

Sometimes You've Got to Be a Little Lost

by Rev. Jason Stump, Pastor, *Oakland Christian Church, Suffolk VA*

I grew up in Pine Grove, Pennsylvania. Eagle Scout. Went to military college at Norwich University on a four-year Army ROTC scholarship. Civil engineering major. Got a medical discharge before I was ever commissioned. Started in construction management, taught middle school math for a while, and did a few other things.

Along the way, I became a single father to the world's best little girl. Eventually, after years of court hearings and drama, the primary custody was awarded. I'm a straight, white, now-past-middle-aged guy. My Spotify playlist jumps from Don Williams to Jimmy Buffett to Foo Fighters, with a few unexpected turns along the way. I hunt for most of the meat I eat. I'm kind of a gun guy. I've backpacked a good portion of the Appalachian Trail. I own several sentimental T-shirts that are older than my 24-year-old daughter.

I don't dabble as much in craft beer anymore, but I keep Pabst Blue Ribbon and a small selection of bourbon around. Cigars—anything maduro-wrapped and robusto-sized, with a soft spot for Diesel Unlimited.

These days, I pastor and love the people of Oakland Christian UCC, a church in Chuckatuck, Virginia. Our cemetery includes the graves of former Confederate soldiers.

That sets the stage well enough. You get the picture.

Now here's the scene from last Sunday afternoon, January 18th, 2026.

I'm on the chancel of St. Mark United Church of Christ in Norfolk, Virginia, at the Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration for the Eastern Virginia Association of the UCC. I've been asked to read from the prophets—the ones who don't pull punches. The ones who say things like, *"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

In the sanctuary are about 80 people; there are about ten white folks present. More than last year. The weather is lousy, and many of our churches skew older, so I suspect there would've been more people under different circumstances. Still, it's worth naming: even in a

denomination that has often stood at the forefront of movements for justice and equality, we remain—by and large—a pretty white denomination.

That said, the Eastern Virginia Association, part of the Southern Conference, likely has the most black congregations in the UCC. Either us or our neighbors in the Eastern North Carolina Association. The Southern Conference, without question, is the most racially diverse in our denomination.

And there I am.

Standing on that chancel, waiting to read Amos and Micah, thinking two things at the same time:

How in the hell did I get here?

And

I am exactly where I want to be in this very moment.

If there is any place to honor and celebrate the life and witness of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it is in a Black church. And for a white person, that often includes feeling just a little lost.

How did I get there? The short answer is an old saying attributed to the 16th-century preacher John Bradford, spoken as he watched prisoners being led to execution: *“There but for the grace of God go I.”*

Only grace—undeserved, unearned—has steered my journey into spaces like that one. Only grace has given me the privilege to stand within that community, among those people, on that particular day. Only grace has allowed me to work towards releasing chains on spiritual growth like racism, privilege, homophobia, misogyny, and all the other things that so many I know let their spirits be chained to. And how much these good people have taught me. How much I have learned—not from books alone, but from testimony, from resilience, from faith forged under pressures I have never had to endure.

I have my own testimony, of course. But theirs is different. And yet, it is all directed toward the same God—the God who places a divine spark within each of us, and who invites us to recognize it in one another.

My role came early in the service, and I knew there was a *lot* coming after. And I was ready. Rev. Dr. Earl Johnson offered his welcome, then turned toward me with a smile. I assumed it was my cue. As I leaned forward to stand, Earl gently reached over, and placed his hand on my arm.

“Not yet,” he said quietly and kindly. “Let them sing.”

I had been following the bulletin. But in the Black church—as in many faith traditions—some things aren’t written down. Some things are carried.

So they sang. No hymnals. No screens. No sheet music. And I didn’t know the words.

I closed my eyes, as I often do during worship, and let my spirit move my body just enough to stay inside that holy tension between comfort and discomfort—the place where growth happens.

When I finally stood to read, I told the congregation what had happened between Earl and me. They offered a knowing chuckle. And I said, “Sometimes you’ve got to be a little lost so that you can learn. Sometimes it’s good not to know the words—so you can hear all the other voices.”

Then I read Amos and Micah.

Words God once spoke to people who were doing all the *right* religious things while neglecting justice. Words that remind us God does not delight in empty worship, polished performances, or well-meaning intentions that never become action. Words that insist that what God truly desires is simple and demanding all at once: *to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.*

The celebration went on. God was praised. Dr. King was honored. And hope was offered—real hope, not cheap optimism.

Hope in the reflection of Elizabeth Nikade, a young member of St. Mark UCC, as she engaged Dr. King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.

Hope moving through the sanctuary in the spirit-filled dance of the Women of Faith from St. Luke UCC in Sedley, Virginia—transporting me across time and bringing me to tears.

Hope grounded in history and prophecy through the words of keynote preacher Jennifer Jones Austin, Esq.

And those two thoughts stayed with me.

How in the hell did I get here?

I am exactly where I want to be.

Because sometimes faith looks like being out of place. Sometimes worship means letting other voices lead. Sometimes obedience to God sounds less like singing along and more like listening long enough for justice to roll—and then having the courage to step into the stream.

Go ahead. Step in. God is there ahead of you and waiting in the waters.