

Transcript of remarks of Rev. Dr. Raphael D. Warnock at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen

This is a transcript of the recorded remarks of the Rev. Dr. Raphael D. Warnock at an interfaith/ecumenical prayer service to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the death April 4, 1968, of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The prayer service was held April 12, 2018, at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore.

Rev. Warnock has served since 2005 as the senior pastor of Atlanta's historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, Rev. King's spiritual home.

The son of two Pentecostal pastors, Rev. Warnock responded to the call of ministry at a very early age, and at age 35, became the fifth and the youngest person ever called to the senior pastorate of Ebenezer Baptist Church, founded in 1886.

Well, good evening. *[Congregation responds tepidly.]*

Listen, I'm a Baptist preacher. You have to talk back to me. *[Laughter]*

Good evening, everyone. *[Congregation responds "Good evening" loudly.]* That's better. Praise the Lord. Give yourselves a round of applause for being here. *[Applause]*

I am delighted and deeply grateful to be back in Baltimore, Maryland, where I served for about five years as senior pastor of the Douglas Memorial Community Church. *[Applause]* I am grateful to the members of the congregation for putting up with me for five years. And I'm grateful to this august body for inviting me to be here on this very special occasion. To your archbishop and mine, the Most Reverend William Lori; to your mayor and mine, Catherine Pugh, whose political career I remember during my time here and I've watched with great interest; to all of the clergy across many faith traditions and the leaders. I'm sitting next to the Chief of

Police. I was trying to be on my best behavior. *[Laughter]*

And to this wonderful choir. Isn't the future in great hands? Come on. *[Applause]* To all of you, my sisters and my brothers, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity. It is as the precious ointment upon the beard - even Aaron's beard that went down to the skirts of his garment. It is as the dew of Hermon - there God commanded the blessing, even life forever more.

Thank you so very much. I'm humbled and grateful to be here now. We are an ecumenical gathering. God is known by many names and worshipped in many houses, but of one blood, God has called all nations to dwell upon the face of the earth that we might seek after God and yet God is not far from any one of us. In him we live and move and have our being. What a wonderful gathering of the children of God.

Now for those of you who are Catholic and Episcopalian, every now and then, if you hear somebody talk back to me, don't get afraid. Those are just Baptists. That's what we do. Amen. *["amens" and Applause]* Now if you don't do that in your tradition that's fine. Just sit quietly. Don't be afraid. We love those who are quiet and reflective as well. We call the Episcopalians the frozen chosen. *[laughter]*

I grew up in the Pentecostal church. So I bring a little learning and burning. I'm Penta-baptist, Bapti-costal. But I'm grateful to be in this wonderful cathedral.

Will you bow with me and will you reach out and join hands with your neighbor?

I saw a great multitude of men and women, boys and girls, gathered together on a hill. There they were, diverse and variegated, hailing from the four corners of the earth, yet they looked into each other's eyes and they were not afraid.

So I asked the one standing there, "What is this?" He said, "It is the kingdom of God, imbued with love and justice."

And so I asked, "Where is this?" And he answered, "It exists already in the hearts of those who have the courage to believe and struggle."

And so I asked, "When is this?" And he answered, "When we learned the simple art

of loving each other as sisters and brothers.”

And so, O God, give us wisdom give us courage for the living of these days, for the facing of this hour, as we bear witness to your kingdom. O God who loves us into freedom and frees us into loving, to you we offer this prayer. Amen.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. Behold, I make all things new.

I just want to talk for a little while about a new heaven and a new earth – the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr. draws us to this place. And as we remember him we would do well to remember why he went to Memphis, where he would meet his destiny, in the first place.

He went to Memphis fighting for those on the margins of the margins. It was 1968. Garbage collectors, fighting for their basic human dignity, were trying to get a movement started, and if we are honest tonight the church was slow to get on board.

I don't know if it was the politics of respectability. I don't know if it was a lack of courage or uncertainty.

It's difficult sometimes to discern in the moment what to do. The movement had a lot of fits and starts and then on February 1st – can I tell the story? Two garbage collectors by the name of Echol Cole and Robert Walker were literally crushed, their bodies were crushed in the compactor area of their garbage trucks. And their shed blood provided fuel for a movement that finally got started.

Poor and marginalized, crushed by the machinery of systemic oppression. They were there in the back of that garbage truck in the first place because the curious logic of Jim Crow segregation said that they could not ride in the front of the truck, and so they were in the compactor trying to find some shelter from the storm.

