

Good morning.

First, giving honor to God, our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

I am blessed and happy to be with you today.

[Note: Introduce family & friends]

Thank you **Ms. Lewis** for that warm introduction.

When Ms. Lewis, *with Ms. Young on the phone*, first approached me about serving as a guest speaker for this celebrated Black History program, I questioned her request, with “Me, are you sure? Ms. Lewis, I’m a speechwriter, not a public speaker.”

Of course, she shrugged me off and said, “Just be there.”

And with Ms. Lewis, when she gives you an order, you usually follow it, cause she has that “look” about her.

She’s just so wonderful and nurturing, I love her!

So, again, thank you **Ms. Lewis, Ms. Young, Pastor Phillips, and the New Hope family** for having me.

[Pause for transition]

Well, as I contemplated today’s theme, “Proud of our Heritage,” I am reminded of great transformation and impact to our people, and society at-large as a result of individuals who possessed the resolve to “do the right thing.”

And with further thought, I appreciate that great acts of courage, and change, and excellence usually begin with “one look” or an “act of expression.”

So, as we explore today's theme: “Proud of Heritage,” I would like to ask, “*What are you looking at?*”

I am reminded of an act of expression on my part that sparked great change in my life.

As Ms. Lewis mentioned, as a child, I had the unique experience of being raised half-Baptist, half-Church of Christ.

My parents went their separate walks of life when I was about 7 years old. And my father wouldn't re-emerge in my life for another 4 years after that.

It was right about the time when I was 11 years old, not much older than my twin sons, when my father reentered my life, and, it was at that time, that he was deeply active in the Church of Christ.

Every other weekend, he'd pick us up: my brother, sister, and me, and head up 59 North toward east Texas, past Lufkin, jump onto Highway 69 North, destination, Alto, Texas ...

Population one: one red light, one Dairy Queen, and a dollar store.

As, my father's activity in church increased, naturally, he wanted us, his children, to be a part of his faith, which was vastly different, as you know, from the Baptist faith.

The Church of Christ's foundation is Jesus' words found in Matthew 16, verse 18, when he tells Peter that: **“Upon this rock, I build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

And since this passage represents a beginning, an establishment, the Church of Christ, primarily studies and draws from the New Testament.

And the belief that literally, the Church of Christ, will be the only church allowed to enter the gates of Heaven for its obedience.

As a member of this church, you'd only visit fellow Churches of Christ, and encourage Baptists folks like myself to “obey the Gospel,” and become a part of the Church or Christ or regret your decision in the afterlife.

And at this opposite end of this spectrum was me, a Baptist, going to my mama's church with all that preaching from the Old Testament, pianos and organs and drums and all that in the church, making a joyful noise unto the Lord, and all that shouting and feeling the Holy Spirit. *What was that all about?*

All I know is that at my mother's church, St. Mark Baptist Church off of Lawler in Sunnyside, I sang in the choir, had communion every first Sunday, and

stayed in church, most of the time, allllllll day on Sundays.

At my father's church, I sat quietly, sung congregational hymns (*absolutely no instruments allow*), had communion every Sunday, and was out of church in about an hour!

As a child, this was an exercise in puzzlement. I rarely knew all the rules and boundaries. And oh, did I pay for crossing one big one.

At St. Mark, when I was 11, I believe it was spring, that the Children's choir was preparing for a major event, and our choir director, Sister Renee, encouraged us to practice outside of church, cause at that point, “we needed it,” she said.

My brother was singing the lead to a particular song, “*Sign me up,*” his voice was cracking cause he was going through puberty, and I was one of three choir

members in charge of rattling the tambourine on that song.

Well, since I knew we'd be visiting my father's the upcoming weekend, I decided to take my tambourine and practice at Daddy's church.

I wanted to, also, surprise my Grandmother, or *Momo* as I call her, who sat on the second pew, to this day, she still does. And I'd sit directly behind her cause I'd like to play in her long hair, to this day, I still do that.

So, that Sunday, I snuck in before church started and hid my tambourine under my bible and hymn book.

During service, my uncle performed his usual duty of directing us to the appropriate hymns. He said, “Let us turn to Page 121, Send the Light.”

And we would oblige:

*There's a call comes ringing over the restless wave,
"Send the light! Send the light!"*

*There are souls to rescue there are souls to save,
Send the light! Send the light!*

Then, I decided to break out the tambourine and add to the chorus to practice like Sister Renee said, and also liven up this song:

*Send the light, the blessed Gospel light;
Let it shine from shore to shore!
Send the light, the blessed Gospel light;
Let it shine forevermore!*

For. Ever. More. For-ever-more.

At this point, I'm the only one singing. All I see is a bunch of angry eyes staring at me, with mouths open, but nothing is coming out of them.

Then, my Momo turns around, and looks at me with these incredible smiling eyes, and quietly gets up and ushers me out of the church.

