Unity Fellowship weekend on April 28-29 with churches across Corona.

Together, we shall overcome!

¹ <http://www.interpretermagazine.org/topics/a-letter-to-martin-luther-king-jr>

Message: Passionate Worship

[Watch “Hardraising” video by Tim Hawkins

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TK2_ezOBa2A]

For the record: we are a hand-raising church!

Anything we do to celebrate God is fine by me. Do I hear an “Amen”?

We’re blessed in this congregation. When we gather for worship, we embrace a range of musical styles, formats and activities. Sadly, in some congregations, the phrase “worship wars” hits home. It’s not unusual to find people pitted on opposite sides of the traditional versus contemporary, choir versus band, screens versus books debates. Thank you for your openness and willingness to embrace a way of worship that invites others with open hearts, minds and doors.

Psalm 100 is a song of thanks. It begins this way:

“Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.” (NRSV)

The song leader captures an important truth: worship wasn’t intended to be a sober, solemn, don’t-dare-crack-a-smile kind of experience. Reverence, awe and joy go hand-in-hand in the kingdom of God. If we’re real people with real lives, authentic worship of God allows for an abundance of grace. Fussy children – not a problem. Someone speaking out – no worries. When an incident occurs, it’s a moment for prayer and grace, not judgment and coldness. When we live from a place of confidence and assurance, we embrace life with passion. That’s our theme for today: finding passion in our worship.

We find passion in many aspects of life. For example, a lot of people have passion for sports in our society. Whether it’s the Super Bowl, college basketball’s March Madness or the Winter Olympics, people love games. Sometimes they show it while jumping up and down on the couch or yelling in sports bars. Fans often wear a team’s colors. Some die-hard, extreme male fans take off their shirts, paint their chests with letters or numbers, and then spend hours in an open-air stadium in sub-zero temperatures - all to show their team spirit.

We think about passion in other ways. For example, healthy romantic relationships involve passion. People who are good at selling are passionate to make the big deal. People are passionate about hobbies and leisure activities, from gourmet cooking to quilting to antique cars to travel. Anyone who wants to find passionate young people just has to go to a rock concert. People listen to passionate speakers, watch passionate actors, and follow passionate leaders. Passion is attractive.

What does it mean when we attach passionate to the word worship? I’m not so sure most mainline Christians are known for being passionate in services. There was once a person who said with emotion, “I’d do anything to have my children and grandchildren in church again. The church means everything to me, and it breaks my heart that my own family members don’t attend anywhere.” A friend responded, “You’d do anything? Would you listen to music that’s not your style?” They answered, “I can’t do that!”

Maybe we can’t change our taste in music. That’s okay. Supporting innovative styles of worship requires spiritual maturity. It’s good to be willing to set aside personal preferences to encourage other people’s quest for God. That’s what it means to love our neighbor.

21st century mainline Christians may not be known for passionate worship, but that hasn’t always been the case. John Wesley was a preacher who led worship services known for their passion in the 1700’s. That doesn’t mean people would jump on the pews and roll in the aisles, though Wesley notes in his journal that periodic “swooning” took place. The passionate worship of Wesley’s time was founded on the belief God was doing something significant in and among them.

There was an anticipation, a readiness to hear a word from the Lord, to be prepared for the Spirit to move in unexpected ways. So they sang their hymns with great joy and prayed earnestly. Wesley and other preachers of his day passionately proclaimed the Gospel so there was no doubt they believed what they were saying. Many people in the early Protestant movement were passionate worshipers, but something happened along the way.

We lost our passion.

How do we recover faithful, passionate worship? I’m not suggesting we should revert to ancient rites, music and sermons, but we can try to recapture the passion and sense of expectation of our ancestors.

Do you expect to experience God when you worship? I do. Worship is the best time for us to expect to experience God. No matter what happens during the week, we anticipate worship. That’s when we know God is present. That’s a promise. Jesus said, *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”* (Matthew 18:20). We can have that same, confident expectation anytime we go to God – in prayer with others, small groups, Sunday school, or anytime we’re together. During spiritual worship our mind is renewed. Our heart is refreshed. We’re made whole, reminded we’re God’s children. We’re sisters and brothers in Christ. We’re being made into God’s image.

That’s a great reason to worship!

Jesus once had a conversation with a woman by a well. John narrates the encounter (John 4). Jesus stopped at a well in Samaria. While they were waiting, his disciples went to buy food. It was mid-day and sunny. Jesus was thirsty, so he asked a woman drawing water for a drink. She was surprised. She said, *“Why are you – a Jewish man, asking me – a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water?”* John reminds us - the readers, Jews and Samaritans didn’t get along.

Jesus said something strange: *“If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water”* (John 4:10, The Message).

The woman: *“Where would you get this living water? Who are you?”*

Jesus said, *“Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst - not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”*

The woman (& we) say: *“Please, give me this water!”* (John 4:10-15).

