

LISTEN TO THE LAMBS

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All are crying

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African American Spiritual

My Companions on the Journey,

I come to you today with a heart brimming over with love and pragmatic optimism. In the spirit of pragmatic optimism, I extend an open invitation for us to put our heads and hearts together as a community to think deeply with troubled and hopeful hearts as we reflect on the socio-spiritual landscape and soul of the culture of Whiteness and how it marks all of our lives.

Notice I said culture of Whiteness rather than White people because the problem is not White people. Rather, it is the culture of Whiteness which is a systematic organization of beliefs, customs, and canonized knowledge that we all are socialized into from birth to death.

Since the culture of Whiteness influences every aspect of all our lives, it is logical to extend our conversation on the culture of Whiteness to consider the ways that it shapes the lives and perceptions of not only peoples with darker skins but also European Americans with White skins. In short, Whiteness is not merely something that happens to Black, Brown and Indigenous communities.

Therefore, if this is true, and we argue that a culture of Whiteness adversely effects Black, Brown, and Indigenous lives, then is it also logical to make the same argument about White people’s lives? For those of us who concern ourselves with matters of the spirit, any thoughtful reflection must address the socio-spiritual markings of the culture of Whiteness. The culture of Whiteness diminishes the possibilities for White Americans to live fully human and just lives free of the shackles of dehumanization and non-redemptive anger.

I propose that a redemptive spirituality in the 21st century raises us all up beyond the emptiness of mere skin to the fullness of all our identities. Let us imagine the culture of Whiteness as a dehumanizing process that melts away our multiple and interlocking identities such as class, race, sexuality, age, and all other differences to create a false unity.

Moreover, a culture of Whiteness stifles dissent for the purpose of maintaining status quo power where ordinary European Americans go against their own class, ethnic, sexual, age and gender interests. Within this framing, Whiteness is a social construct

that also influences Black and Brown people and makes us commit soul murder by identifying with a culture that goes against our interests and survival.

Accordingly, a struggle for racial justice for all of us is both a spiritual and social one that not only transforms the lives of others, but it also elevates the inner and outer lives of individuals and the collectivity. My sisters and brothers, our approach to Christianity in the 21st century must consider the multidimensional and interlocking socio-spiritual ways that the culture and idolatry of Whiteness define and fuel our sacred and secular spaces today from our sanctuaries to the halls of Congress and to those sites of terror called detention centers.

Ultimately, these questions lead us to the overarching one — “where do we go from here, community or chaos” in the midst of a capitalist White corporate technocracy which sustains itself on predatory greed, accelerated individualism, alienation, decimation of intimacy, commodification of human suffering, virtual communities, state sanctioned and vigilante violence as well as spiritual nihilism. If left unchecked, this anti-human and fascist stream will finally shatter our relationships with each other, our communities, God, and all aspects of creation.

My siblings, we can no longer look at our history through dualistic lenses. Rather, it is imperative that we look at it through simultaneous optics that allow us to hold in tension multiple realities without diminishing the significance of any one of them. Even as we critique America’s constant flow towards fascism, it is important to recognize its perpetual flow to advance democracy.

This also influences the way we all describe our status and the status and place of others in the world. What is our definition of the world? Please stay with me as I line out the meaning of these questions.

Scholars, activists, practitioners, and spiritual guides use the monolithic description of “marginalize” to describe the status and place of Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities of color in American society. In doing so, they look at us solely from the White supremacist gaze without acknowledging our significant status with each other, Spirit God, and within the project of democracy. In other words, to call Black, Brown, and indigenous peoples “marginalized” reduces us to the absolute definition and the status of “other” or the dualistic position of either victims or survivors or outsiders or insiders.

This view of the socio-spiritual meaning of Black, Brown, and Indigenous lives of peoples of color does not transform or democratize our discourse on Whiteness. Instead, it continues the White nationalist and racist declaration that Black, Brown, and Indigenous lives are simply what White Americans make and think of us and our lives. In other words, it fails to ask if we are mere objects of White desires and their creations? Or are we our own subjects with agency who shape and create our own lives and the world?

If we genuinely seek to resolve the socio-spiritual distortions that sit at the heart of a culture of Whiteness, it is necessary to expand our consciousness and sights so that we hold multiple realities simultaneously and in tension with each other without negating the significance of any one of them.

With these tensions in my heart, I come to you as a southern Black woman remnant who lived during segregation when White rulers and their people's hearts were hard with the bricks of Southern Apartheid and state sanctioned and economic terror against my people.

As a child, I heard the cries of my people as they witnessed Emmitt Till's battered, adolescent body broken and lynched by White supremacists who did not see him as a child but saw him as an enemy combatant who threatened their way of life. They believed they must murder his body and the soul force in him and his community which they feared.

As a young girl, I read the accounts of Mary Turner, a young pregnant Black woman, whom a White mob lynched in the early 1900's and set her body on fire. Still craving blood, they cut her unborn fetus out of her body killing and smashing the fetus' head on the ground.

