

Resources for Holy Week 2021

2021 Lenten Devotion 7

By Rev. Jeanelle Nicolas Ablola

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It's quite easy to take for granted the humanness of Jesus. One of my favorite things about Lent is that it is an invitation to meet Jesus in all of his humanness. I grew up hearing the stories of his path towards the cross as a seemingly predestined fast track in which Jesus had little if any, agency over his life and his ministry.

I don't know if Jesus really did "predict" his death. I do know that oftentimes being committed to the work of a just and lasting peace, in times and places where war and policing thrives and fills the pockets of the already wealthy, means risking one's life. Facing mortality is an everyday reality. Through my years of involvement with the Cal-Nev Philippine Solidarity Task Force I've made friends, both there and here in the US, with people of faith and community workers who have been, or are being, red-tagged and targeted by the Philippine government and its agencies for the liberating work they do. They are activists and church people who dare to defend human rights, feed the hungry, support striking workers, visit political prisoners, and bring aid to the poor in the Philippines. After the Anti-Terror Law (ATL) was passed in 2020, they found themselves in increasing danger. This targeting is supported, financially and politically, by the US government and US tax dollars.

Many have lost their lives before them and they know their stories. They know the cruelty of the military and the police, especially under Duterte's War on Drugs. They know what happened to other people of faith who have gone before them, such as Bishop Alberto Ramento who was found killed in his home in 2006. They know about Fidela Bugarin Salvador, a layperson and Engineer who was killed in 2014 because of her socio-economic and disaster response work with indigenous people in the Cordilleras. They have received death threats and intimidation. Those who have fought for justice around the world know this type of danger.

I believe Jesus "predicted" his death as much as any other committed person of peace and justice - Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Bishop Oscar Romero - knew

the risks they were taking and the relentless violence of the Empires that they and their communities sought to undo. They saw this violence firsthand.

When Jesus said yes to being part of a Movement that his cousin baptized him into, he knew the stories of those who had gone before him, too. He knew that what John the Baptist was doing was risky and would cost. He knew that Moses didn't live to see the end of his people's journey. He knew of prophets being killed for the prophecies. He knew the stories of his ancestors. And he chose. It wasn't a matter of destiny beyond his control. In his humanness, coming from the midst of a crowd poised to also say yes, he chose.

Viewing Jesus' journey to the cross as a neatly laid out predicted plan loses a bit of Jesus' own human process. Viewing his journey this way tends to become an excuse for us to separate from his experience and keeps us from being able to identify with Jesus. It's much easier to put Jesus onto an ahistorical, apolitical pedestal to become an object of worship whose ministry cannot be matched or for which to aspire. It keeps us from being accountable. It also keeps us from being empowered as agents of change in our own times and places.

As someone who often gets stuck in the intellectual realm and forgets their own power to be an agent for change, I hope to choose for Lent to be an invitation to challenge myself to reflect on and intentionally live into the vulnerabilities, strengths, and beauty of humanness; to immerse myself in community interconnectedness and the interdependence that liberates us; to savor love and service for the People. What might I choose for myself and for all of Creation this season? What legacies might my chosen ancestors be calling me to say yes to, bringing with me, and midwifing?

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Let Your Heart Break

BY KIMBERLY BROWN | MARCH 30, 2021

In this excerpt from her book *Steady, Calm, and Brave*, Kimberly Brown offers a practice for letting your heart break when the weight of the world leaves you angry and overwhelmed.



Photo by Dominik Scythe.

The history of the world is also a history of humans behaving badly, and current crises are no exception. Since the coronavirus contagion was discovered, we've seen how shortsightedness, selfishness, and greed have contributed to so much unnecessary sickness and death. In any situation when I'm witnessing the incompetence of leaders, the ignorance of citizens, and the suffering of the most vulnerable, I sometimes feel complete and utter

frustration and rage, and I catch myself stomping up and down my hallway shaking my head and thinking how everyone is an idiot.

When I finally let myself feel the terribleness of this time, and really let my heart break, I was able to offer my greatest gifts.

This has happened many times over the past few months: at the young people on spring break, playing on crowded beaches in Florida during a viral pandemic; at the president and his lack of leadership and politicization during public health and civil rights crises; at the federal government unable or unwilling to mount a competent and robust response to provide healthcare, safety, and adequate support for its suffering citizens; at my neighbors, who aren't social distancing and allowing family members from other parts of the city into their homes to visit; at early news reports suggesting Covid-19 is no more dangerous than the flu; at people demanding that their "freedom" includes the right to infect me with a disease; and at videos of people in a peaceful protest march, "kettled" by police on the Brooklyn Bridge for hours, frightened and trapped like animals.

