From the time of slavery and the underground railroad, to the freedom rides and civil rights marches of the 1950’s and 60’s, right up until today, music fed and feeds the spirit of a people yearning for freedom. In honor of the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., today we will sing together and reflect on the power of music in the long struggle of African Americans for freedom and equality. As we sing, we will open our hearts as well, to recommit ourselves to the dream of dignity for all people, and to find encouragement and hope for the struggles we still face together.

INTRODUCTION: The Story of the Spirituals
For about 250 years of our country’s history, people who had come over from Europe captured people from Africa and brought them to America as slaves. A slave is a human being who is treated as if they were not really human, but more like a machine for work. But even if you treat someone like a machine, they still know inside themselves that they are a human being, and they want to be free.

The Africans sang songs to help remember that they were human beings, that they were special, and to give them hope that they would not always be enslaved. The songs they created are called spirituals. They were like food and drink for the spirit. The spirituals are still sung today, to help people remember hope, especially when things aren’t going well.

Today, we’re going to sing a spiritual together, that most of you might already know: *This Little Light of Mine*. But, we’re not going to use our hymnals. The enslaved Africans weren’t allowed to read. So they didn’t use song books, and they also didn't have pianos. So this time we'll sing A Capella. Many of the spirituals have repeating lines, so that the song leader can sing out the first line, and then everyone knows what the rest of the lines will be. So, I’ll sing out the changing lines, and everyone can join right in.

**OPENING SONG:**
*This Little Light of Mine*

>This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...  
>Everywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine...  
>Building up a world... 
>I’ve got the light of love...

**TIME FOR ALL AGES**

*“The Spirituals as Code Songs”*

*Myke:* Some of the spirituals sung by Africans in slavery were code songs: they held secret messages that people needed to pass on to each other without the white owners finding out.  

*Carolyn:* The most important secret message was about trying to escape from slavery, to travel north to freedom. One of those escape songs is called *Come and Go With Me.*  

*Myke:* It sounded just like a church song, inviting people to come and go with me to the land of heaven.  

*Carolyn:* But secretly the enslaved Africans used it to signal that they were planning an escape to the north, and inviting their brothers and sisters to join them.

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1 Copyright 2018 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission to reprint must be requested for other than personal use. Words to the spirituals are traditional and in the public domain.
Myke: This song is a song that substitutes one line for another. So Carolyn and I will take turns singing the first line, and everyone can join in after that. Dale will help us this time on the piano.
Carolyn: All of us will sing the verses of the song, and when we come back to the first verse, the children and I will head out to our programs.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Come and go with me to that land, (3x) where I'm bound. (2x)} \\
\text{There'll be freedom in that land (3x) where I'm bound. (2x)} \\
\text{There'll be justice in that land...} \\
\text{There'll be singing in that land...} \\
\text{Come and go with me to that land...} 
\end{align*}
\]

Reflection: Hold On, Hold On!
The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born January 15, 1929. He was arguably the most significant person to live in America in the twentieth century. At the age of twenty-seven, as a young minister in his first church, he was called upon to lead the Montgomery bus boycott. In the next twelve years, his influence shaped a civil rights movement which transformed the nation.

During the last couple weeks, I have been re-watching the PBS series, *The Abolitionists*. It reminded me of the terribly long time frame for achieving deep social change. In the beginning, the people who wanted to abolish slavery were hoping to change the hearts of the slave owners so that they might be moved to end the horrible institution. After years of speeches and organizing, they felt profound discouragement when yet another compromise was reached in Congress between north and south, to keep the precarious balance between free and slave states. Of course, eventually, the divide proved so great as to stir a secession and a war, before emancipation finally came.

Frederick Douglas, formerly enslaved himself, and one of the leaders of the abolitionist cause, tells us, “Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightening, they want the ocean without the terrible roar of its waters. The struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand.”

Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. In 1968, I was a naive white teen in a small town in the northern state of Michigan. I don’t remember my experience of Dr. King’s death. At that time, for me, politics was something to read or think about in civics class, something to watch on TV. I remember that I believed in civil rights, but I didn’t know that I could participate in changing the world.

Dr. King was a visionary, and our society often holds up his dream of a better world. But Dr. King was also a strategist. Dr. King believed in the power of love and truth as proclaimed in the life and ideas of Jesus, and put into practice in the methods of Gandhi. He not only saw a vision of the promised land, he had a roadmap for getting there. Just like the codes in the spirituals, he was pointing the way, and spelling out the details.

