

The Hymn for Liberation: Unmasking the Old Time Religion

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 September 2024

Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] So there's this old song that has been, it's one of those songs that's kind of seeped into the American soil. It's one of those songs that's come from the throats of people from a variety of backgrounds, from those living in the country and from those living in cities, from those who we call rich, from those who we call poor. It's a song that's been covered by a multitude of artists from Mahalia Jackson to Johnny Cash. And even if you didn't grow up in America or you have spent your life far from dominant culture, the song might still have a kind of odd familiarity.

Give me that old time religion. Give me that old time religion. Give me that old time religion. God is good enough for me. I'm not even sure when that song, you know, made itself in the, it entered my mind, entered my imagination. I don't know where I first heard it, but what I do know is that that song, that the sentiments of that song always make me aware that the American church is divided. That we are divided because the Christianity that we love, the Christianity that's at the heart of America's truth and America's mythology is divided.

One of the earliest versions of that song contains stanzas that center these lines. It was good for our mothers. It's good enough for me. It has served our fathers. It's good enough for me.

Makes me love everybody. Good enough for me. It will take us all to heaven. It's good enough for me. But the problem is that if you've been around Christianity at all, either up close or further away, you know that some of that is a lie. Woo, that came quick.

Then that old time religion was not good enough for our mothers. That it was often resulted in the suppression of their voices. That it didn't serve our fathers. That it actually led them to shoulder a burden of false masculinity that was rooted in domination. It didn't help us love everybody, but rather fueled genocide and racial subjugation and economic exploitation and the rape of the earth is a commodity. And it will not take us all to heaven because the heaven that is instigated by such religion is always exclusionary. But the Christianity of our country has another side. And that's what we've been talking about in this series. It's a side that doesn't farken back to that imagined past that's rooted in the status quo, but one that remembers resistance and survival and creatively trusts in a God that makes all things new. And when I think about that side of Christianity, there's another song that comes to mind. And I think I've shared that song with some of you. It's one of my favorites. The first time I heard it, I was in a learning cohort at NIH and I started absolutely bawling uncontrollably and had to like leave the room. And the words of that song say this,

[3 : 43] I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down. I don't know how my father stood his ground. I don't know how my people survived slavery. I do remember. That's why I believe.

Now that song is by Sweet Honey in the Rock. And it's a reminder of a faith that is not connected to an imagined past, not connected to the status quo. It reminds us that our faith lives strongly among people who, while grounding themselves in the mystery and presence of God, survived within and pushed against entire empires. Entire empires. These are people who were not content with that old time religion that was really steeped in pretense and illusion. They preserved this Christianity that was the flourishing of all of us. Now, I think that one of our first tasks as followers of Jesus is to decide which Christianity that we will follow. One of our most pressing assignments is actually to decide which Jesus we will follow. And to do that not just theoretically, but to do that in our everyday walking around lives. In the words of Lainie Pinkert, it's a question of whose account of reality we decide to sign on to. And here we've chosen to sign on to an account of reality that privileges the perspectives of the disparaged and not the dominant. We want to live into the, live intentionally into the legacy of churches and communities of faith that have been the antibody to slave-holding religion.

So we're taking these first Sundays after the summer to explore what it means to be and to become a liberating church. We're talking about the qualities and markers of that. How might that look?

Last week, I talked about Cain and Abel and the concept of Ubuntu, which means essentially, we are people or I am a person through other persons. And this week, what I want to do is explore the idea that a liberating church must be grounded in a reading of the Bible that is for liberation.

Because ultimately, the answer to which Jesus we will follow is usually found in probing another question, which is whose Bible do we read? See, in his brilliant book, *We Have Been Believers*, an African-American Systematic Theology, James Evans reminds us of something really important.

[6 : 40] African slaves in North America were introduced to the Bible at a point in history when the Bible was the main support in pro-slavery ideology. From 1772 until 1850, the Bible was the primary source, the primary source for the authority and legitimation for the enslavement of African people.

A century and a half earlier, the Puritans had already begun to interpret scripture in ways that would undergird supremacist notions of their right to conquer and inhabit.

They had these ways of reading that would fully flower in the 19th and 20th centuries. And in so many ways, many of us and many of our churches still read the Bible in these ways.

So I'm going to list a few of these ways of reading before we get into our text. And one of my challenges for you this week is to try to add on to this list, because I'm just going to like name a few. But what are some of the ways that we need to flag, that we need to say, okay, not so much of that, more of this, if we are to become a liberating church? So a couple of things in quick succession.

So first, spiritualizing things that might disrupt our claims to power. Downplaying or removing entirely the centrality of the exodus and the exile and the prophets.

[8 : 09] And how does that often happen? By discrediting the Hebrew Bible, which incidentally is the Bible, is a part of the Bible that actually a lot of marginalized people tend to focus on. And we always have to remember that the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, is 75% of the entire Bible.

Over-representing Paul and the New Testament letters. Dismembering the Bible by reading it in parts instead of the whole. By placing individual texts above the entire story.

