

The Apocalypse of American Racism Today  
By Dorothy Whiston  
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New Song Episcopal Church

Many of you know that John and I just spent 5 weeks with our newborn granddaughter, Eva, and 3-year-old grandson, Oscar. Talk about heaven! One of my favorite Oscar-expressions, which can come when he's intentionally smashed a Lego tower or accidentally spilled his juice, is "What a mess! Ay, ay! What a mess!" Oscar's life is indeed pretty messy, in a mostly delightful way.

Sadly, our adult messes are often not nearly so benign. So, the Bible includes some troublingly messy texts to ponder, like the ones we heard today. Most modern Christians think of these apocalyptic passages as dire predictions about God's coming wrath. But the word apocalypse really just means "revelation or uncovering." These words are indeed warnings from God, but they are descriptive rather than prescriptive.

As Jesus said in today's gospel: "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." God wants us to see where our current way of life is taking us so we can turn around and aim for something better. Jesus wants us to see the mess we're making of things so we will want to follow him into a whole new way of being human.

I'm sure most of us have been following the recent news of the murders by police of our Black brothers and sisters. Which frankly shouldn't really surprise us, even as it once again shocks our sensibilities. And most of us probably also know much of the history of what's been called our nation's "original sin" of slavery and racism. Bryan Stevenson, the author of *Just Mercy* and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, summed up our racist history recently in an interview in *The New Yorker*, saying:

The great evil of American slavery wasn't the involuntary servitude; it was the fiction that black people aren't as good as white people, and aren't the equals of white people, and are less evolved, less human, less capable, less worthy, less deserving than white people.

This evil fiction, and the systems, attitudes and actions that support it, continue to infect every aspect of our troubled nation to this day. And if we're really honest with ourselves, they're also woven into the personal histories and the psyches of all us 21st century American white folks. What a mess!

Hard as it can be, we need to look this mess closely – the facts, past and present, as well as our own attitude and behaviors. So, I thank God for what I see as a divine apocalypse -- the unveiling, yet again, of who we are as a people and as persons in the U.S. today.

Hopefully, we will take this opportunity to lament and repent. I can just see the prophet Jeremiah calling us out, carrying one of the signs often seen at protests today – maybe "No

Justice, No Peace” or even “Silence is Violence.” We need to get involved, to listen and learn, to speak out and take action – from voting, to educating family and friends, to lobbying legislators, to funding grass roots efforts, or whatever fits our particular talents. We need to deal with our own white privilege and learn to be good allies to People of Color as they decide what’s needed as we move ahead.

And even in all this turmoil, especially in this turmoil, we need to ponder deeply what it means to be truly human. And that takes us to the heart of our faith.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that our old selves, immersed in sin, have died with Christ, so that we, too, might walk in newness of life, a life lived “to God in Christ Jesus.” We often hear these words at funerals, meant to reassure us of life after death. But I think Paul was primarily talking about our earthly lives, about becoming truly human here and now.

In his memoir *Just Jesus: My Struggle to Become Truly Human*, theologian Walter Wink said:

... this is the revelation: God is HUMAN ... It is the great error of humanity to believe that it is human. We are only fragmentarily human, fleetingly human, brokenly human. We see glimpses of our humanness, we can only dream of what a more human existence and political order would be like, but we have not yet arrived at true humanness. Only God is human, and we are made in God’s image and likeness — which is to say, we are capable of becoming human.

Well, that’s hopeful -- we are capable of becoming human! But today’s scriptures warn us this becoming human is a dangerous and messy business.

In the gospel, Jesus enjoins his disciples, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Sadly, this passage is often used to tell people they should fear God’s eternal retribution for sin. But nothing could be farther from its true meaning, which is revealed in the very next lines:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your father. . . So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Jesus is not talking about God when he calls us to fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. He is, in fact, calling on us to fear the “devil”, the divider, or “satan”, the accuser. Devil and Satan are names for the human-generated powers and principalities that have controlled us for so long and so pervasively they appear to have a life of their own. Which is a lie, though they remain frighteningly powerful forces in our stumbling efforts to become human.

When Jesus tells the disciples to fear the killing of the soul, he’s not likely talking about the death of some mysterious spiritual entity that is separate from the body. He was, after all, Jewish and not Greek. The word soul here much more likely refers to the imprint of God’s

image in us as the seed of our humanness. Even more than losing our bodily lives, Jesus says, we should fear losing our humanity.

It is so telling that one of the cries in today's crisis is, "I can't breathe! I can't breathe!" Breath, *pneuma*, is another name for the Spirit that enlivens our souls. The physical lives of Eric Garner and George Floyd were brutally choked out of them. But the essential humanity of the police officers stifling that breath was also extinguished by those murders. And the humanity of all of us who enable the systems that committed those murders was deadened as well.

