

**DELIVER US FROM EVIL**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*Based on Exodus 3; Moses Meets God on the Mountain*

In the autumn of 1845, along the northern banks of the Ohio River, two White Presbyterian clergymen debate whether or not slavery as an institution is inherently sinful.

At this point in American Presbyterian history, the percentage of slaveholders who are Presbyterian is second only to the percentage of slaveholders who are Episcopalian. Including among clergy.

Pro-slavery Presbyterians, including pastors, act out of their own self-interest in the pulpit. Consistently preaching sermons of racial superiority and anti-Black racism. To such an extent that the President of Princeton Theological Seminary at the time – the flagship Presbyterian Seminary both then and now – throws up his hands and declares the ideology of White supremacy to be so pervasive, and to be based on such insidious and irrational underpinnings, that no theological argument that can shake its unreasonable foundations. And therefore White supremacy is virtually unconquerable.

Let me say that again: in the mid-1800s, not too long after our own Meeting House was built, THE Presbyterian leader of THE Presbyterian seminary declares the ideology of White supremacy to be so pervasive among Presbyterians, and based on such twisted reasoning, that it cannot be undone.

Even *anti*-slavery Presbyterians, according to this logic, cannot escape their White supremacist worldview.

We see evidence of this sentiment in the transcript of the debate between those two White Presbyterian clergymen in the autumn of 1845.

Your argument is inconsistent, the pro-slavery pastor declares to his abolitionist colleague, who has just insisted that those who have enslaved Black persons have “stolen” human beings, contrary to the commandments of God. If that is true, the pro-slavery pastor concedes, what about the stolen land?

To which the anti-slavery pastor responds, without convincing anyone, perhaps it is stolen land, but it was too long ago. How would we return the land to its rightful owners? And then proceeds to continue the inconsistent, still White supremacist, argument against slavery.

This debate, from the autumn of 1845, encapsulates the historical struggle of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America – indeed, the historical struggle of all of America – with our original sins of slavery and colonization, based on an ideology of White supremacy. An ideology so entrenched in the cultural linings of our minds that at least one of our forebears considered it could not be changed.

As we were reminded, in the Presbyterian Intercultural Conversation hosted by the national church this week, “Until white supremacy is dismantled ... we,” who strive to serve the Presbyterian Church from the full breadth of its racial and cultural heritage, “cannot even talk about the same God.”

But we can try.

Beginning with the foundational text of the biblical witness before us today, from the Third Chapter of the Book of Exodus:

"I have observed the misery of my people," God says to Moses.

This is the first accounting in written human history of a divine figure who aligns with the powerless instead of the powerful.

"I have heard their cry on account of their slavedrivers," God says. "Indeed, I know their sufferings, and have come down to deliver them."

Again, until this moment in written human history, every single divine figure is presented as aligning with the powerful. *Not* with the powerless.

I see, says the God of the Bible.

I hear.

I know.

AND I RESPOND!

Through these foundational words of Scripture, in the third chapter of Exodus, we meet the God who self-identifies over and over in the psalms and the prophets: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery."

In these foundational words of the third chapter of Exodus, a theology of liberation is born. A theology of the God who chooses those who suffer. Who is in fact intimately concerned with that suffering. Who insists oppression and poverty are NOT the final answer. And certainly not in keeping with the divine will for humanity.

Through these foundational words of Scripture, in the third chapter of Exodus, we also meet the *vision* of the God of Liberation: "I have come," God says, "to bring [my people] ... to a good and broad land ... a land flowing with milk and honey."

In these foundational words of the third chapter of Exodus, a theology of Abundant Life is born. A theology that describes God working overtime, through *all* time, through all parts of the human condition to establish what the prophets call The Beloved Community. What Jesus calls The Kingdom of God. What the apostle Paul calls The New Creation. Where misery and injustice and violence are no more. And we have all finally learned how to live – as one – in peace.

The God of Liberation, with a vision of Abundant Life, this is who Jesus invokes when he teaches us to pray: "Our Father, who art in heaven." Oh, what a God! Oh, what a vision! "*Hallowed be thy name!*"

"Thy kingdom come," Jesus teaches us to pray, "thy will be done." In that Beloved Community, where those who have struggled for daily bread get to feast, and those who have gorged on more than enough have to share.

On earth. IN THIS WORLD. As it is in heaven.

It is not easy.

I know. I struggle, too.

Even as we pray, “forgive us our debts,” we White Presbyterians know – we White *Americans*, know – we still hold a debt. A promissory note, as Martin Luther King, Jr, called it. Of stolen land. And stolen people. Our debt has not yet been forgiven. Because we, as a people, have not yet repented.

Instead we are led into temptation. At least I am. Like the President of Princeton Seminary one hundred seventy five years ago, we are tempted to throw up our hands at the seeming intractability of White supremacy. The work is too hard. I know, I feel it, too. Can’t we just go on with our lives? As if nothing could – or should – be done differently?

It is easy to give in to despair. It is tempting to wash our hands of the whole project.

But the prayer still goes on.

Deliver us from evil.

As long as we keep praying, as Jesus told us to do, all is not lost!

There is still hope.

We have not yet stopped fighting for our own souls’ salvation.

“Deliver us from evil,” we pray. Again and again.

From the evil done to us, yes. But also from the evil we inflict. Sometimes with intention. But mostly without even knowing it. Because the very lining of our mind leads us astray.

“Deliver us from evil.”

Do we really mean it?

If we do, this prayer may cost us everything we hold dear. We say we pray for the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God, the New Creation to come, on earth, as it is in heaven.

But it will cost us: our whitewashed heritage; our belief in our inherent goodness; the land we have convinced ourselves we have the right to “own”; perhaps even our livelihood.

It will cost us if we really mean what we pray: Deliver us from evil.

But we have been warned by the one whose Way we claim to follow: those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life *for the sake of the gospel* will find it!

This is our work, friends. The work of faith in these times. To place our trust in the Liberating God of Abundant Life. And the future God is bringing about that we glimpse but have not yet seen in its fullness. The future Moses and Jesus proclaimed *will* come to pass. Even when all evidence points to the contrary.

Deliver us from evil, we pray, joining forces with the God of Moses and of Jesus, who WILL one day deliver us. Some how. Some way. For the sake of the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God, the New Creation that really does hold the true power and the true glory now and forever.

Amen.

Notes:

1. *Historical references in this sermon are taken from The Virtual Town Hall Gathering, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Week of Action for Black Lives: <https://vimeo.com/449525095>. In particular, the comments of Dr. William Yoo, associate professor of American Religious and Cultural History at Columbia Theological Seminary.*
2. *The Virtual Intercultural Conversation in support of liberation and Black Lives is available at: <https://vimeo.com/451941013>*