

Re-membering the Disposable Baby Jesus

CMCL Sermon December 8, 2019

By Jonathan Sauder,

Based on the reading of Luke 2:15, Matthew 2:1-16, and the singing of “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow”

In the name of our Mother, in memory of our brother Jesus, and in the energy of spirit, greetings!

This advent season here at Community Mennonite we are employing a lectionary guide gifted to us years ago by Prem Dick, of blessed memory. Each week we focus on an African American spiritual and related Bible texts. This week my thoughts have been on the parallels between ancient and modern economies of terror and on the human families they dis-member.

Ancient Egyptian elites considered themselves civilized. What we would call “ladies and gentlemen.” The owning class. The investors. The deserving. The stimulators of international economy. They were so civilized that they could read and write and invest in massive works of art. Their brilliant architects and accountants were accomplished mathematicians. They excelled in the kind of math that could predict the angle of the sun on a certain day and build an ornate temple to catch its rays in an inner sanctum at a prescribed moment. Projects of this scale were not possible without the management skills of slave drivers and their camp commandants and commissaries. Egypt’s accountants and think tank experts (see the Genesis 47:21 story of Joseph the vizier and slave-maker) managed a growth economy fed by a constant diet of humans. Egypt’s economy was not vegetarian. It digested Hebrew lives. It drank their blood and sweat and ate their babies. When it had more than it could eat in a given year, it legally defined the left-over slave babies as disposable babies. (see the Exodus story of Moses the throw-away baby).

Pyramids built by Egypt’s carnivorous economy kept making the Seven Wonders of the World list for centuries.

If there was a God at that time, and if Godness is glory, fame, dominion, ownership, and power, now and forever, . . . well, then, it should go without saying that God was a leading sponsor of the Pharaohs and the supreme model of the gentlemanly ability to calculate the economic equations that make a civilization

superior to a mere culture or tribe. Equations that turn slave labor camp inmates from humans into statistics. Cost-vs-benefit analyses that present peasant die-offs as “worth it” when weighed against the importance of maintaining what the investor class calls its “high standard of living.” (Compare the deployment of the phrase “worth it” in a more recent imperial setting. Secretary of state Madeline Albright was asked by an interviewer what she thought of reports that half a million Iraqi children had died as a result of UN sanctions on Saddam Hussein, a herod-type strongman admired and supported by US powerbrokers like Donald Rumsfeld in previous years. Madeline’s reply? “This is a very hard choice, but we think the price is worth it.”)

But the Hebrew Bible begs to differ from this sort of straight forward, self-evident god-logic, or “theology.” In contrast, it keeps alive a memory of God as a partisan for the oppressed, and as the opponent of the predator classes who owned everyone else’s means of survival and who measured their dignity by their investments and consumption without regard for how many other families they dis-membered and brutalized. (See Leviticus and Deuteronomy for explicit Israelite legislation calling for cancellation of long term debts and for prohibitions against lending money at interest, against demanding large collateral, and against retaining another tribe’s land-deeds for any longer than fifty years). The Hebrew Psalms were composed and sung by exiled people whose communities had been dis-membered by the rape, murder, and refugee status that always accompanies wars both ancient and modern. They were written to resist the theologies of empires. They argue that God sides with the victims in a world where injustice prevails. Psalm singers in alien lands were re-membering themselves – claiming membership -- as part of God’s economy. A very different economy from Pharaoh’s and Nebuchadnezzar’s.

Herod’s temple was built two centuries after Philo of Alexandria issued the final listings for Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but it certainly rivaled many of them. And it could not have been built and supplied without reformatting the surrounding economy of Palestine. “Reformatting” is my euphemism for what historians like Jared Diamond call the transition “from egalitarianism to kleptocracy.” [a chapter title in his 1997 book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*]

Jesus is reported to have begun his ministry by announcing the arrival of the debt-canceling, prison-breaking jubilee prescribed in Leviticus and pictured in Isaiah. (See Luke chapter 4 and Mark Clatterbuck's *This I Believe* sermon from this pulpit a few weeks ago). In contrast to those of his neighbors who aspired to imitate the predator classes, Jesus preached the sudden arrival of the economic regime of a God who sustains lilies and sparrows without destroying their environment in the process. In an age when the Mediterranean owners and managers of large estates worked by slave labor considered their investments to be a measure of their dignity, Jesus adopted a Hebrew prophetic stance and reversed the order of membership in God's family. Jesus perversely insisted that the poor were birthright members of God's regime, or economy, and that the rich investors in the Roman economy which consumed and dis-membered the poor were excluding themselves from God's community.

