Reverend Blount, Members of the Clergy, Distinguished Guest, Ladies and Gentlemen – Good morning and Happy New Year. It is indeed an honor and privilege to serve as the keynote speaker for this year’s Martin Luther King, Jr. I Have A Dream Breakfast.

Let me begin by giving recognition to this organization - Church and Community in Action and the New Mount Olivet Baptist Church for your longstanding commitment to improving and lifting up the lives of those in our community who need direct assistance, mentorship, and the power of prayer. Through your work, you are truly transforming lives and improving our community.

As a son of Sussex County, Virginia and a 1968 graduate of Norfolk State, my wife, Patricia and I are no strangers to the Hampton Roads community. I am delighted to have an opportunity to serve as Interim President at my alma mater and equally as excited to continue the important work of building a lasting partnership with this organization and the Portsmouth community. It takes a village to raise a child and to grow a university. The doors of Norfolk State University are always open for community dialogue and partnership. I hope to see each of you at one or more of the many activities we host on our campus.

The legacy of Dr. King is one that should be celebrated and remembered by everyone because his work and leadership was so transformative to our communities, our country, and the world.

Having come of age during the Civil Rights Movement here in Norfolk, I can remember vividly picketing in front of the Norfolk YMCA, so that my fraternity brothers could also sign up to join. My wife led and coordinated student busing from Hampton Roads to the March on Washington. We and so many of you that are present here today - joined King in the fight for Civil Rights not because it was easy or popular, but because we believed that all mankind should be afforded basic dignity and respect, and that every individual that was willing to put in hard honest work deserved a fair shot at the American Dream.

This morning, I would like to share with you my observations on what it is we must do in the year 2018 as a community and as a people to keep moving forward on the road of progress.

While Dr. King’s “I Have A Dream” speech is a masterpiece, I have always been drawn to his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” because of what it symbolizes and what it says about the fight against injustice and the struggle for equality.
King penned the letter on the margins of scraps of newspaper from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama in response to public criticism he received from members of the clergy that believed that his presence and peaceful protests in Birmingham were disruptive to law and order and unwise. King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail reminds us that a just cause can prevail even under the harshest of conditions and informs us that along the road to equality we will meet resistance from even our closest allies, but that victory will be ours if we stay the course.

To use King’s words, “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.”

This morning I would like to share with you three observations on where we are on the road to realizing King’s Dream. These observations are the following:

- Education is Power;
- Economic Security is the New Freedom; and
- Civic Engagement is Transformative

Education is Power

One only has to look at the evening news on any given night to know that we are living in an era of great uncertainty. Despite this uncertainty, one universal truth has stood the test of time. This truth is that a high quality education remains the great equalizer in a world filled with inequity. Education is power. The power that has propelled African Americans to positions of leadership and influence in the classroom, the corporate board room, the courtroom, the operating room, and even the Cabinet Room at the White House.

Dr. King once said, “the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character-that is the goal of true education.” At Norfolk State University, we could not agree more. For more than 80 years, NSU has served as a pathway to prosperity and a better way of life for thousands of African Americans. Our alumni have gone on to distinguish themselves in a multitude of professions and have played important roles in helping to ensure that the doorway of opportunity and upward mobility remain open for future generations.

What sets NSU and other historically black colleges and universities apart from the rest of higher education is not our state-of-the art buildings – although they are impressive. Not our expert faculty – although they are well respected. Not even our marching bands – although they are a remarkable sight. What sets us apart is our strong sense of community. A community that fully embraces our students the very first time they step foot on campus and says to them that we respect you as an individual and believe in your hopes, your dreams, and your ability to succeed.
Whether as an Army captain in Vietnam, university faculty member, or corporate board director, and now University President, I have never forgotten where my journey began. NSU provided me with an excellent education, solid foundation for career success, and – even a wife. Despite the unrest and uncertainty of the late 60s and early 70s, there was never any doubt in my mind about whether I would be successful on the road of life because I knew that my family and the NSU community was standing firmly behind me.

Today, more than ever, the power of education is being limited and in some cases denied to our children.