Because of these atrocities and so much more, I heard my people's cry and petition to God, "How long, how long, oh God, how long must we suffer and how much must we endure?" God heard our cry. As a remnant, I participated in that Kairos moment during the Southern Freedom Movement where I saw ordinary people of all colors in this country move from the low level of an Empire consciousness to a mountaintop consciousness where they imagined a world house and a Pentecost moment and went all the way to achieve it.

It was in this movement moment that I further witnessed miracles of faith and soul force in action that were borne out of Black folk theology. Our individual and collective soul force was "more powerful than all of their weapons." It sturdied Black children to stand up and not be afraid as police unleashed on them powerful water hoses with water moving at a speed of 180 miles an hour as well as stand down big German Shepherd dogs that clutched at their little throats.

Young and older Black people came together as a community and drew on the same soul force that had permitted our ancestors and elders to survive and thrive 500 years of unimaginable White terror, criminalization, dehumanization, heinous acts of degradation and exploitation without "becoming broken winged birds." As a matter of fact, the soul force of ordinary southern Black people brought down the southern White nationalist culture without firing a shot.

It was in this moment of movement toward mountaintop consciousness that in a Mississippi jail White jailers beat Anelle Ponder, a young Black female freedom fighter, until her body was broken. They demanded that she call them "Sir." Calling on her soul

force, she raised her hands in defiance and muttered through bruised lips, and a body battered by male hands “Freedom now, freedom now.”

During this moment of mountaintop consciousness, I saw ordinary Black people move with a collective soul force that turned southern streets, jails, and other sites of terror into liberating sites of reparations, redemption, restoration, and resurrection.

During the high tide of this freedom season, God lifted me up and gave me, a 17-year-old Southern Black girl, who in the eyes of the state, was the least of all of them, a new name, a new consciousness, and a new status. It was Freedom Fighter.

Having witnessed all of this, I saw us turn in another direction in the highway and move downward from the mountaintop to the arid desert into the wilderness years where we forgot who our Benefactor had been. We knelt at the altar of the same Empire from which we fought to free ourselves. My soul wept as I witnessed us in this wilderness committing idolatry of worshipping at the altar of Whiteness rather than bowing down at the altar of God who had brought us a mighty long way out of the dreary land of oppression into the bright promise of a freedom land.

I saw in these desert years my White brothers and sisters once again close the door on another opportunity to remove the cataracts of oppression from their eyes that would give them a clear vision straight to the Kingdom of God. Instead, they rendered unto Caesar that which belonged to God including their lives, loyalty, labor, and obedience.

As a witness and a remnant of this time standing on the fertile ground of three scores and ten, I bring to our conversation the merciful grace of hindsight, insight, and foresight. For all these corners in my life in which I stand and witness, my soul does magnify the Lord.

My siblings, today we still languish in the wilderness. We struggle to move beyond the spiritual malformation and social perversity inherent in a culture of Whiteness with its seductive grip on our inner and outer lives. We are a hard of hearing and stiff necked people who suffer from numbness and lack of compassion. We cannot hear or feel the cries or quench the thirst of God’s lambs for a 21st century social gospel that offers relief from the pile up of spiritual malformation of a White Supremacist Empire. It is an Empire whose intestines are clogged and rotted with the bitter bile of its own impending spiritual death. We die slow and painful deaths from its inability to excrete its poisonous fumes of racism, militarism, materialism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and Christian imperialism.

I ask, can you hear God’s lambs cry and thirst and hunger for a balm in GILEAD to soothe our socio spiritual wounds in the society and in our sacred spaces which reek with the hypocrisy and lies of American goodness and exceptionalism in a culture of Whiteness?

No one is exempt from this viral disease. In Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities of color all around the globe, the guardians of White male supremacy have torn up our communities, gobbled up our resources and made us poor, homeless, and hungry. There are millions of children of color around the globe living in the streets homeless because we have destroyed their homes. Yet, when they come to our door seeking refuge and reparations for the harm we have done, many Americans distance themselves from these refugee survivors.

Instead of looking at them with redemptive and remorseful eyes and hearts, far too many Christians of all colors look at Black, Brown, and Indigenous refugees with hardened hearts and distorted visions that interfere with their ability to see our sister and brother refugees of color as being fully human.

Seen through the mirror of a culture of Whiteness, they are not refugees who are “stranger sojourners with us in our land, whom we shall not do wrong. We shall treat the stranger who sojourns with us as the native among us and we shall love them as ourselves, for we all once were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

Instead, we see Black and Brown refugees as enemy combatants or savages who do not deserve the same opportunities that we destroyed for them in their countries. Wrapped up in blankets of conspiracy theories and rationalizations, the guardians of White supremacy cover themselves in self-righteous rhetoric that allows them to hide and ignore the homelessness and spiritual warfare. Nor do we take responsibility for America’s death driven foreign policies that destroyed the inner and outer infrastructures in the homeland from which they have come.

Further, I come to you in this season of both desolation and hopeful promise as churches everywhere must address the pernicious fall out of the fourth industrial revolution that intensifies the changes in our ethics, our relationships as well as our understanding of the meaning of church. Within the fourth industrial revolution, most people are unessential and disposable waste especially people of color, women, and children.