Rome's theology was a straight-forward recognition that the Caesars were participants in the sort of domination that separates gods and godlings from mere humans. The Calendar Inscription of Priene uses the words "savior" and "gospel" to communicate to everyone that salvation from military destruction was available to anyone who would pledge allegiance to Augustus. So, when Jesus' followers called him *the* son of God they were treasonously and blasphemously alleging that a victim of Roman judicial murder in the outlying colony of Palestine was actually a truer access point to the reality of God than any other person or moment in the entire Mediterranean world. And that theological treason prevented many of them from pledging allegiance to the Roman Regime.

Jesus' crucifixion was neither unique nor special. It was horribly routine for rabble-rousers, slaves, and "terrorists." It is not necessary to be personally violent in order to be labeled as a terrorist. From the perspective of anyone literally invested in the Roman definition of Pax Romana -- endless war for endless peace, endless slavery for endless economic growth -- a vision like that of Jesus is not cute or naïve. It is a source of real terror; it threatens all of one's core values and signals the end of the world as we know it. Jesus died the death of a terrorist.

Jesus was not the first or last Palestinian peasant to publicly label Herod a predator (Jesus called him a fox) or to point out that self-styled “benefactors” were actually predators (Luke 22:25). Roman legions carried out three internal crusades against Jewish infidels, believers in their own redeemer God who were therefore unfaithful to the Caesarean vision for their colony. These atrocities were carried out by uniformed national security personnel in the years 4 BCE, 66 CE, and 132 CE, and involved countless wooden crosses. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, four miles from where the center of the 4 BCE “counter-insurgency” horrors occurred. John Crossan says it is easy to imagine that Mary would have told Jesus about “the day the Romans came” to traumatize the land of his birth around the time he was born. [Endnote 1]

It thus makes perfect sense that when Matthew, in the late first century, composed his account of Jesus’ career and its meaning he would imaginatively present Jesus as a terrorist threat to Herod from the very beginning. The scripture we just read this morning from what churches call the “First Gospel” is not very . . . well . . . Christmas-ey. In the scripture we read for today, Matthew’s nativity scene is vividly drawn around the organizing theme of paranoid executive narcissism and its deadly consequences for children. Jesus is pictured as escaping the lethal policing of Herod’s elite insecurity forces only by means of an angelic intervention and a night flight to a neighboring province.

African-American spirituals were composed and sung by a people who were enslaved in large and small labor camps throughout several former British colonies. They are the soul-deep psalms of a kidnapped people whose families were cruelly dis-membered on the auction block and subjected to the rape, murder, and repeated displacement that fed the digestive system of the fastest growing economy in the world at that time. They were written to resist the straight-forward theology of American empire. The White Theology that defined Africans as Manifestly Destined for perpetual enslavement. [Endnote 2]

Darryl Pinckney reminds us that

“In the savage, undreamed-of slave system in the New World, Africans were physically and mentally subjugated, worked to death, and replaced. Only when the enslaved labor population was maintained by reproduction and not by the importation of replacements were they given enough to eat to sustain life, and

that was more than one hundred years after Louis XIV's Black Codes licensed barbarism in the Caribbean.”

[Endnote 3]

I've never been to Europe myself, so have not visited Auschwitz or Dachau, but from what I've read from people who have, it sounds like the tour guides do not spend the bulk of the time pointing out majestic grand staircases in the homes of camp commandants or admiring silverware collections of their highly civilized wives. For that sort of celebratory, or nostalgically oriented camp tour, I think you'd be better off visiting Dixie, the land of King Cotton.

The Counter-Revolution of 1776 [Endnote 4] was sparked by elite North American colonists who feared that two catastrophes were near at hand: 1) The British abolition of slavery and 2) British enforcement of treaties with Native Americans living west of the Appalachian Mountains. The counter-revolutionary militias were skillfully led by George, a descendant of the John Washington who had been known among the Susquehannocks as Conotocarious, “Destroyer of Villages.” George lived up to that name himself as an ally of Redcoats and oversaw the slaughter of many children of the “mighty Gitchi Manitou” mentioned in hymn number 190 that we sang this morning. [Endnote 5]

In the face of these two pending catastrophes, George turned his coat to blue and successfully led the Continental Army in preventing the outbreak of justice for slaves and Native Americans and in securing the blessings of liberty for enslavers and their posterity. Within a few years the Articles of Confederation were discarded and a more perfect union was formed by means of what historian David Waldstreicher has shown to be “Slavery's Constitution” in his book by that title.

