

The Annoyingly Lavish Mercy of God Pt. 2

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Preacher: Shae Washington

[0 : 00] So now we're going to welcome our preacher of the hour, Shea Washington, who is one of our elders and is preaching here for the first time, live and in person.

This one is good. Okay. Stay. Okay. Password, which I tried to do already.

Beautiful. Good evening, church. Wow. It's really good to be with you this evening. My name is Shea Washington.

My pronouns are she, her, and hers. I'm one of the elders here. I came over with the Res City crew circa 2022, something like that.

And I'm really grateful for the invitation to preach today from Pastor Tanetta. So thank you so much. I just a little bit about me.

[1 : 14] Let's see. I live in Northern Virginia. Folks from D.C. and Maryland think it's, like, so far.

I do have folks in my life who refer to it as the Shire from the Lord of the Rings, and it's not that far. Except sometimes it is, you know. Also, in my heart, I'm a vegan. And, like, I've tried really hard for the past few years or so to, like, make the switch all of the way.

But sushi is, like, so good, you know. But I'm going to keep trying because it really does, like, align with my values and my faith.

So pray for me. Also, I'm an auntie. That's probably my favorite thing to be. Yes, aunties. I have a rack of nibblings.

[2 : 14] They all live in Ohio, which is where I'm originally from. And I am there as much as possible, just constantly inserting myself into their lives. They can't really get rid of me.

Also, I have a background in the performing arts, singing, directing, acting, mostly in connection with social justice, and I love musicals.

Any guesses on, like, what my favorite Broadway musical might be? Wicked, that's a good one. Not my favorite. Phantom, that was my first show, but no, not the...

No, no. Rent, people, rent. It's rent. It's rent. I fell in love with rent, like, years ago.

I've probably seen it, like, 10 or 12 times in different places across the country, so I love it. And for work, I work independently as a social justice trainer, facilitator, consultant, largely on racial justice and LGBTQ justice with groups across the country, both in and out of spaces of faith, helping them to understand and heal from and figure out how to change systems of oppression.

[3 : 29] So, that's a little bit about me. I'm so excited to keep getting to know folks here, so if we haven't met yet, please feel free to come up, introduce yourself, share your fun facts, share prayer requests, all of the things.

We are diving into the second and final for now part of the current series, which is entitled The Annoyingly Lavish Mercy of God, Musings from the Margin.

And while I'm grateful for this series, which is seeking to make as its primary audience black folks and indigenous, Asian, and Latine folks of color here at the table, I am a little, shall we say, mixed about being up here.

I totally believe and agree that in a community that, you know, is changing but is still predominantly white, both in numbers and in culture, that we need to center the margins, right?

And that we need more of that here, really for everyone's benefit. So, it's not that. It's mainly that the book of Jonah, which is where we're focusing on, though it's tiny, it's pretty dense in everything that can be drawn from it.

[4 : 47] And it carries some pretty difficult themes, especially emotionally, to talk about, particularly as a person with intersecting oppressed identities on the margins of our society as a black queer woman.

So, in preparing for this message and digging into the text, I have felt like a range of emotions as I've tried to discern what was happening for Jonah back then and how we might apply it today. I've had to wrestle with how my own desires have shown up to, at times in my life, run to Tarshish like Jonah instead of going to speak truth to my oppressors.

Or maybe more relevantly, to intentionally stay in a place where there are folks benefiting from my oppression and the oppression of my peoples. But I heard a friend say that they don't preach a message unless they've been convicted by it first.

So, maybe I'm on the right path. Are y'all ready to dive in today? Would you pray with me? Creator God, you are here and we are grateful.

[6 : 07] You are speaking and we are grateful. Help us to continue to be moved by your spirit, to be sensitive to your word, to connect deeper with you and with each other.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So, last week with Pastor Toneta, we took a look at the first half of the book of Jonah, where Jonah, a prophet to his people, the Hebrew people, is called by God to go to Nineveh and preach against it because of the evil ways that they were moving.

He was called to cry out against it, to denounce it, to say, as it says in the book of Jonah, chapter 1, verse 2, But Jonah does not want to do this, y'all.