Across Virginia the academic achievement gaps between white and black students continues to be unacceptably high. Our public schools are becoming more segregated with those schools with majority minority population being chronically under resourced. Moreover, while African Americans students make up about 23 percent of Virginia public school enrollment, they receive 59 percent of short-term suspensions, which means that our students are on average suspended nearly four times more often than white students were.

In the area of higher education, the rising cost of a four-year degree is hitting minority families particularly hard leaving many students with the choice of either taking on massive amounts of student loan debt or foregoing college altogether.

These are troubling developments. If education is to retain its power as the great equalizer, we must take decisive action now to ensure that our children’s futures are secure. At Norfolk State, we take our commitment to our students and to the Hampton Roads community seriously. Under my leadership, students will always be first and a high quality higher education will always be accessible to those who come through our doors committed to the pursuit of higher learning and self-empowerment.

Economic Security is The New Freedom

Simply put, money is power and economic security is the new freedom. Dr. King knew that money matters in our society and he effectively used economic boycotts throughout the South to force bad actors to join him at the negotiating table for equal rights and dignity and respect for all citizens. While we as a people have secured the fundamental freedoms for which King and countless other so fearlessly fought, in the year 2018, the chains of economic insecurity shackle many of us.

Despite gains in income and wealth, the economic divide between black families and their white counterparts is significant— even when it comes to Americans with comparable levels of education. The median net worth of whites remains nearly 10 times the size of blacks'. Nearly 1 in 5 black families have zero or negative net worth — twice the rate of white families.

By 2053, Black households will have a median wealth of zero.

Economic security is the new freedom because without it, our lives and our life decisions are not our own. Without economic security, our ability to live the American Dream and to realize King’s Dream is limited and dependent on the whims and arbitrary decisions of others. If raising
a family, buying a home, sending our children to college, and retiring with dignity and respect are truly priorities in our own lives and in the Black community; we must treat them as such because no one else will.

While it is true that we must continue in earnest the fight for equal access to work and equal pay, we must also take ownership of our own financial futures by making tough financial decisions at home. We must make savings a priority, turn away from easy credit, and accept the reality that keeping up with the Joneses is keeping us down. Life is tough, so let us live it on our own terms by securing our economic freedom.

Civic Engagement is Transformative

The one unalienable truth that we learned from the Civil Rights movement is that change is not a spectator sport. Change is tough and requires direct action and engagement. Whether it be the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Bloody Sunday, or the Poor People’s Campaign, Dr. King’s work underscores the importance of engagement and staying the course even in the most challenging times.

In the current political and social climate, some might be tempted to leave the battlefield and retreat to the ark of safety. Yet, there is no safe place as long as there is inequality and injustice. The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. This is our time. This is our responsibility. As citizens, we have a duty to participate in the electoral process by voting. As African Americans, we have a moral obligation to those who came before us, endured unimaginable hardships, and even sacrificed their own lives so that we might have the right to cast the ballot.

Elections matter and every vote counts - a point that was clearly on display right here in Hampton Roads during the 2017 state elections when the House of Delegates seat in Newport News and the balance of power in the Virginia General Assembly was decided by a single vote. So, if you are a registered voter in House District 94 and did not vote in November, know that your nonparticipation was still consequential.

There are no shortcuts or easy outs in democracy ever action or inaction has a consequence. We will not win every fight or prevail in every election, but at least let us fully engage as citizens let us ask ourselves what would Martin do?

Conclusion

Dr. King once said that if you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward. As a people and as a community we will continue moving forward against racism and injustice because perseverance is part of our DNA.

Let us continue to believe in King’s vision that - “one day the South will know that when these disinherit children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing
up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”

Let us also continue the important work of educating this generation and the generations to come on the monumental sacrifices Dr. King and those who worked alongside him made for the freedom and liberties that we continue to enjoy today because those who do not know history are destined to repeat it. There is much work to be done, so let us join together to complete it.

Thank you for providing Patricia and I with the opportunity to be here today and for serving our communities and being examples of what true leadership means. Be blessed and please enjoy the rest of the program.