Three months ago, I stood with twenty-five other young adults, Missioners from the National Church, and other Episcopal and community leaders on Canfield Drive in Ferguson, Missouri. It was there—one year prior—that a recent high school graduate, Michael Brown, was killed by a Ferguson Police Officer. In that moment, the Episcopal pilgrims were standing on holy ground. To inhabit that space is find yourself transfixed by various tensions—of life and death; despair and hope; of fear and courage.

Since my time in Ferguson, I found it was easier to fill journals and legal pads. I could treasure the people and their stories. In the secret place of my desk drawer, I could offer the protection that Michael Brown did not have that August afternoon in 2014.

We all know the story of Ferguson.

It is the story of a predominantly black community set against a nearly all-white police force.

It is the story of a demographic change within a community.

It is the story of white flight.

It is the story of an under-resourced community, where the median household income is well below the state average and the percentage of residents living below the poverty line is higher than the statewide rate.

It is the story of a community where blacks are arrested at rates—13 times—disproportionate to their white counterparts, and “driving while black” is enough to warrant a car stop and search by police officers.

It is that righteous indignation that re-zoning efforts are so ludicrous, that within the span of three miles, you could drive through six different municipalities, give a ticket in each of them for a minor driving offense, and face the strong arm of the law if you are unable to pay your fines.

The uprisings and demonstrations of Ferguson, Missouri were a response to what Emilie Townes has termed the “Cultural Production of Evil.” This is the reality that history, myth and memory have conspired to perpetuate stereotypes about the non-white other. It is what allows for the systematic subjugation of black people to continue festering in the American psyche. It is why across this nation, and, indeed, across the globe the hashtags #HandsUpDontShoot and #BlackLivesMatter gained so much
traction. Because the story of Michael Brown and Ferguson, Missouri was—and remains—our story.

As James Baldwin astutely noted, “To be black in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.” This rage is born out of the one-sided narrative of the mainstream news media that black people are intrinsically violent creatures who loot, set fires and destroy property. So law enforcement officers have no choice but to respond with tear gas and brute force.

My fellow pilgrims and I arrived to see the Ferguson the media overlooked for lack of sensational effect.

It is the work of the Ferguson Commission, engaging in the ministry of holy listening.

It is telling the ugly truth of the intersectionality and collusion among legislators, corporations and organizations.

It is publicly chastising a major banking institution for their practice of “ghetto loans for the mud people.”

It is the story of Howard Fields, the Principal at Koch—the local elementary school. He secured teddy bears for his students as a form of therapy.

It is the story of Cornita Robinson, returning to St. Louis to be part of the rebuilding effort of her community.

It is in the humility of Rev. Steve Lawler, priest at the local Episcopal parish who understands his context as a middle-aged white man affords his privilege. So he extends hospitality, opens the church to the community and partners with Pastor Willis Johnson. Together, they make the streets of Ferguson a modern day Road to Emmaus, beholding the revealed Christ in their neighbors.

I recently finished reading the Book of Nehemiah. The story of Nehemiah is one which goes against everything our culture tells us we should be striving for. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the King of Persia. As a man with this King’s ear, Nehemiah was used by God to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. His story if not one of sitting on his laurels or advancing his position in the palace. Rather, it is about walking away from the comforts of palace life and working in the trenches. The wall is a wall. But it is also a symbol of rebuilding the community of God’s people. It is about complete and total obedience to God.

Before the Union of Black Episcopalians selected their theme; and Andrae Crouch and Marvin Winans collaborated on ‘Let the Church say Amen,’ Nehemiah knew the value of
gathering together the people of God not only to hear the Word, but to have the priests explain it in great detail. Above all, Nehemiah’s life was one of fervent prayer that God would remember his servant; remember his promises; and remember his people.

This weekend, we also remember the prophet, pastor and martyr—the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On the eve of his assassination, he said to the gathered people in Memphis:

...Something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God’s children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn’t stop there.

I would move on by Greece and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon. And I would watch them around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality. But I wouldn’t stop there.

I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire. And I would see developments around there, through various emperors and leaders. But I wouldn’t stop there.

I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all that the Renaissance did for the cultural and aesthetic life of man. But I wouldn’t stop there.

I would even go by the way that the man for whom I am named had his habitat. And I would watch Martin Luther as he tacked his ninety-five theses on the door at the church of Wittenberg. But I wouldn’t stop there.

I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating President by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. But I wouldn’t stop there.

I would even come up to the early thirties, and see a man grappling with the problems of the bankruptcy of his nation. And come with an eloquent cry that we have nothing to fear but "fear itself." But I wouldn’t stop there.

Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy."

Now that’s a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That’s a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God
working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding.

Something is happening in our world. And we cannot stop here.

There is some ontological shift taking place. We have—in our lifetime—witnessed the United States of America elect a black man to serve as President. Twice. We have—in our lifetime—witnessed the Episcopal Church elect as its leader a descendant of slaves and sharecroppers in North Carolina and Alabama. God has spoken, Let the Church say “Amen!”

The lesson of Nehemiah is that one person cannot get there alone. The people of God erected the wall of Jerusalem as each member, man and woman, did his and her part. There is no Martin Luther King, Jr. with Ella Baker, Ralph Abernathy, Diane Nash, James Lawson, and countless others. And so it is for our beloved Union of Black Episcopalians.

If we are to move forward as a people, we must anchor ourselves in our history as black people. We must receive the wisdom of our ancestors in their struggle against the systems of racist oppression and economic exploitation. Something is happening in our world.

Our calling is to loom back and remember the rock from which we were hewn. Our calling as the Union of Black Episcopalians is to be in the business of rebuilding broken people. We cannot be an organization of order filled with broken people living disordered lives. We must assess. We must organize. We must get to work. About all, we must be people of prayer.

God has spoken, let the Church say, “Amen!”