But from the storm of racism and classism, there was no hiding place. So they were crushed and Dr. King made his way to Memphis and then he made his way to Memphis again and then on April 4th, he met his destiny on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

But what I want you to know tonight is that he was scheduled to preach at our

church. He was scheduled to preach at Ebenezer on April 7th, 1968, and there among the effects in his briefcase were the early thoughts of a sermon he never lived to preach. We don't know the text, but the title was "Why America May Go to Hell."

I know that's shocking but don't get mad at me. That's Dr. King's sermon. You're here to celebrate him, right?

Perhaps it's hard for us to imagine Dr. King preaching a sermon titled "Why America May Go to Hell" because Dr. King, although he lived and died long before our current era, years ago he was already the victim of identity theft. In other words, when Dr. King died we resurrected a new Martin Luther King Jr., one who does not make us too uncomfortable.

And so it's hard for us to imagine the prophet of peace preaching with such harsh words. But you ought to remember that it was not the first time that Dr. King spoke to the country that he loved so much with some challenging words. He said to America a year before he died, in that famous Vietnam war speech, at the Riverside Church. He called America the greatest purveyor of violence on the globe. He said that the nations of our world are caught up in a colossal contest for supremacy. And I'm sad to admit that my nation is the supreme culprit. In other words, he was the best kind of patriot because he loved the country enough to tell the country the truth.

Now is a time for truth-telling. Now is a time to call the nation to be the best, to stand tall with moral excellence. To push past the predictable partisan arguments of the public square and catch a glimpse of the vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

It's bigger than Republican politics; it's bigger than Democratic politics.

It is God's vision of a new heaven and new earth. And whenever people of faith catch a vision of what God intends, it makes folks on the right and the left uncomfortable.

So that's why in recent days I've been drawn to the book of Revelation. We don't deal much with this book in our churches. And I submit to you that we need revelation in a time like this.

Don't be afraid of the book. It just reminds us that our God reigns. Our God reigns in the heavens above and the earth below.

It reminds us that although it may not seem like it in the moment, our God really is up to something in this world. And I want to be wherever God he is. Reminds us that evil and injustice will never have the last word. Revelation encourages us to fight, to fight on, knowing in the words of George Frederick Handel, who was simply lifting words from Revelation, that the kingdoms of this world had become the kingdoms of our God and he shall reign forever and ever. *[applause]*

And if you know that, if you know that, you don't mind making your way to Memphis, even with death threats all around. Because you remember that you serve one who was born in a barrio called Bethlehem, raised in a ghetto called Nazareth. One day he made his way into Jerusalem where prophets die.

We Christians celebrated, not long ago, Palm Sunday. I hope your preachers up here didn't tell them it was a parade or a processional. It was really a protest march. Jesus was making his way on the east side of the city at the same time Pilate the governor would have been coming in on the west side. You understand east side/west side. I'm in Baltimore. *[laughter]*

See the governor, followed by all of his military might, surrounded by cavalry. Jesus comes in on a donkey. What is he up to? It is a parody of imperial power. It is a mocking of a power that is too impressed with itself.

He makes his way into Jerusalem, and then he sits down for a meal by Thursday - a Passover meal with friends because contrary to what we Christians think, Jesus was not a Christian. He lived and died a Jew.

He sat down for Jewish Passover meal, which reminds the people of God that God is the God who delivered us out of Egypt, out of the hand of Pharaoh into the promised land, into the good and spacious land. It is a land of human flourishing where everybody can live, where everybody has enough to eat.

It is the vision of a new heaven and a new earth and it is that vision that brings him into conflict with the powers that be.

So Jesus died, executed by the Empire, lynched on a tree.

Martin made his way into Memphis. If you believe that the kingdoms of this world belong to God, if you remember that he rose with all power in his hand and that he said, "Be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life," then that causes you to stand up in the midst of injustice, it won't allow you to be silent. So by the time we get to Revelation, the church movement is under attack.

Nowadays the church is seldom under attack, at least not for the right reasons. Perhaps we're not under attack by the powers because too often we're in cahoots with the powers.

You know, the simple folk that I grew up with down in Savannah, Georgia, used to say that if you never have a head-on collision with the devil that means you're riding in the same car. *[laughter and applause]*

And so John, the writer of this letter, is not some other-worldly thinker thinking about some life that is trans-historical. It is eschatological in character, to be sure, but it is a critique of this world.