Finally, a few weeks ago I woke up in the morning, mad and outraged and frustrated with the entire world. I fumed in the kitchen as I made coffee, thinking about how stupid everyone was acting. As my husband reached into the cabinet above my head for the Cheerios, he noticed me talking to myself. "What's wrong?" he said. "It's all wrong!" I yelled, and burst into tears.

I cried because beneath my anger was such sadness and grief, for everyone who is suffering: those with Covid-19 who are very sick; the Black community; healthcare workers who are in danger; for me and my family; for so many right here in New York City who don't know how they will feed themselves and their children or pay the rent; for the abandoned animals in zoos and sanctuaries around the world; for those in ICE detention already scared and now at risk for illness or death; and for all struggling in all nations everywhere.

I'd been trying to hide my sadness, hoping my anger would protect me from having to feel it. But it's only through vulnerabilities such as sorrow and grief that natural compassion arises and we can connect with the suffering of everyone (including ourselves), without looking away or getting overwhelmed. When I finally let myself feel the terribleness of this time, and really let my

heart break, I was able to offer my greatest gifts—love, wisdom, understanding, and joy—to all who need it. No one (including me) needs more hatred or anger. But we can all benefit from sharing our good qualities with ourselves, and others, as an appropriate response to the world’s suffering and pain. Even if we can’t control what is happening, each one of us can share our heartfelt intentions with every living creature. Those of us who are healthy and safe have a responsibility to ourselves and the world to let our hearts break for the sick and the dead, for the poor and the lonely and the frightened, and for all creatures struggling during this crisis. It’s the practice of a bodhisattva to hold appreciation for our lives with deep grief and compassion for the suffering in the world, and to use our thoughts, speech, and behavior to not harm and benefit all.

If you are feeling angry here are some resources that may help you.

Let Your Heart Break

- *Find a quiet place in your home; shut off your phone, computer, and TV; and ask the people you live with to leave you undisturbed for ten minutes.*
- *Take a moment to be still and follow your breath.*
- *Put your hand on your heart and quietly say, “I’m here for you, and it’s okay to be upset.”*
- *After a few minutes, you can imagine someone who might also be feeling this way and say, “May you be free from suffering and be at peace.”*
- *Then you can give this kindness to everyone struggling right now: “May we all be free from suffering and be at peace.”*

Excerpted from Steady, Calm, and Brave: 25 Practices of Resilience and Wisdom in a Crisis Copyright © 2020 by Kimberly Brown. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

Source: https://www.lionsroar.com/let-your-heart-break/?goal=0_1988ee44b2-d8b6efc3c3-25122948&mc_cid=d8b6efc3c3&mc_eid=ba361d3731

Reinterpreting the Easter Story

Posted on [March 19, 2021](#)



Herb Montgomery | March 19, 2021

“The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the harmful message that suffering is redemptive. So what do we do with the passage from John’s gospel?”

This week’s reading is from John’s gospel:

“Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say?”

'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." (John 12.20-33)

The statement that jumps out at me each time I read this passage are these words from Jesus: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

Statements like these seem to be more prevalent in John's version of the Jesus story, and they trouble me. They bring to mind the writings and critiques of both womanist and feminist Christians who recount these passages' destructive and even death-dealing fruit in their communities.

For example, womanist scholar Delores Williams, writing of how destructive holding up Jesus' death as an example for Black women has been, states, "African-American Christian women can, through their religion and its leaders, be led passively to accept their own oppression and suffering— if the women are taught that suffering is redemptive" (*Sisters in the Wilderness*, p. 161).

She also writes, "As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred" (p. 132).

Two pages earlier, Williams explains, "The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God's spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the ministerial vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it. Thus, to respond meaningfully to black women's historic experience of surrogacy oppression, the womanist theologian must show that redemption of humans can have nothing to do with

any kind of surrogate or substitute role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil.”