In last week's sermon Susan mentioned the New York Times 1619 Project, published online. Here is an excerpt from Matthew Desmond's article posted there:

“What made the cotton economy boom in the United States, and not in all the other far-flung parts of the world with climates and soil suitable to the crop, was our nation's unflinching willingness to use violence on nonwhite people and to exert its will on seemingly endless supplies of land and labor. Given the choice

between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above.”

One of the most important books I’ve read in the past three years is Edward E Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. He helps us to see the direct connection between images like this, the torn open and scarred back of a man whipped so that he will work faster or to discourage him from running to freedom, and this image of a page from “The Planters Annual Record of his Negroes upon Pleasant Hill Plantation, during the year 1850.” This second image has columns with the names of human assets followed by columns showing how much their market value has appreciated or depreciated over twelve months.

In her book *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*, Caitlin Rosenthal reminds us that historians of American economics have long known that “the amount of capital invested in slaves was massive, by some measurements as large or larger than the amount of capital invested in factories.” And yet, our preferred version of the history of capitalism erases the fact that “Neither ‘free’ trade nor ‘free’ markets have any necessary relationship to other kinds of human freedoms. Indeed, the history of plantation slavery shows that the opposite can be true.” [Endnote 6]

Another excerpt from Matthew Desmond:

“When seeking loans, planters used enslaved people as collateral. Thomas Jefferson mortgaged 150 of his enslaved workers to build Monticello. [[My interjection: I did have a lovely tour of this camp headquarters as a bright-eyed teenager and really enjoyed it.]] People could be sold much more easily than land, and in multiple Southern states, more than eight in ten mortgage-secured loans used enslaved people as full or partial collateral. As the historian Bonnie Martin has written ‘slave owners worked their slaves financially, as well as physically from colonial days until emancipation’ by mortgaging people to buy more people. . . . Global financial markets got in on the action. When Thomas Jefferson mortgaged his enslaved workers, it was a Dutch firm that put up the money. The Louisiana Purchase, which opened millions of acres to cotton production, was financed by Baring Brothers, the well-heeled British commercial bank. A majority of credit powering the

American slave economy came from the London money market. Years after abolishing the African slave trade in 1807, Britain, and much of Europe along with it, was bankrolling slavery in the United States. . . . Some historians have claimed that the British abolition of the slave trade was a turning point in modernity, marked by the development of a new kind of moral consciousness when people began considering the suffering of others thousands of miles away. But perhaps all that changed was a growing need to scrub the blood of enslaved workers off American dollars, British pounds and French francs, a need that Western financial markets fast found a way to satisfy through the global trade in bank bonds. Here was a means to profit from slavery without getting your hands dirty. . . . Call it irony, coincidence or maybe cause – historians haven't settled the matter – but avenues to profit indirectly from slavery grew in popularity as the institution of slavery itself grew more unpopular.”

Edward Baptist describes how camp accountants kept careful records of enslaved people's daily cotton picking and rationally, calmly, prescribed public whippings to force them to pick cotton faster than they previously knew how to. Dixie's booming economy “looted the riches of black folk's minds, stole days and months and years and lifetimes, turned sweat, blood, and flesh into gold. [page 142]” The U.S. became a world power thanks to “an economy whose bottom gear was torture. [page 139]” “Henry Bibb's owner said ‘that he was no better pleased than when he could hear . . . the sound of the driver's lash among the toiling slaves,’ for then he knew that his system was working. [page 140]” Southern agribusiness camp managers used a creative variety of torture technology to stimulate the American economy, including branding irons, pokers, electric shocks, and waterboarding [page 141].

“Enslaved migrants in the field soon learned what happened if they lagged or resisted. In Mississippi, Allen Sidney saw a man who had fallen behind . . . fight back against a black driver who has tried to ‘whip him up’ to pace. The white overseer, on horseback, dropped his umbrella [[Note the unmistakable evidence of high-born gentility and refined culture here, please. This gentleman was likely the only person in the field that day with an umbrella.]], spurred up, and shouted, ‘Take him down.’ The overseer pulled out a pistol and shot the prone

man dead. ‘None of the other slaves,’ Sidney remembered, ‘said a word or turned their heads. They kept on hoeing as if nothing had happened.’” [Endnote 7]

My spouse is a stronger human than I am, and so has been able to watch the movie *Schindler’s List* several times over the years. I have only ever brought myself to view it one time, quite a while ago, but when I first read that last quoted paragraph from Baptist’s volume, my mind immediately saw a scene in which a German camp commander does sniper rifle practice from his back deck. History provides us with no direct equivalents, but some of the parallels can be quite horrifying.