He is an inmate in Rome's prison industrial complex. And this is his letter from a Roman jail, kind of like Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

This is no pie-in-the-sky religion. He is writing in memory of a brother who was lynched on a tree. It is the language of the oppressed because oppressed folk have to find a way to talk to one another so that they know what they're talking about when they're talking about it and other folk don't know what they're saying. *[applause]* The arts of resistance. Roman emperor – self-important – declared himself *kairos kai dios* – Lord and God. This movement offered no ultimate allegiance to him. They dared to say that the one executed by Rome's method of capital punishment was Lord and God.

Oppressed people have to speak to each other in coded language.

Martin Luther King Jr. did not emerge out of nowhere – *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. He was a part of a great faith tradition and of a people who trusted God when they couldn't hear nobody pray. Long before he became the leader of the movement, he

was a part of a faith tradition of religion and resistance of faith and struggle for freedom.

He hailed from a people who form their churches, and their churches were born fighting for freedom and they used to sing about that freedom in the coded language that oppressed people use to speak and so they say, "Steal away to Jesus. Ain't got long. Stay here." And the master thought they were talking about some pie-in-the-sky religion. What he didn't know is that later on that night, they were going to steal away. *[laughter and applause]*

They sang, "I got shoes." Stripped of basic material necessities they dared to sing, "I got shoes, you got shoes. All of God's children got shoes."

When I get to heaven, it's a critique of this world and I'm going to put on my shoes. I'm circumscribed right now but guess what I'm going to show all over God's heaven.

And then they give the master what we call side-eye and say "heaven, heaven, everybody talking about heaven, ain't going there." They were talking about a new world order.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the old-world order – the first heaven and the first earth –had passed away and I came all the way from Atlanta to suggest that voices of faith and moral courage ought to lead the way. We ought to be raising our voices fighting for God's kingdom imbued with love and justice where everybody can eat, where everybody has medicine, where everybody has education, where every child has a chance.

Do you believe in a new heaven and a new earth? A new heaven and a new earth. The longing for a new order, not some uninformed reminiscences of an old order. No desire to make Rome great again. I'm just preaching the text. *[laughter]*

Whatever your politics you ought to be suspicious of this idea, not of greatness but of again-ness. Because as a person of African descent I have to ask when was this again? Was it when I was three-fifths of a human being? Was it when women could not vote?

No, a new heaven and a new earth. Dr. King went to Memphis and died in Memphis fighting for that and you ought to keep fighting. Don't give up. *[applause]*

Don't give up on America. Don't give up on our children. Don't you dare give up on God.

Triplet evils, he said of racism, poverty and war. Racism, we're still dealing with it. It is that old sin.

We don't like to talk about it in America. But you can't heal a disease without a diagnosis. Without a diagnosis, there's no prescription.

We can talk about racism in so many ways, but let me just say that in America today, we live with this tragic irony. All of the racialized barriers that Dr. King lived to pull down, and to be sure he accomplished much. Those who say nothing has changed, don't get it; a whole lot has changed.

We ought to pay homage to those who died too young and gave so much. Red, yellow, brown, black and white. Not just black folk. But a white woman named Viola Liuzzo, who gave her life. Two Jews and an African-American - (Michael) Schwerner, (James) Chaney and (Andrew) Goodman - who gave their lives. So many others who gave their lives.

Yet, many of the racialized barriers have reinvented themselves within the context of what that brilliant legal mind Michelle Alexander calls the New Jim Crow. Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness and so today, three years ago today, Freddie Gray lost his life *[editor's note: Gray was arrested April 12, 2015, and died April 19 of injuries suffered in police custody]*, but I submit to you, Baltimore, that as tragic as those incidents are, they are tragic and predictable. Because while we abhor police brutality and Dr. King was talking about police brutality - did you know that? - in 1963.

He said, "Some are asking, when will we will we be satisfied? We will not be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim. As long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality." He said that in the "I Have a Dream" speech.

We don't even like to hear the whole "I Have a Dream" speech. We've cherry picked Dr. King.

He said, "as long as the Negro is the victim of police brutality." In other words, he recognized that there was racial bias and he was honest about it.

Translation: It was the 1963 version of "Black Lives Matter." *[applause]* Don't get mad at me and don't get mad when folks say black lives matter. That's part of what it means to be an oppressed people.