Later, Jesus said, *“It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people [God] is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”* (vv23-24)

Jesus reveals he’s the Messiah. The woman is excited. She goes and tells everyone in the village. Many of the Samaritans believe her and come out to see Jesus, begging him to stay for a while. I have to tell you, the disciples were uncomfortable. The Samaritans aren’t people they would normally associate with. For us, it would be the equivalent of a homeless family inviting us to join them at a park table or perhaps the people who play loud music and have messy parties who live a couple of houses down inviting us over. Guess what? Jesus ends up staying two days! Many people in that village became believers through their own experience. They were filled with gratitude. Everyone found something they had in common: God’s love.

Jesus offers us the same gift. That’s what leads us to worship, regardless of who we are, where we came from, what language we speak, how much we have or what we believe. I don’t know about you, but that makes me grateful. It makes me want to live differently, with a different attitude. I want to please God in my heart, mind and spirit.

Worship is where God’s grace and our gratitude come together.

A necessary ingredient in passionate worship is genuine gratitude, our attitude. Christian worship loses its passion when people gather with the expectation God will give them more – more stuff, more achievements, more recognition. Without grateful hearts, we aren’t gathering to give glory to God. We’re just looking for more. We can be like an ungrateful child on Christmas morning who, after opening up many presents, wonders why there aren’t more gifts under the tree.

I have news: worship isn’t about us. Worship is about God.

We come together each Sunday to thank God for everything God has done the other six days of the week! We read Scripture to remind

us the main actor in the drama of life is the Lord. We sing songs to connect to God. We pray to thank God, lift others up and to open ourselves to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

We receive blessings in worship. We experience God. When we worship, God gives us the word we need to hear. God can't help being generous toward us. God loves you. You may hear God's word in a song, a prayer, a sermon, during communion, from a friend or from the children.

Passionate worship is marked by joy and gratitude. When we aren't grateful, then it becomes primarily about us. What makes worship boring isn't the style of the music or the flow of the service. Worship is boring when it's no longer about the God who makes all things new, who transforms all of life. Worship is boring when it's about us. When we come expecting spiritual entertainment, we're most likely going to go away disappointed. That's the view of a consumer, not someone who comes in anticipation of hearing a word from God.

A pastor once expressed frustration. Each week, as he walked to the back of the sanctuary, he wondered if anyone thinking, “So what?” If we ever find ourselves in that situation, let's stop and reflect where we are on our spiritual journey. We might need a “gratitude jump start” to get us going again.

Bishop Robert Schnase writes, “God changes people's lives through Passionate Worship. Worship stirs people's souls, inspires them, and strengthens them. They find such help, courage, belonging and care they cannot help but talk about the sermons, ideas, stories, music, and prayers during the week.”²

What the church offers in worship can't be found anywhere else. We can't get it at the beach or talking a walk. It can't be found on the golf course. It can't be experienced while shopping. We can't find it drinking coffee on Sunday morning while reading the news. We find it when we gather with others to be filled and refreshed with the good news: **Jesus rose from the dead to save us!**

² Abingdon Press, 2007; p. 53

I invite you to offer yourselves wholly and completely to God in worship. Let’s worship with deep gratitude for Jesus. Let’s not hold anything back. Let’s worship God in a way that no one will ever leave wondering, “So what?”

That kind of grateful, loving worship is indeed passionate!

Let us pray...

“O God, you showed your passionate love for us through your Son, Jesus Christ. We come today with hearts of gratitude and praise, seeking to become passionate worshipers - people who seek you and love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We desire to be worshipers who are so focused on you that our agenda and our lives meld into yours. Teach us how to worship with such passion and abandon that nothing short of miraculous transformation takes place, reshaping us and growing us in the image of Christ. Amen”³

³ Schnase, *Op cit.*, p. 7

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (CEB)

Now the boy Samuel was serving the LORD under Eli. The LORD’s word was rare at that time, and visions weren’t widely known. One day Eli, whose eyes had grown so weak he was unable to see, was lying down in his room. God’s lamp hadn’t gone out yet, and Samuel was lying down in the LORD’s temple, where God’s chest was.

The LORD called to Samuel. “I’m here,” he said.

Samuel hurried to Eli and said, “I’m here. You called me?”

“I didn’t call you,” Eli replied. “Go lie down.” So he did.

Again the LORD called Samuel, so Samuel got up, went to Eli, and said, “I’m here. You called me?”

“I didn’t call, my son,” Eli replied. “Go and lie down.”

(Now Samuel didn’t yet know the LORD, and the LORD’s word hadn’t yet been revealed to him.)

A third time the LORD called Samuel. He got up, went to Eli, and said, “I’m here. You called me?”

Then Eli realized that it was the LORD who was calling the boy. So Eli said to Samuel, “Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD. Your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down where he’d been.

Then the LORD came and stood there, calling just as before, “Samuel, Samuel!”

Samuel said, “Speak. Your servant is listening.”

John 4:21-24 (CEB)

Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you and your people will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You and your people worship what you don’t know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews. But the time is coming - and is here! - when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. The Father looks for those who worship him this way. God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth.”