It was through his road maps that my life also began to change. His influence permeated the anti-nuclear movement and the farmworkers’ struggles, which first drew me into social activism. I met Dr. King through the nonviolent tactics we embraced, the civil disobedience we risked, the non-cooperation we practiced, and the jail time we experienced. I met Dr. King in the songs we sang.

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2 *Singing the Living Tradition* #579.
Non-violence, despite the word, does not mean gentle or soft or wimpy. Gandhi used the word *satyagraha* to describe the method of social change he was practicing. *Satyagraha* literally means “holding on to the truth.” It was this truth force, this “holding on to the truth” that Dr. King harnessed for the Freedom movement. *Ahimsa*, or nonviolence, was one aspect of holding on to the truth. Dr. King did not preach that people should patiently bear the sufferings they were enduring under segregation. Rather, he preached that people should resist segregation, risk their lives if necessary to do so, and bear the suffering that would come in the midst of the battle.

The spirituals were enlisted as a part of the struggle. This music was a flourishing expression of black culture and faith. The songs were adapted to fit the situations. The lyrics evolved from a focus on religion to a focus on freedom, rights, and equality. When you were exhausted from marching all day, and facing the hateful words of bystanders, or the growls and bites of dogs, that was when you would sing a song like this one:

\[
I \text{ ain’t in no way tired.} \\
I’ve come too far from where I started from. \\
Nobody told me the way would be easy. \\
I can’t believe God would bring me this far to leave me.
\]

And then you would have the power to keep on going. According to Cordell Reagon of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the music itself became a form of protection. During the days of marches and protests, the music evoked such emotion and joy in those who sang it that some said the music “felt like an angel watching over you” in times of violence.

When I think of the long term nature of social change, when I think about how much and how long we must hold on to the truth, if we hope to have an effect, I always come back to a particular freedom song. The chorus goes like this:

\[
Hold on, Hold on, Keep your hand on that plow, hold on.
\]

The song reminds me of *satyagraha*, the power of “holding on to the truth.” There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of different sets of verses for this song. And I first learned it with another chorus: “Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.” But “the hand on the plow” has some deep layers of meaning that can help us to understand the process of social change.

“Keep your hand on the plow, hold on.” To better understand these words we need understand traditional plowing. A horse would pull the plow, and the farmer would hold onto the plow behind the horse. You didn’t have to push the plow forward--the power and energy of the horse would drag you along in fact. But if you took your hand off the plow, it would lift up out of its groove, and just drag along above the soil. Your hand holding on to the plow enabled the turning of the soil.

Just so it is with us, in the service of truth and justice. Dr. King used to quote the Unitarian abolitionist Theodore Parker, when he said, the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. When we hold on to truth, when we devote ourselves to justice, we tap into that moral arc, just like the farmer plowing tapped into the energy of the horse. Our effort is indispensable, but what can be accomplished will go far beyond our strength.
There’s another part to plowing: The reins that controlled the horse were looped around the neck of the farmer. A well trained horse would follow the lead of the farmer’s head. If you looked to the left, it would veer to the left. If you looked to the right, it would veer to the right. It was important that the farmer looked directly toward the end of the row, in order for the track to be laid down straight. We too must stay focused on our vision, on our goal, in order one day to achieve it. Keep our eyes on the prize. One verse of the song goes like this:

*When you plow don’t lose your track,*
*Can’t plow straight and keep a-lookin’ back,*
*Keep your hand on that plow, hold on.*

In another verse of the song, there is a story told about Paul and Silas bound in jail. You might not be familiar with Paul and Silas. The story comes from the Acts of the Apostles in the Christian scriptures. I want you to imagine hearing this story through the ears of people marching in the streets, and getting arrested by the hundreds.

Paul and Silas had been preaching in Philippi in Macedonia. There was a slave girl there, who was said to be possessed by a demon. Her masters capitalized on her condition by making money off her fortune telling. She began following Paul and Silas around everyday proclaiming that they were sent by God to bring salvation. Finally, Paul got irritated, and performed an exorcism, and the woman was freed from the demon. But her masters were angry that they couldn’t make any more money—it often does come down to money. They dragged Paul and Silas to the magistrate, and accused them of causing a disturbance and advocating unlawful practices. The magistrate ordered them flogged and thrown into prison.