So all lives matter, of course. And that's the point. *[applause]*

Can I help you? Part of what it means to be an oppressed people is that you have to have a campaign and a movement to declare about yourself that which ought to be obvious. Fifty years ago - have you thought about it? No. It's kind of like Sunday school. You've seen it so often you haven't thought about it. Fifty years ago: "I am a man." Why would anybody have to say that?

What it means to be an oppressed person is you have to have a movement to declare yourself that which ought to be obvious. "I am a man. I AM A MAN." Sojourner Truth, 19th century, asking rhetorically, challenging racism and sexism, "Ain't I a woman?" Black lives matter.

In Dr. King's lifetime, there were less than 200,000 people in America's prisons.

In 1980, there were about 300,000 or so Americans in prison. Today there are 2.3 million Americans in prison. Most of them are there for non-violent, drug-related offenses in America's so-called war on drugs. We warehouse in America 25 percent of the world's prisoners.

Nobody else comes close. Not even China with a billion people. We've got them beat. We warehouse 25 percent of the world's prisoners in the so-called war on drugs.

And here's the irony: when they come out or even if they don't serve much time or no time at all, when our children take a plea sometimes for a marijuana charge - and we deplore drug use, to be sure. But some children are taken down to central booking, and others are taken home.

The issue is not simply drugs. Raise your hand if you ever tried some weed. You're in church now. *[laughter]*

For 35 years, we've had a war on drugs.

And so when they get out, 1964 civil rights law, completely undermined. 1965 voting rights law, for them undermined, why? Because job discrimination, legal; you have to check the box. Housing discrimination, legal. Voting discrimination, legal. Matter of fact, my church had an expungement event last year.

We did in one day in church what takes 120 days to do. We convinced all of our government entities, Mayor Pugh, to come together. And in one day we did expungements for people's criminal arrest records because there are folks who been arrested, never convicted. Some of them acquitted.

And yet they can't move forward in life because they have an arrest record. And so that day in church everybody in church had a record. Now that I think about it, that's true every Sunday and every Saturday night, Friday night, everybody in all of our houses of faith has a record. We expunged those records.

I was in the barbershop not long ago. Believe it or not. True story. I was in the barbershop. *[laughter]*

This man came up to me and said, "Rev., thanks for doing that expungement event."

I said, "God bless you." I thought he had seen it on the news.

He said, "No, you expunged my record." He looked respectable. had on a jacket and a nice button-down shirt.

He said, "Twenty years ago I had a check, an issue of a bad check. Twenty years I haven't been able to get a good job. You expunged my record and I have a much better job than any job I've ever been able to get because I didn't have to check the box. Quality of life improved." *[applause]*

I said, "God bless you."

He said, "No, it's better than that."

He said, "There's a young couple in my family. They have a young baby, they had a baby. They weren't able to take care of the baby. The baby needed to be adopted. Two years ago, I would not have been able to do anything for them. DFACS (Georgia Department of Family and Children Services) would not have allowed me to adopt the baby. But because you cleared my record I was able to save this child from foster care. Two generations saved because of some grace and mercy." *[applause]*

So we're now trying to expand that program across the state, across the country.

For 35 years - Freddie Gray, the tip of the spear, that's physical death. Those who can't get jobs, can't get an apartment, they suffer social death.

For 35 years we've had a war on drugs. Now, back then we were dealing with heroin, crack. Now we're dealing with meth and opioids. It's interesting to me that now we have a public health emergency. I'm glad we've become so enlightened now that the bodies are suburban, rural and white. *[applause]* Public health emergency.

In a war, you have enemy combatants. Public health crisis you have patients.

I'm glad we're taking this approach. I just want to know - as I think about the war on drugs that did as much devastation to places like Baltimore as the drugs themselves - I just want to know where is the restorative justice package for the inner cities like Baltimore that have been devastated by 35 years of this so-called war. *[applause]*

We've got to deal with racism. We've got to deal with poverty.

It's expensive to be poor. Poor people have to work two, three jobs. In 1968, when Dr. King went to Memphis to fight for those workers, do you know that the minimum wage in 1968 had more purchasing power than it does today?

We're still crushing the poor in the compactor of systemic oppression. And if the church, if people of faith, if the mosque and the synagogue will not speak up, who will?

The Kaiser Family Foundation did a study and it showed that Christians are more likely than the rest of the population to blame the poor for their poverty. There's something wrong with the theology that's coming from too many of the pulpits of the

American church.