American investors in slavery considered themselves to be every bit as elite and civilized as any ancient class of owners. They named one chamber of Congress the Senate, in admiring imitation of Rome. Oliver Wendell Holmes, father of a later Supreme Court justice, was proud of the fact that the U.S. was not just another tribe or culture or nation – as in merely a people group, but a lethal colonial settler-state. In 1858 he announced, in his book *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, that “we are like the Romans of the modern world – the great assimilating people. Conflicts and conquests are of course necessary accidents with us, as with our prototypes.” [Endnote 8]

Our lectionary resource for today points out that it was illegal for enslaved persons to read. They heard about the travelers carrying gifts to Bethlehem and included that star story in the story of the shepherds.

Hebrew shepherds in Egypt were despised by civilized Egyptians and sent to segregated housing in Goshen. African Americans could identify with that. They could also identify with the peasant shepherds of Jesus’ day, who were, [according to our lectionary resource] stuck in “a dirty, isolating job, not unlike being a slave.”

The lectionary commentators point out that “if the master had really been listening, this song would have been banned just as the drum had been banned. . . . slaveholders from New England to the southern regions (especially Virginia) were all too aware that they had made plans to “rise up” since the 1660’s.” Today’s spiritual, “There’s a star in the East on Christmas Morn,” is not only about Jesus’ birth story, “For many, the star in the east represented Polaris, the North Star.”

In many African spirituals, “Heaven referred to Africa, Canada, and the northern United States. Frederick Douglass wrote about the double meaning of these songs: ‘A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of *O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan*, something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *North*, and the *North* was our Canaan.’” [Endnote 9]

James Cone says that “White people achieved what they called dignity by their enslavement of black Africans; they measured their importance by the number of Africans they enslaved.” [Endnote 10]

By identifying their own pain with that of God’s son Jesus, the enslaved contradicted the economic and legal system that rendered their lives disposable. They persistently **re-membered** themselves as part of God’s family facing the same sorts of horrors that Moses and Jesus and other babies had faced. One white American enslaver wrote to her slave-trading cousin, “Gross has killed Sook’s youngest child. He took the child out to work (it was between one year and eighteen months old) & because it would not do its work to please him he first whipt it & then held its head in the [creek] branch to make it hush crying.” [Endnote 11]

Black spirituals were a means for the oppressed to claim Jesus as a brother and to rebelliously re-member themselves as part of God’s illegal economy of grace.

African American spirituals were produced by the bravest people on our continent in the same decades when Francis Scott Key so famously misrepresented the U.S. as the land of the free. He got the “brave” part right, though, because African Americans were living all around him. For nearly two centuries by then African Americans had been surviving and sometimes even thriving against an economy carefully engineered to render Black Lives Disposable.

This Christmas, which Americans have the most right to identify their charming babies with the Palestinian Jewish babe in the manger?

I have a three-sentence conclusion to my sermon today, the first one being a “preachment,” and the last two a fragment of my personal testimony:

If you are a Christian and a U.S. citizen and have not yet realized that Jesus is Black, you do not yet understand the Hebrew Bible, you do not understand the Gospels, and your conscience may be a casualty of your middle school and high school American History classes.

As for me, this I believe: Black Lives Matter. And that is one reason why I can not pledge allegiance to a piece of fabric, and to the proud history for which it stands, one empire, under surveillance, with liberty and justice for whites.

ENDNOTES:

1. John Dominic Crossan, *God & Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*. Harper One, 2007, pages 108-110.
2. In his book *Seeds of Racism in the Soul of America*, Paul R Griffin demonstrates that racism was not merely incidental to Puritan theology in New England. Instead, it was a structuring component of the most deliberate and systematic theologies produced in such contexts as “Plymouth Plantation,” for example.
3. Darryl Pinckney “Black Lives Matter,” *New York Review of Books*, November 9, 2017 issue.
4. The title of Gerald Horne’s 2014 book published by New York University Press.
5. *George Washington Remembers: Reflections on the French and Indian War*, edited by Fred Anderson, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004, page 31.
6. Harvard University Press, 2018, quotes from pages 4 and 8.
7. Baptist, pages 117-118.
8. Quoted in Crossan, page 2.
9. James H Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Seabury Press, 1972, page 88.
10. Cone, page 29.
11. Baptist, page 134.