Later that night, Paul and Silas were praying and singing in jail, and an earthquake shook the prison—the doors flew open, and the chains fell from the prisoners. When the jailer saw what had happened, he was about to commit suicide, presuming that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul stopped him, and said “we’re all here.” They weren’t interested in escaping—they were in Phillipi on a mission. The jailer was so moved, he listened to their preaching, joined them on the spot, and invited them next door to his home.

The next morning the word came down that the prisoners were to be released. And here is the fun part. Paul replied: “You think we’re going to leave quietly? After you flog Roman citizens in public without a trial, and throw us into prison? Oh no! You must come and escort us out yourselves.”

This story reminds me of the times that Dr. King was arrested as part of some campaign, and then refused to pay bail. There were at least a few times that the bail was mysteriously paid, it turns out by the authorities themselves. They had found out that Dr. King in jail was more trouble than Dr. King out of jail. When we hold on to the truth, miracles can happen. Liberation can happen. Now just imagine this song being sung in a jail. Join me on the chorus…

*Paul and Silas was bound in jail*
*Had nobody for to go their bail*

*Keep your hand on that plow, hold on.*
*Hold on, hold on. Keep your hand on that plow, hold on*
The very moment that all seemed lost,  
the dungeon shook and the chains fell off....

Paul and Silas began to shout,  
Jail door opened and they walked out....

Jim Zwerg, a white freedom rider, talked about music as the way those who were arrested communicated to each other in jail. He tells of one experience, of being pulled from a bus, and thrown into a cell with a group of drunken white men. He was very afraid, but decided to sing this song for his cellmates. A group of ten of them warmed up to singing along with him. When he heard other groups singing in the jail, he knew that his comrades were okay.

Let’s all sing together the next few verses of the song:

The only chain that we can stand  
is the chain of hand in hand  
Keep your hand on that plow, hold on.  
Hold on, hold on. Keep your hand on that plow, hold on

The only thing that we did wrong,  
was staying in the wilderness a day too long

The only thing that we did right  
Was the day we began to fight

Got my hand on the freedom plow  
Wouldn’t give nothing for my journey now

Dr. King said, “Once I gave everything there was no turning back.” African Americans and their allies held on to the truth. They held on to the plow of freedom and dignity. They refused to submit to the untruth of an inferior status in American society. And the whole nation changed. Legal segregation was dismantled. Restaurants, schools, buses, trains, hotels, theaters, swimming pools, neighborhoods.

It was a difficult and costly battle. Many people lost their lives. But Dr. King held on to a vision of hope, not condemnation. Just like Paul and Silas didn’t condemn the jailor, but won him over to their side, so Dr. King held on to the vision of winning all people to the goal of human dignity, justice and community.

We know the work isn’t done yet. Racism keeps rearing up again and again. We have seen its virulence in the streets of America during this difficult past year. If love and truth were the only realities in the universe, maybe progress would be inevitable. But there is a brokenness in our world. We can’t be mushy or naive. Dr. King would say we must be tender hearted and tough minded. The problems we face as a people today require hard analysis and creative thinking. But the first step is to join in, to put our hand on the plow. The next step is to hold on and walk together--to trust that there is an energy in this world that moves toward justice, that will help move us toward the beloved community.
The truth Dr. King believed was that we all are one family, black and white, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. If we don’t take care of each other, the whole family will be doomed. Dr. King held on to that truth, and lived it. He gave all of his energy to bring about right relationship. He taught us with his life, and with his death, that when we devote all of the energy we have to the service of our vision, transformation can happen. May it be so.

And now let us join in our final song, one more spiritual, for guidance on this journey,

*SONG Guide My Feet #348

   Guide my feet, while I run this race, (3x)
   for I don’t want to run this race in vain
   Stand by me...
   Hold my hand...
   Search my heart...

CLOSING WORDS
An excerpt from a poem by Langston Hughes, “Freedom’s Plow” [1943]

   A Long Time ago,
   An enslaved people heading toward freedom made up a song:
   Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!
   That plow plowed a new furrow
   Across the field of history.
   Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped.
   From that seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.
   That tree is for everybody,
   For all America, for all the world.
   May its branches spread and its shelter grow
   Until all races and all peoples know its shade.
   Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!