All around us the people of God are crying out for comfort. They hunger for righteous and hopeful news. Many of God’s lambs feel hopeless, powerless, and spiritually exhausted in the face of so much contention, brokenness, Trumpism, and suffering.

We all, each of us, desperately search for signs and sites of hope, solace, relief and meaning in a time of socio-spiritual crisis in rural and urban sites of desolation and human disposability. Some days and nights we slump down to our smallest selves because the world as well as our lives often appear beyond our control. All of these socio-spiritual assaults intensify our loneliness and alienation. We urgently need communal spaces where we can work together to figure out what to say to each other and how to say it.

Many of you are spiritual guides in a culture of Whiteness of vast uncertainty based on a technocracy that has changed the meaning of our lives in so many good and troubling ways. Your ministry in the world requires you to speak in multidimensional, authentic and redemptive tongues about race, class, gender, age, sexual, and environmental justices.

This charge is not easy. It requires thoughtful and disciplined reflections and analyses of the many streams that make up the currents of US technocracy. Yet, this must be a priority because these issues will impact the direction and relevancy of Christianity and churches for the remainder of the 21st century.

These are the issues that greet you as you tackle the challenge of navigating how you live out your faith beset with the demands on you and whatever community you are called to serve.

In my conversations with those of you who make up generation Y and those of you from other generations who are 5 years and less into your call as a pastor or as an active Christian, you speak a universal language about personal and collective alienation, loneliness, and a nagging hopelessness. Many of you question the staying power of faith and the meaning of remaining in Christian churches when congregations are shrinking, and many young people are absent or in self-imposed exile. Ultimately, you say you face questions such as how to build a beloved community rich with a social gospel of pragmatic optimism. What does it mean to be pastors or active Christians, and what does it mean to be church in a technocracy in a season of despair and an age of disposability? How do you in congregations face this spiritual crisis of meaning without giving in to despair or cynicism? What clues might we find in the lives of other Christians, especially young ones?

All of these questions exist within a predatory White male supremacist Christofascist, militarized, corporate surveillance, technocratic state where machines and other forms of technology replace human labor, and artificial intelligence replaces human intelligence. Some critics call it an age of human disposability. In many ways, they are right. Young spiritual guides under forty and members of younger generations face a questionable future of at least fifty more years where you hunger to be relevant in a technocracy of accelerated individualism in virtual communities and constructed and artificial intimacy where history no longer matters.

These socio-spiritual issues shape many dimensions and determine the vitality and meaning of our lives and our relationships with God, each other, and all aspects of creation. They must define the nature and contours of Christian theology in a global world where 1% of White men control more than 50% of the global wealth and the top 30% controlled 95% of the global wealth while 70% of us must split the remaining 5%. These statistics paint a dire picture at home and abroad of unprecedented hunger and poverty. According to statistics from Feeding America in 2017, 34 million people in the US faced poverty, and before COVID-19, 37 million Americans were chronically hungry. 10 million were children. COVID-19 has intensified hunger and poverty leaving millions

of families without a dependable income. More than 54 million Americans experience food insecurity. 17 million are children.

These socio-spiritual malformations are exacerbated because of gentrification that pushes economically dispossessed communities of all colors into rural sites of desolation. A report by the Duke Endowment makes this sobering observation about rural North and South Carolina. “The economic forces currently affecting the South seriously threaten rural regions of the Carolinas. In a time of rapid change, rural leaders and institutions are struggling to maintain economic viability and ensure a future for themselves and their children.”

I agree that the future looks dim for our sisters and brothers in rural sites of deprivation that are devoid of access to quality public schools, hospitals, transportation, and supermarkets. Unfortunately, this a minefield that is left in the hands of the young to stop from exploding into race and class wars.

That is the bad news. However, the good news is that you do not need to grapple with these issues alone or in isolation. We can upbuild new Christian and secular socio-spiritual communities that build the intimacy that is essential to authentic, redemptive, and restorative inner and outer journeys that resurrect our humanities in a global technocracy which have according to the English theologian, George Pattison, “already penetrated deeply into our social and psychological sensibilities, making us feel differently about who we are and, therewith, influencing the way in which we act upon our environment and ourselves.”

Some of you might wonder where do you begin when the task seems so large, and you feel so small?

Despite all the troubling in the nation, one wonders where do we go from here, and where shall we begin? We begin with the hope that is in the people’s history.

Even as White nationalists build global movements to consolidate a global White corporate state,

Even as they conspire to gobble up the resources of people of color around the globe,

Even as they call for walls to contain all of us in a prison of a White Supremacist Empire,

Even as the state gives police the green light to murder my people,

Even as agents of the state and private corporations snatch fathers and mothers away from their crying and frantic children,

And even as White men push their feet on the necks of women,

This is a season for both lamentation and celebration. Let us lament our losses. Simultaneously let us celebrate because history teaches us, as paraphrased from Sweet Honey in the Rock's *Ballad of Harry Moore*, that no Empire can kill the dreams we hold because the people's impulse and hunger for freedom never dies.

Thanks be to God.

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