Outside, she explained in her nurturing, calming voice, the policy of the Church of Christ. But she urged me not to feel badly for my actions, but praised me for worshipping God with boldness and enthusiasm.

It was her **look** of acceptance and pride that sparked a change in my heart to continue marching to my own beat with *audacity*, being my own person with enthusiasm, and being convicted in my destiny.

Talk about Proud of my heritage!

[Pause for transition]

Abolitionist, publisher, and unwavering worker for justice and equality, the late **Frederick Douglass** said:

It is not light that we need, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.

We need to storm mediocrity and perform bold actions; we must move **beyond the boundaries of others' expectations to fulfill God's purpose.**

As we find ourselves at the conclusion of Black History Month, let us not cease the celebration and acknowledgement of numerous past pioneers who assisted in changing the world—*for the better.*

New Hope church family and friends, please be encouraged to maintain the momentum of Black

History Month throughout the year and years to come.

Let us append the standard list of African-American heroes we traditionally honor such as the great Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriett Tubman ...

Let us share those *untold* stories with our youth of past and present ethnic innovators such as physicist **Shirley Ann Jackson**, who was born in Washington, D.C., in 1946; she was the first African-American female to receive a doctorate in theoretical physics from MIT in 1973.

... or **Bayard Rustin**, a major force in the civil rights movement, helping to organize the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the March on Washington.

... or **Little Jimmy Scott**, probably *one* of the most underrated American singers of the 20th century. The jazz artist, with the emotionally charged “squeaky” voice collaborated with the likes of Lionel Hampton in the late 40s, wherein Scott recorded his breakout record, *“Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool.”*

Young people, as we celebrate our heritage, *who are you looking at:*

Are you looking at **Arthur Ashe**—the first African-American male to win three major tournaments in tennis: the U.S. Open in 1968, the Australian Open in 1970, and Wimbledon 1975.

Are you looking beyond his success as a tennis pioneer whereas he, finally, after three unsuccessful tries, received a visa to play in South Africa in 1973

...

He was widely criticized in the black press and by activists. His refusal to honor an international boycott of the country that endorsed segregation prompted charges that he was an "Uncle Tom."

What wasn't commonly known was that in his negotiations with the government, Ashe had insisted on an integrated stadium at Johannesburg's Ellis Park, a first.

When he won the doubles title with Tom Okker, there were tears in the eyes of the black fans, who nicknamed him "Sipho," or a "gift from God," in Zulu.

Beginning with that tournament in Johannesburg and the organization that he co-founded, Arthur Ashe's influence helped create the economic sanctions that ultimately brought an end to apartheid.

When Nelson Mandela walked out of Robben Island Prison in 1990 after 27 years of incarceration, he said the first person he wanted to meet was Arthur Ashe.

[Pause for transition]

Great acts of change, usually begin with a “look.”

–a look of *defiance*, a look of *dissonance*, a look of *positive turbulence*, a look of a *movement*.

South African civil rights activist, Stephen Biko said:
“The power of a movement lies in the fact that it can indeed change the habits of people. This change is not the result of force, but of dedication, of moral persuasion.”

So, when I hear, alarming statistics such as:

- While African-American children comprise **17 percent of public school children** in this nation, **41 percent of African-American children—or 6.8 percent of the 17 percent figure—are placed in special education**
- **Some 37 percent of black men (ages 18 to 24) are enrolled in college**, compared with 42 percent of African-American women and 44.5 percent of Caucasian males
- In 1980, there were **100,000 African-American men incarcerated**; today, there are **1.5 million**, with 85 percent of the males released from prison re-entering the system as repeat offenders.
- Each year, **one-quarter** of the estimated 12 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases, other than HIV, in the U.S. occur among teenagers.

- About **one in three high school students** has been or will be involved in an abusive relationship.

- **More than 1 million American teenagers become pregnant each year.** This represents one of the highest rates of any western industrialized country.

These impediments do not translate into impossibilities as they relate to solutions.

The devil's busy, NOT **victorious**.

Jesus said: *Seek and ye shall find ...*

Look for answers to our challenges, and we will find them.

With seeking, we find great transformation.

Just as when Mary and Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning following his crucifixion that Friday, to anoint his body out of love, devotion, and respect.

And as they first were startled to see the very large stone rolled away from his tomb, they were further started by the presence of an angel who said, *“Be not afraid: ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here” ...*

Because Christ lives, we are forever transformed.

Through the purpose that our past and present great African-American leaders serve in our lives, we are inspired.

When our loved ones visit *our* tombs, what will they *look at*? Simply the birth date and the death date? What about our dash between those dates, which represents our lives, our significance?

What will others *look at* when it comes to your impact on this earth?

Will it be pleasing to God?

As you are designing your purpose for the future, today and contributing to the heritage of this incredible circle of Africans, Africans in America ...

What are you looking at?

My sincere hope is that is something *meaningful, magnificent, and memorable.*

Thank you again, and may God continue to bless your steps.

[End]