And then by disembodimenting our interpretation so that our reading doesn't relate to our everyday lives, that it's just abstraction. It's a thing of our head and not of our heart.

That's a quick list. But I would say, like, you know, one thing to consider this week is, what are the things in your own past that have led to reading scripture in ways that are not liberating?

We could truly do a whole series on this and on biblical interpretation in the United States that has led our churches to be anything but liberating.

[9 : 19] But what I want to turn to, to deepen us a little bit, I want to turn to a remarkable passage, one of my favorite passages, which is in the Gospel of Luke, to help us think even more deeply about some of this.

How to read the Bible as a liberating church. So we're going to go to Luke 4, 16 through 30. Luke 4, 16 through 30.

When he, Jesus, came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

[10 : 31] And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, Is not this Joseph's son?

He said to them, Doubtless you will quote to me this proper doctor cure yourself. And you will say, Do hear also in your home, in your hometown, the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.

And he said, Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months.

And there was a severe famine over all the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them, except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel, in the time of the prophet Elisha.

[11 : 45] And none of them was cleansed, except Naaman the Syrian. When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of town, and led him to the brow of a hill on which their town was built, so they might hurl him off the cliff.

But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Now, I'll say first here, that I have preached this text a number of times.

But I think one of the fascinating things, on revisiting it, that I never realized, is how much an interpretation of Scripture, and a view of how to interpret Scripture, is present here.

For Luke, this is Jesus' inaugural sermon, and it fundamentally sets the framework for the way that Luke understands the ministry of Jesus. It gives us a sense of the lengths to which we must go to make sure the gospel we proclaim is good news for the poor, and it's about breaking chains, and relates to Jubilee justice.

But it also gives us this sense of what it means to unroll the scroll. What it means to liberate the Bible from death-dealing ways of reading, and to read it, to rescue it, from what one scholar calls, it being the poison book.

[13 : 19] To find inside of it antidotes to what has made our society so incredibly ill. So here's basically what happens.

Jesus returns to his boyhood home, village, Nazareth, probably about 500 people, pretty small. And he goes to the synagogue on Saturday, the Sabbath, as is his custom.

He's chosen to read from the book of Isaiah, and then to give commentary on it. He is given, or maybe he decides to read, it's not really clear, a section from Isaiah 61, 1 through 2, which is about the restoration of the people of Israel.

After kind of being devastated by empire, this text about liberation. And the people in the synagogue, they are listening intently, like they're on the edge of their seats.

Even as Jesus is making the shocking news, even as he's saying that, these words are all fulfilled in me. I mean, that's a pretty bold claim. Even as he says that, the people accept him, and they embrace him.

[14 : 25] They see Jesus maybe as this kind of like hometown hero, this local boy who's making good. And it makes them, it has the possibility to make them look good.

If the promises are actualized, they're happening in Jesus, then certainly the first evidence of that will happen among them.

They think his words are gracious, until it turns out that the words are gracious, not just for them. And then Jesus goes on, despite their excitement, and says basically, you actually won't find me acceptable, once you understand what I'm about.

He talks about these two famous Israelite prophets, Elijah and Elisha, these two men who brought healing to outsiders. The second, Naaman is actually, was actually a general in the army of a traditional enemy.

And rather than healing the equally deserving people of his own land, Jesus, or the Elijah and Elisha, choose to heal and go to outsiders first. And because of those examples, the people are filled with theory, very outraged.

[15 : 48] When I think about this, a sports metaphor came up for me, so forgive me. Okay. If you hate sports, I'm sorry. Okay. I love tennis. And I was thinking about like, if, like I was imagining what it would be like if I were from Compton, I am not from Compton at all.

Okay. If I were from Compton, if I had been from Compton when Venus and Serena were first becoming famous and well-known and starting to really win, you know, and I realized like, these are people of power and prestige and they come back home to make a speech.

And, you know, I would be so excited, like, yes, they're coming back. All right. And then they got up and said, sorry, what we really want to do is to make things better over in Oakland first.

And we'll see about y'all, but we're going to start over there first. When I think about that, I get the rage. Like, I would be frustrated by that. And it makes these people so frustrated that they attempt to kill Jesus, which actually would have gotten them into a ton of trouble because that would have been illegal for a woman province.

But Jesus escapes and he continues on his mission. So that's the story. That's the story. But now let's look at what that means or what that tells us about what it means to unroll the scroll as a church that desires to be liberated.

[17 : 14] Well, maybe the most obvious place to start here is with the reality that Jesus' reading is steeped in community and in tradition.

He's not a biblical long ranger. He's not sitting alone in an ivory tower projecting his thoughts from on high. That kind of thing has gotten us into so much trouble reading the Bible outside of community.

His reading is open to the input of other people. and the text is read in respect of a long tradition of interpretation. To read in such a way is necessary.

To read with humility and patience and a certain kind of love. And that key word, patience. His words, his words, his reading has really deep rootedness.

But it's one thing to unroll the scroll in light of our hometown. And it's another thing to unroll the scroll in our hometown.

[18 : 18] And based on the conversations that I have with some of you, that I have with progressive folks that I know, learning to unroll the scroll in liberating ways in our hometown can be a challenge.

