

Thank you President Roelof for this invitation. While I'm an official retiree, my heart will always remain closely connected to the Berea College community. As we honor Congressman John Lewis, I thought about Sankofa, which means to go back and fetch it, to learn from our past as we move forward.

Consider this, I saw this post on facebook. You have 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great grandparents, 16 second great grandparents, 32, third great grandparents and on and on. Looking back from today you might have over 4,000 ancestors over the last 400 years – that many people who got together so that you can even exist right now.

How many of your folk went through struggles, how many had difficulties, how many battled through wars? How many have hoped for a better future? What has somebody sacrificed so that you are alive today?

Whatever your answer, know that you matter-- your words, your thoughts, and your actions. The question right now is in this time of worst pandemic in our lifetime, when folk are losing jobs, and income and hope, when others are filled with fear and hate or acting just plain crazy, when folk on the frontline are just so tired, when black folk keep getting shot and killed for seemingly no reason – “what you gon’ do?”

And the mighty John Lewis shared so much hope when he said,

You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone — any person or any force — dampen, dim or diminish your light ... Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won." (Let the church say Amen!)

So when I learned that he was keynote speaker for the 2017 commencement, I put together a medley of songs in his honor, that our combined choirs sang at the program. The first one is entitled You Made a Way. It speaks about thanking God for making a way, and I also wanted to thank John Lewis, as one of God's messengers, for making a way. The song Glory follows, referring to the movie Selma. John Lewis was a vital part of that story. The medley finally ends with a spiritual “Keep on marching til we make it home.”

So as we listen to the songs that we sung on that eventful day in 2017, take a moment to remember the wisdom of our ancestors, to affirm and access your own power, and then choose to march on. March on to make this better world than the one you were given. March on because we are the light, and we are the hope. March on cause we are all God's creations and because we can and we must!!!

[Video plays of choirs singing the Song medley]

I went up to John Lewis on stage right after we sang just to say thank you. He had tears running down his face and he said... “you done me proud, I feel like I can go on a little while longer.” Later during his speech, he thanked the choirs and made an unforgettable statement...

[Video plays John Lewis saying “thank you....the civil rights movement without music was like a bird without wings.”]