He does not want to go to this brutally oppressive empire known for violence and exploitation. In the book, *Liberating Jonah, Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation* by Miguel A. de la Torre, he digs into the story of Jonah through a liberation theology lens.

This is a lens that centers the experience of those on the underside of power and understands the good news and direct connection to the dismantling of structural oppression endured by the margins of society.

[7 : 35] He writes this book as an exploration of reconciliation, and he uses Jonah as a sort of what not to do. He employs what feminist biblical scholar Elizabeth Schuessler-Friorenza calls a hermeneutic of creative imagination to retell and examine this story, paying close attention to the historical, please don't fall, to the historical power structures during Jonah's day and uncovering what we might understand as folks on the margin of the current day's power structure.

In shedding light on the Assyrian empire, of which at one time Nineveh was the capital of, de la Torre writes, Assyria was not some nation with which Israelites had religious disagreement.

Rather, it was an evil empire, the mortal enemy of Israel, whose fundamental purpose was to destroy Jonah's people, the Israelite nation, and its way of life.

So God says to Jonah, Go to them! And Jonah flees. He doesn't want to go to them and cry out, right?

So this huge storm comes, the people on the boat that he is now on realize that the storm is happening because Jonah is disobeying God and Jonah has them throw him into the sea.

[9 : 09] This is where the part that I, you know, is most familiar with happens. He gets swallowed whole by this huge fish, right? You talked about as a whale.

So Jonah is sitting in the belly of the whale. He's got like seaweed wrapped around his head and he prays this long prayer about everything that has just happened to him. He acknowledges how God has saved him and that salvation comes from God.

In Jonah 2 verse 9, it says, But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed, I will make good.

I will say salvation comes from the Lord. And I take this to mean that Jonah was like, Okay, God, you saved me again.

I guess I'll like go to Nineveh and bring your word to the Ninevites. So the fish spits Jonah out after being commanded to do so.

[10 : 13] And in chapter 3, Jonah goes to Nineveh. It was a big city that would take three days to walk all the way through it. Jonah just goes one day's walk.

And as he tells of God's impending doom, the Ninevites actually listen. They believe God. They repent. And Jonah gets angry.

In chapter 4, starting with verse 1, this is the message version because I think I really like the drama of it, but also like the earnestness. It says, Jonah was furious.

He lost his temper. He yelled at God. God, I knew it when I was back home. I knew this was going to happen. That's why I ran off to Tarshish.

I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness.

[11 : 11] So God, if you won't kill them, kill me. I'm better off dead. Why was Jonah so angry?

Was it because he thought that Nineveh's repentance might inadvertently shine a light on whatever the discretions of the Israelites might have been?

Was it because he didn't believe that given the atrocities, the Assyrian Empire had committed that they deserved God's mercy? Was it because he thought that it was a shallow repentance the Ninevites were performing that would ultimately lead to the destruction of the Hebrew people? Or was it something else? I don't really know. And while we do know that, spoiler alert, Nineveh does end up overtaking the Israelites and completely destroys the northern kingdom of Israel, I don't know if the potential of that would have factored into Jonah's anger or not.

Last week, we talked about how the work of becoming the beloved community, a concept popularized by Dr. King, can feel like a curse at first.

[12 : 33] It can feel like sitting in the belly of a whale, like death. That there is an extra burden placed on BIPOC folk, and I would say also an extra risk placed on BIPOC folks, especially in predominantly white spaces on this journey towards liberation.

And when I think about the beloved community, that is what I'm thinking about, liberation. But liberation isn't liberation if it's not for everyone.

Fannie Lou Hamer said, nobody's free until everybody's free. This cry of hers has been a guiding light in my life.

Nobody's free until everybody's free. Collective liberation is about recognizing that our struggles are bound together, and so is our freedom.

Where systems of oppression like racism and sexism and heterosexism and cis-sexism, et cetera, are dismantled and a new way of being is mantled.

[13 : 44] I like to think that I made up the word mantled. I'm not sure. But y'all understand what I mean, right? A new way of being is erected where everyone can thrive.

