

“I Don’t Mind My Light Shining,”

Speech Delivered at a Freedom Vote Rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, Fall 1963

Of the many strategic innovations introduced in Mississippi by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and the Council of Federated Organizations, perhaps none was more consequential than the Freedom Vote of fall 1963. The joint creation of Allard Lowenstein and Bob Moses, the Freedom Vote was a “mock election” designed to dramatize, especially to the federal government, that disenfranchised black Mississippians would cast a ballot if given the opportunity. In addition, in order to vote for meaningful racial progress in the state, black Clarksdale pharmacist Aaron Henry and white Tougaloo College chaplain Reverend Edwin King were recruited to run as an integrated ticket for governor and lieutenant governor, respectively.

As the campaign gathered momentum and publicity by late October, Freedom Vote rallies were held across the state. At one such rally, held in the SNCC-headquartered town of Greenwood in the Delta, Fannie Lou Hamer delivered a brief but impassioned address to her fellow black Deltans. In this, the earliest known recording of Hamer’s speechmaking, she borrows extensively from the Old and New Testaments not only to legitimize her role of rhetorical leadership—Jesus had answered her prayer and opened a way for her to speak—but to have Scripture also function as something of a cudgel: if Mississippi blacks did not take action and vote at this defining hour, they would go “straight to hell” with their oppressors.

This opening salvo in Hamer’s rhetorical ministry foreshadows many of the themes she would address during the next thirteen years: the intimidation and violence she had faced immediately upon attempting to register to vote on August 31, 1962; her brutal beating on June 9, 1963, in a Winona, Mississippi, jail; the extent to which the black church was often an insular house of hypocrisy rather than a house of meaningful political action; the relationship among poverty, race, and social justice; and always the impassioned righteousness that sprang from the unswerving knowledge that she was doing God’s will.

The Mississippi Freedom Vote was a stunning success: nearly eighty thousand ballots were cast between November 2 and 4; the arrival of white Yale University undergraduates to assist in the campaign generated local, state, and national publicity; the Henry-King political ticket foreshadowed the creation six months later of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; and the influx of northern college students proved so successful that Freedom Summer of 1964 was modeled after such domestic missionary work.

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From the fourth chapter of St. Luke beginning at the eighteenth verse: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captive, and recover the sight to the blind, to set at liberty to them who are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Now the time have come that was Christ’s purpose on earth. And we only been getting by, by paying our way to Hell. But the time is out. When Simon [of] Cyrene was helping Christ to bear his cross up the hill, he said, “Must Jesus bear this cross alone? And all the world go free?” He said, “No, there’s a cross for everyone and there’s a cross for me. This consecrated cross I’ll bear, till death shall set me free. And then go home a crown to wear, for there’s a crown for me.”

And it’s no easy way out. We just got to wake up and face it, folks. And if I can face the issue, you can too. You see, the thing, what’s so pitiful now about it, the men been wanting to be the boss all of these years, and the ones that ain’t up under the house is under the bed.

But you see, it’s poison; it’s poison for us not to speak what we know is right. As Christ said from the seventeenth chapter of Acts and the twenty-sixth verse, says: “Has made of one blood all nations, for to dwell on the face of the earth.” Then it’s no different, we just have different colors.

And, brother, you can believe this or not: I been sick of this system as long as I can remember. I heard some people speak of depression in the ’30s. In the ’20s, it was ’pression with me! De-pression. I been as hungry—it’s a funny thing since I started working for Christ—it’s kind of like in the twenty-third of Psalms when he says, “Thou prepareth a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointed my head with oil and my cup runneth over.”

And I have walked through the shadows of death because it was on the tenth of September in ’62 when they shot sixteen times in a house and it wasn’t a foot over the bed where my head was. But that night I wasn’t there—don’t

you see what God can do? Quit running around trying to dodge death because this book said, "He that seeketh to save his life, he's going to lose it anyhow!"

So as long as you know you going for something, you put up a life. That it can be like Paul, say, "I fought a good fight." And I've "kept the faith." You know, it had been a long time—people, I have worked, I have worked as hard as anybody. I have been picking cotton and would be so hungry—and one of the poison things about it—wondering what I was going to cook that night. But you see all of them things was wrong, you see? And I have asked God, I said, "Now Lord"—and you have too—ain't no need to lie and say that you ain't. Said, "Open a way for us." Said, "Please make a way for us, Jesus." Said, "Where I can stand up and speak for my race and speak for these hungry children." And he opened a way and all of them mostly backing out.

You see, he made it so plain for us. He sent a man in Mississippi with the same name that Moses had to go to Egypt. And tell him to go down in Mississippi and tell Ross Barnett to let my people go. And you know I feel good, I feel good. I never know today what's going to happen to me tonight, but I do know as I walk alone, I walk with my hand in God's hand.

And, you see, you know the ballot is good. If it wasn't good how come he trying to keep you from it and he still using it? Don't be foolish, folks: they going in there by the droves and droves and they had guards to keep us out of there the other day. And dogs. Now if that's good enough for them, I want some of it too.

You see, as I said, it was on the tenth of September when they shot in the house for me sixteen times, but I didn't stop. Now some of the time since then I got hungry, but I got consolation because I had got hungry before I got in it. Wasn't going to be no more hungry now than I was then. Then, on the ninth of June, this year, I was beat in a jailhouse until I was hard as metal. And I told the policeman, I said, "It's going to be miserable when you have to face God." I said, "Because one day you going to pay up for the things you have done." I said, because, as the Scripture says, "Has made of one blood all nations." He said, "It's a damn lie," said, "Abraham Lincoln said that." So that's pitiful—I'm telling you the truth, but it's pitiful, you see—that people can have so much hate that will make them beat a person and don't know they doing wrong.

But open your New Testament when you get home and read from the twenty-sixth chapter of Proverbs and the twenty-seventh verse: "Who so diggeth a pit shall fall down in it." Pits have been dug for us for ages. But they didn't know, when they was digging pits for us, they had some pits dug for themselves. And the Bible had said, "Before one jot of my word would fail,

Heaven and earth would pass away. Be not deceived for God is not mocked. For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

All we got to do—that's why I love the song "This Little Light of Mine"—from the fifth chapter of Matthew, He said, "A city that's set on a hill cannot be hid." And I don't mind my light shining; I don't hide that I'm fighting for freedom because Christ died to set us free. And he stayed here until he got thirty-three years old, letting us know how we would have to walk.

And we can come to this church and we can shout till we look foolish, because that's what we're doing. And we can come out here and live a lie and like the lie and we going just as straight to hell, if we don't do something. Because we got a charge to keep too. Until we can sing this song of Dr. Watts: "Should earth against my soul engage and fiery darts be hurled, but when I can smile at Satan's rage and face the frowning world." Thank you.