I need an amen. I'm from North Carolina. I need an amen. Amen. We don't want to be driven out like Jesus was. I can remember this one holiday gathering.

Of my extended family. And my brother, who's a true older brother, who always wants to put me on the hot seat. He chased me around the room, like the root, that kind of the rooms of the house, just whispering loud enough for other people to hear, do you believe in the devil?

Do you believe in the devil? Because he felt like, oh, they'll hear and they'll be like, do you believe in the devil? And he knew it would like, just like, it would be so entertaining for him. And I was running away because I was like, I don't want to deal with this.

Like I, I'm in this tense moment at home with like older people and you know, older people in a rural area. How do I do this? And yet Jesus has the courage to unroll the scroll in his hometown.

[19 : 30] And while I do not think that there's a one size fits all for this, I do think that if we are to be people who are liberating others, who are becoming a liberating church, we have to think through this like, how do we open the scroll in our hometown among our own people and how does that shed light on what it means to be liberating?

Now, in addition to being grounded in community and tradition, Jesus is reading privilege is a text of liberation. He claims to have fulfilled not a text that is about law keeping or moral purity, but a text about human freedom, a text about literal and spiritual release.

He claims to have fulfilled a text that proclaims the year of Jubilee, which is this 50th year written about in the book of Leviticus in which humans would be released from bondage and property would be returned to the original owners and the land would be allowed to rest.

He says that he fulfills this year that would have guaranteed that at least once in the people's lifetimes, the economy would fully reset so that no one would be allowed to excessively accumulate and no one would be structured into poverty.

That's the text that Jesus lifts up. And if we're going to read the Bible for liberation in the service of shalom in the service of deep flourishing peace, we have to make choices about what to privilege.

[21 : 01] The whole story is more important than each individual text. We have to consider what text to lift up, like which texts guide us the most fundamentally.

Every single interpreter of scripture makes assumptions about what the story is about. And the invitation is to become conscious of what you assume, even consciously, that it's about.

And to test that assumption against the ministry of Jesus and what he says, it's about. Katie Cannon, who's a womanist theologian, here's how she summed up this idea.

The lesson I learned from black storefront clergy and laity is that every passage of literature does not have the same importance. These women and men understood the Bible to be a divinely inspired book, but not every jot and every tittle has the same significance.

In explaining the full meaning of God's revelation, Bible study leaders give consideration to the whole scripture and its unfolding movement. Afterward, they decide the priority which should be given to selected texts.

[22 : 18] So in order to be a people who read, who unroll the scroll, we have to make some decisions about what is life-giving in line with the ministry of Jesus. And then, as a church, we, I think, and this story is brilliant because of this, I think our, if we are reading the Bible for liberation, one of the clearest things here is discerning whether our interpretations gain us the power and notoriety of the status quo or lead us into a vulnerability that feels like crucifixion.

See, the people love what Jesus is saying as long as they believe it's for them. But as soon as they are invited into the scandal of God's grace, into his care for the marginalized, into his care for the marginalized who are not like them, they immediately want to kill him.

Jesus is always lowering the walls instead of raising them up and that is the thing that will make people want to throw you off of cliffs. A few years ago, during the tables, learning cohort, it was an experiment we tried one time.

We had the Reverend Alexia Salvatierra speak to us. And one of the things that she said was that during the war in El Salvador, 12-year civil war in El Salvador, the one thing, or one thing, I should say, that could bring you under suspicion was possessing a Bible.

Because Christians have begun to read in ways that subverted the rightness of an unjust regime, Christians, because of that, became public enemies.

[24 : 06] and because of that, in 1989, this was a story that got a lot of press, six Jesuit priests were killed at the Central American University and two other people were also killed who happened to be there that day.

And the New York Times said of these priests, they called them leftists, leftist intellectuals. And there was this other priest who was really angry about that identification.

and he quoted the words of another priest that has become known for saying, when I feed the hungry, they call me a saint.

When I ask why they have no food, they call me a communist. So if our interpretation of scripture helps us find favor with the genuinely powerful, we have to ask some questions.

But if it leads us to the vulnerability of the cross with the Jesus we love, we just might be doing something right. Now, I'm going to skip to the end because I have a whole nother point, y'all, because I was going in, y'all.

[25 : 19] Sometimes I go in. So, I'll just release it as some bonus material on our Instagram. Right, Anthony, you got that right. Some bonus material. You know, okay. So I have a whole nother point that I think is fascinating.

But I'll just end here because I know I've already said a lot. I really, really care about this topic. But the good news for us, I think the good news for us as the table church is pretty simple.

And I think marginalized communities teach us this really, really well. The good news is that the Bible is not our master. We are not enslaved to it.

Rather, we are invited to be in a creative relationship with it. You can talk back to it even as it talks back to you. We have the agency to interpret.

And God entrusts us with the agency to interpret as a community. So let's do that in ways that help bring about the flourishing of all God's creation.

[26 : 25] And let us lead into the joy of becoming a liberating church when it comes to reading the Bible. Amen.