Jesus spoke of "hell" as the place where our humanity can be killed. The word used for hell in the gospels is the Greek "Gehenna", which was the name of an actual valley just south of Jerusalem. Jeremiah called Gehenna the Valley of Slaughter because for generations it was a place of child sacrifice to the pagan gods. So, yes, a place of fiery doom, but a hell on earth created by our broken humanity and certainly not ordained by God.

Today we see human sacrifice as the most abhorrent of idolatries. But the reality is, we continue to practice human sacrifice under the secular guises of warfare, capital punishment, modern policing, and even our economic and criminal legal systems. These are all sacrificial systems that depend on sanctioned victimization and killing to maintain our social order. The cruel irony is that we see things as more civilized the more hidden the sacrificial mechanism is, and so willingly turn a blind eye to what we're really doing.

What a horrific mess we've made of human life! So how on earth can we get out of this hell we've created? The answer, I believe, lies in learning more about our human origins.

The human family is largely defined by our enormous capacity for imitation, which is how we learn. Both imitation and learning go on in us constantly and largely unnoticed, much like breathing. Grandson Oscar is a little imitation machine! We even imitate the desires of others, a process which is almost entirely unconscious. While we like to embrace the romantic notion that our desires arise spontaneously within us, great literature, the advertising industry, and now the science of mirror neurons all tell us otherwise. As do Biblical texts.

Just as we were evolving into *homo sapiens*, back in that blissful garden, our inability to recognize the enticement of the serpent as part of our own inner workings set us up as rivals to God and generated the powers and principalities that have distorted our humanity ever since. Mercifully, God continued to help us discover our true humanity, even going so far as coming to live among us as a fully human being.

When Jesus calls disciples to follow him, in his day and in ours, he calls us to learn a new way of being human through imitating him. We are called to lose our distorted lives for Christ's sake, or purpose, so we can become fully alive -- and wholly human -- in God.

But back for a moment to Gehenna, our hell on earth. When our unconscious human propensity for imitation of others' desires and the ensuing rivalries get out of control, the result

is violence. I'll fight you for what you, and now I, both want. Though we rarely can see it, we humans fight not over our differences, but over our similarities!

Another pitfall along the way to becoming fully human is that our enormous capacity for imitation also overrides our animal instinct to play dead or slink away when we're losing a fight. And so way more than any other species, we'll fight our own kind to the death. This is of course a very dangerous way to live. And it can all too easily degenerate into the mayhem of all against all. As social animals, we humans needed to find a reliable way to curtail our intraspecies violence if we were to survive.

Over the millennia, we discovered the power of what scholar Rene Girard calls the scapegoating mechanism. We learned to point a collective finger at marginalized members of our group, piling all the ills of the community on their shoulders. Then, just as the frenzy of accusation peaked, the mob killed the accused and the catharsis magically brought peace. This was so powerful that the final act of violence was experienced as sacred.

This "us against them" phenomenon of collective murder eventually gave rise to ritualized human sacrifice and the supporting religious rites and taboos. And thus began human culture. Over time we shifted to animal and then more symbolic sacrifice in our various religious practices. But we also enshrined sanctified violence in our civil systems of governance. Still, today, the tenuous stability of human civilization depends on having ready victims at hand. Our nation casts People of Color in this sacrificial role.

Talk about a barbaric world! And yet, there's still hope! The Bible is an unfolding, and yes, very messy dialogue among our ancestors as, guided by God, they slowly began to recognize and unravel this diabolic web of scapegoating and sanctified violence. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus fully reveals that God has nothing to do with either scapegoating or violence.

The Christ-revelation brings me back again to being grateful for this painful and messy apocalyptic moment in our nation, as the ugly distortions of our humanity and our world are once again so clearly revealed.

I think Jesus was talking about just such apocalyptic times when he said he comes not to bring peace, but a sword. His is the sword that tears through the veil of illusion, much like the rending of the temple veil at his own execution. Jesus's sword draws a line and asks us to choose with whom we will stand, even if our mothers or fathers, sisters or brothers choose to stand on the side of sacrificial violence. Christ's sword points us toward self-sacrificial love and away from sacrificing others for any reason or in any way. The Christ-borne sword is the Cross that will finally and fully redeem our humanity if we will just carry it with him.

Thanks be to God!

Questions for Reflection:

What are you learning about your own humanity and our collective human condition in the face of the violent racism we're witnessing in our country today?

Given that most human conflicts arise and progress through imitation, are there ways you experience yourself and your allies imitating – and even becoming more like – the people or factions you most oppose?