Similar reflections come from Christian feminist scholars like Elizabeth Bettenhausen, who writes, “Christian theology has long imposed upon women a norm of imitative self-sacrifice based on the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Powerlessness is equated with faithfulness. When the cross is also interpreted as the salvific work of an all-powerful paternal deity, women’s well being is as secure as that of a child cowering before an abusive father.” (*Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, p. xii)

In the same book, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker write in their ground breaking essay *For God So Loved the World?*—“Women are acculturated to accept abuse. We come to believe that it is our place to suffer . . . Christianity has been a primary—in many women’s lives the primary—force in shaping our acceptance of abuse. The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive.” (*For God So Loved the World?*, p. 1)

And in the book *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly writes, “The qualities that Christianity idealizes, especially for women, are also those of a victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. Since these are the qualities idealized in Jesus ‘who died for our sins,’ his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women” (p. 77). So what do we do with the passage from John’s gospel? First, I understand how desperately some people in the early Jesus community needed to make sense of Jesus’ unjust execution. So many had placed their hopes for change and liberation in his teachings, and he had been executed by the very status quo he had spoken out against. I can imagine early followers grappling with what this all meant for them and their decision to follow Jesus. I understand why, especially with Paul’s popularity among Gentile Christians, so many would come to see Jesus’ death as salvific and redemptive.

Today, I find much more positive fruit in life-affirming interpretations of the Jesus narrative, like those from womanist theologian, Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, who in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, writes, “God’s power . . . is not a power that diminishes the life of another so that others might live. God’s power respects the integrity of all human bodies and the sanctity of life. This is resurrecting power” (p.178). In other words, God doesn’t overcome death and death-dealing through more death, but by giving

life, resurrecting life—life that overcomes, reverses, and undoes everything accomplished in the killing of Jesus.

Also, science has something to teach us about this passage. Seeds that germinate haven't died! Germination is not death, but transformation. When seeds die, they don't germinate. They actually "abide alone" when they die. But if they germinate rather than die, they transform or "sprout" into a new form: a beautiful plant with the potential to propagate and create more potentially germinating seeds that continue to give life. Life on top of life on top of life on top of life.

As we shared a couple of weeks ago, in other versions of the Jesus story, Jesus died because he refused to keep silent in the face of injustice. The cross was not his silent bearing of injustice, but an unjust penalty imposed on him by unjust people in power who felt threatened by him and his public critique of their unjust system. In other words, Jesus doesn't model the passive bearing of wrong. He models how to speak out against injustice even if you're threatened with a cross for doing so.

I didn't always teach this and I'm thankful for womanist and feminist scholars like those mentioned above who have brought these ideas to our attention. The way I used to interpret and teach the story of Jesus death' has had devastating effects on the lives of abuse survivors and victims. Suffering is never redemptive. Standing up, speaking out, and saying "no" is redemptive, and glorifying people's victimization can extend their bodily, emotional, and psychological pain. Victimization destroys a person's self-worth, self-image, and dignity, robbing them of their sense of self-determining power, and theology that glorifies victimization rather than condemning or resisting it can also lead to death.

Life-giving interpretations of the Jesus story tell of a Jesus who doesn't ask us if we are willing to suffer, but asks if we desire to fully live, to not let go of life, to not lay down, to not be passively silent when threatened for speaking out. Jesus did not come to die, nor did he choose the cross. He rather chose to live a life opposing unjust, oppressive and exploitative ways of organizing life in this world. Jesus chose not to remain silent; he chose to stand up in faithfulness to his life-giving God, and he refused to change course because of threat.

Jesus knew where his speaking out would lead. He knew what his solidarity with the excluded and exploited would cost him. And he chose to do it nonetheless. He refused to let go of life. He rejected the way of death, even while being threatened with death himself. In the words of Brown and Parker, choosing this interpretation, “is subtle and, to some, specious, but in the end it makes a great difference in how people interpret and respond to suffering.” (*Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, p. 18)
Indeed, it makes all the difference in the world.

This week, let’s not ask ourselves how we can die. Jesus doesn’t call a person do die, but to live.

So what is it going to take for us to germinate?

HeartGroup Application

1. Share something that spoke to you from this week’s eSight/Podcast episode with your HeartGroup.
2. Share with your group examples of how you have witnessed the message of redemptive suffering bearing harmful fruit. How do you interpret the story of Jesus death and resurrection in life-giving, life-affirming ways?
3. What can you do this week, big or small, to continue setting in motion the work of shaping our world into a safe, compassionate, just home for everyone?

Thanks for checking in with us, today.

Right where you are, keep living in love, choosing compassion, taking action, and working toward justice.

I love each of you dearly,

I’ll see you next week Herb Montgomery

Source: <https://renewedheartministries.com/Esights/03-19-2021>

Why Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot – Sarah Pruitt – History.com

<https://www.history.com/news/why-judas-betrayed-jesus>

John Shelby Spong Argues Character of Judas Was Created to Implicate Jews - The Chautauquan Daily

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