I preach in memory of that one who said, "I came to preach good news to the poor." You cannot say you love God whom you have not seen and not love the poor whom you see every day. *[applause]*

Don't talk about poor people like they're not human. It makes me so mad. And I believe that it disturbs God.

Most poor people are children. I was one of those children. You invited me because I'm in King's pulpit, but long before I was in King's pulpit, I was a little boy growing up on the west side of Savannah in Caton Homes housing projects. Didn't have much money. My parents though gave me faith and a sense of humor.

My parents had so much faith. You know they used to just live in the world of the Bible. They were Pentecostal preachers and so they spoke to us in King James English. "Thou shalt wash the dishes *[laughter]*, lest I smite thee with my rod and my staff."

They instilled in us, archbishop, a deep sense of faith. And so I decided because I believed in myself and I believed in God - don't give up on yourself believe in yourself, young people - I decided when I was just a young boy that I was going to Morehouse College because Dr. King went to Morehouse College. I had no idea I'd end up in his church. *[laughter]* I went to Morehouse on a full-faith scholarship. When I got there, there were those who already driving fancy cars, dressed like they were already working on Wall Street. They were students.

And I didn't have enough money, really, for the first semester.

When I went to Morehouse on a full-faith scholarship. I turned to my parents as they were getting ready to drop me off as a young freshman and I just wanted a few dollars, you know, to make it. And my dad - a veteran of World War II, a strong man, loving father - looked at me. True story, spoke to me in King James English. He said, "Silver and gold hath I none *[laughter]*. But such as I have, I give unto thee. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ go with you."

Put his arms around me and they drove off into the horizon. *[laughter]*

Four years later some of those guys who were driving BMWs were driving by the stage. I was standing on the stage getting my degree. *[applause]* I was 18 years old. I returned 18 years later as the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. *[applause]*

Now - I'm almost done - but I had a sense of responsibility. Personal responsibility, yes. And a drive, yes. Discipline, hard work, yes. We believe in all of that, but somebody gave me a Pell Grant.

Somebody gave me a low-interest, guaranteed student loan. I'm trying to tell you don't buy into this lie about personal responsibility and public responsibility. You've got to be responsible for yourself and we are responsible for one another. America, invest in your children. It's the greatest resource that we have. All children ought to have a chance. Give all of our children a chance. All sides of town.

I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

Racism was gone. Poverty was gone. Racism, poverty and then finally Dr. King talked about war and some are beating the drums of war even tonight. Pray for our nation, but as you think about the geopolitical situation, let us resist the demons of militarism that disturb our domestic situation.

We've got more guns in America than there are people. Don't ever forget that Dr. King was himself the victim of gun violence. And know that his own beloved mother, just a few short years later, was shot and killed in our sanctuary by a deranged young man who had a gun and no mental health care, while she was praying the Lord's Prayer. Playing it on the organ. Killed her and one of our deacons, Deacon (Edward) Boykin. It would have been a bloodbath in 1974 if he had had an AR 15.

So I'm proud of these young people who are standing up in the Black Lives Matter movement and in the March for Our Lives and in the Me Too movement. *[applause]*

Because I still believe in the vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Do I get tired and weary sometimes? Of course I do. When I get tired and weary I just look up, and because I'm a preacher I'd love to tell you that when I look up I see some grand and lofty vision, the very thing of God riding across the milky deep in Aramaic Hebrew and Greek.

Truth be told all I usually see is birds flying by. *[laughter]* But I love to see birds fly by. I especially like to see geese because geese fly in a V formation. Pelicans flap their wings faster but they don't go as far. If you want to go fast, fly alone; if you want to go far, fly together.

Geese fly in a V formation and the one out front is getting all the glory and the sunshine – the one that you want to hate on because he's out front getting all of the media attention. The one out front, if he's a real leader, is actually working the hardest. *[applause]* Leading by example. What I like about geese is that when the one out front grows tired, he just moves further back into the formation and another one moves up and takes her place. *[applause]*

And geese do that without a church schism.

They do that without a war.

They do that without one side of the geese formation deciding to shut the whole geese government down.

Why? Because geese understand that my individual location is not as important as our collective destination. *[applause]*

And so, if you want to celebrate Dr. King, you don't have to be Dr. King. You just have as much sense as a goose. *[laughter]*

Pray together. Struggle together. Plan together. Work together. Fight together. STAND TOGETHER. WE SHALL OVERCOME. *[applause]*

*Watch a video of the prayer service **here**.*