

Feb. 9, 2025

Pr. Steve

Texts: Jeremiah 20: 11-13; Luke 4: 18-19

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

James Baldwin, poet and prophet of our own time, wrote this,  
*“More horrific than all the crimes of racism, 400 years of racism, more horrific than all these crimes is our country's steadfast refusal to confront the truth that has made them inevitable. I am not talking about the crimes. I am talking about denying what one does.”*

The denial of facing the contradiction between America's love of freedom and democracy, and its practice of slavery and white supremacy for 400 years. We refuse to face the contradiction—as we praise democracy and freedom, and practice slavery and white supremacy—for 400 years.

Some homilies are educational or inspirational, hopefully revelatory. Today's homily is a lament, because sometimes all we can do is cry out in agony. And it is that cry which the Spirit can then use to open us up, to see ways of healing and transformation which we don't see now.

I'm going to share with you some portions from Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. (Some of you have read this—it is worthy of a reread.) He is, as Toni Morrison said, the person who has inherited the prophetic mantle of James Baldwin. This is a letter from Ta-Nehisi to his 15-year-old son.

*These are realities my son, (15 years old), that you will need to deal with for lifetime.*

*(I never had to write a letter like this to one of my three sons. Never.)*

*My son, Americans, implicitly accept, they absolutely believe in the reality of race that it is definable. That there are certain bone-deep features [skin color and nappy hair] which some people have, and therefore you are allowed to humiliate, reduce, and destroy them because of their inalterable condition, because of their race. Americans, absolutely believe this. These physical characteristics signify to Americans an indelible imprint which distinguishes them from us. And these people are brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white—not human—white. [p. 7]*

*This belief and being white is not achieved through wine tastings or ice cream socials. It is learned through the pillaging of life and liberty, and the labor of others. It has been learned through the flaying of backs, the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children. And all of these, first and foremost, meant to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies—and our own lives. America believes itself exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation ever to exist, a lone champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, and tyrants, and enemies of civilization. One, therefore, cannot claim to be superhuman,*

*and plead at the same time innocence and naivete, because there exists all around us, my son, an apparatus urging us to accept and promote American innocence at face value. Don't inquire too much. We don't really know what's happening. [p. 8]*  
(Isn't that what the Germans said in Germany? No, look away. Look away and ignore the great evil done in our names. We're not that bad.)

*And, in your fifteenth year, I'm writing to you because you have witnessed Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you now know that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, [that] John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive-by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child, whom these men in uniform were oath-bound to protect. ...The destroyers, these killers will rarely be held accountable. Most of them will receive pensions. And their killing is merely the superlative form of domination who regularly frisks, detains, beats and humiliates us. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible. [p. 9]*

*It's hard to face this, but remember—all the talk, all the talk about race relations, and racial justice, and profiling, and privilege, and white supremacy—all that talk serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience. Racism dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscles, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You, my son, must never look away from this. All those words—the economics, the sociology—disguise the great violence upon our bodies and lives. [p. 10]*

*Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, 'We would prefer to say that such evil people cannot exist— that there really aren't any. But to do evil a human being must, first of all, believe that what he or she is doing is good, and that it's just normal in conformity with natural law.'*

*However, to acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of this country as it has always declared itself and turn towards something which is murkier, unknown. [p. 98]* It is the face and the fact of the crucifixion of black people.

*At the onset of the Civil War our stolen bodies were worth four billion dollars, more than all American industry, all of American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies was cotton, the primary export. The richest people in America lived in the Mississippi River Valley. They made their riches off of our stolen bodies. Our bodies were held in bondage by the early presidents. They were sold at the White House by James Polk. Our bodies built the Capitol and the National Mall—(for free). We talked of the Confederate War—Robert E, Lee, great General, brilliant General.*

*Pickett's Charge. The courage. All those good old boys—just wanting good old lives. And what they fought for was the right to beat, rape, rob, torture, pillage, and murder black bodies at an industrial level. [p. 101]*

*12 Generations. 12 Generations. Anything could be used—whips, tongs, pokers, stones—anything to break the black body, the black family, the black community, the black nation. We were pulverized into stock [so they could make money.] Senator John*

*Calhoun from South Carolina said 150 years ago, "The two great divisions of society or not, the rich and the poor, but white and black. And all the former [all the whites], the poor, as well as the rich, belong to the upper class and they are respected and treated as equals."*

*And there it is, my son, there it is the right to break the black body, as the meaning of their sacred equality. The meaning and the experience of sacred equality is to break the black body so that they have the right to be white. [p. 104]*

It is a cry of agony—very hard to hear—and we don't like it. But if we don't hear it, nothing changes. As Martin Luther King said, *'The soul of the nation is at stake. Not just for black people, especially for the dominant class, especially for the white people, a moral reckoning has arrived.'*

I certainly don't have the answers. But the cry of agony must be heard because it will lead through the opening of that cry to the discovery of where the Spirit is leading us. That's entirely what the mission of Jesus is about. *'I have come to bring good news to the afflicted, to set the oppressed free, to open the eyes of the blind, to proclaim a year of Jubilee.'* [Luke 4: 18-19] And not because that is poetic or prophetic, that because that is his life.

And in this meal (Pr. Steve gesturing to the altar), [Jesus] says, *'This cup is the New Covenant in my blood.'* That's not poetry—that is the lived experience of our God, who has come to set all of us free, that there might be healing, and blessing, and wholeness, and transformation for all of God's people. Now.

(If there has ever been a time in your life when you have suffered, and others didn't understand it, you know what I'm talking about today. )

Martin Luther King said, *'The most horrific thing is not the southerners and the white supremacists. The most horrific thing is people of goodwill who remain silent.'*

Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.