But that's not the current system that we have. Currently, we live in a society that runs on unilateral power, the type of power that creates a top and a bottom.

And the top makes the rules, it sets the standards and the norms, it determines how those who aren't living up to those standards and norms are treated, and it receives privileges, unearned advantages at the expense of those on the bottom.

The bottom is marginalized, faces all sorts of oppression, cultural, institutional, interpersonal, internalized, and is made to get on board with the current system or suffer the consequences. And to me, I feel like it's always both, right? Because there's nothing that we can ever do to fully measure up to this system that wasn't designed for us to thrive.

[14 : 54] The groups, both those on the top and the bottom, are largely determined by identity, race, gender, age, sexuality, religion, et cetera, ability.

And it's an imbalance of this power between the groups that keeps the system in place. And this system works like a well-oiled machine, and it was put in place long before most of us were here. And we're all conditioned by it. It's like the air we breathe, the water that we swim in. It's meant to look invisible, especially to those who are benefiting from it.

And it works so well that it doesn't really need you to do much intentionally to keep it going. Mostly what it needs is for you to not intentionally try to recognize it and do something about it.

And it definitely doesn't need us coming together to try and do so. Here in the States, the system was built on the genocide of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of black peoples.

[15 : 59] It developed deeper roots through the internment of Asian peoples and created a unique experience of racialization for Latine folks in the States that is primarily about reinforcing the workings of white supremacy and anti-blackness.

Race and ethnicity impact everything here. Every major lived experience, be it health care, housing, education, employment, etc.

And regardless of how much individual proximity we have to unilateral power, as a group, BIPOC folks don't have the societal backing or the concentration of resources to oppress the top.

This is why there is no such thing as reverse racism or reverse sexism, right? White folks sit at the top of this system.

And even though this unilateral working of power is about group power and not individual power, one of the ways the system is able to continue working is because white folks are conditioned to see themselves as individuals and not as part of a group.

[17 : 16] and definitely not a part of a group receiving benefits and participating in the oppression of other groups. And this is because theirs has been positioned as the normative experience.

Everyone else is measured against it. And on top of it, we have a culture of Christian supremacy that has worked to shape and back this whole thing.

Reinforcing it all by individualizing a faith that had been about the collective. Personal piety, individual repentance, individual salvation, and flimsy shows of reconciliation does not lead to collective liberation.

Why was it Jonah that God told to go and provide rebuke to the people of Nineveh? What did Jonah's position on the margins of society make visible to those in the center?

Sorry, make visible to those, make visible that wasn't to those in the center. In the book, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, the late author, educator, theorist, and more, Bell Hooks, says this.

[18 : 39] To be in the margin is to be part of the whole, but outside the main body. Living as we did on the edge, we developed a particular way of seeing reality.

We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both.

This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.

This sense of wholeness impressed upon our own consciousness by the structure of our daily lives provided us an oppositional worldview, a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity.

As a black person living in this society, I have had to become fluent both in my own culture and in the dominant white culture to survive.

[20 : 06] I've had to understand both as Bell Hooks talks about. It's looked like learning multiple histories, multiple cultural languages and knowing when to speak which.

It's a learning of code switching, of picking up unspoken and assumed rules of society and of navigating daily microaggressions discussions that so many of us from various racial and ethnic identities navigate every day.

Where are you from? No, no, where are you really from? You're so articulate. Can I touch your hair?

That one happened to me a couple days ago. Wow, this is your house? Why are you so angry? Ooh, you're so exotic.

You know, when I look at you, I don't see color. I just see a child of God. And I know we could all come up with so many more, right, based off of our firsthand experiences.

[21 : 18] I too, like Pastor Tanetta, spent some formative years in predominantly white evangelical spaces and was burdened with the expectation of making a false choice of a primary identity.

Am I Christian first or am I black first? Is my allegiance to my God or to my people? And isn't it interesting that it is those who hold in their heritage the legacy of Christianity creating and benefiting from this system, constructing race, colonizing the spirituality of BIPOC folk who then are usually the ones who ask us to choose, ask us to pull ourselves apart, sever ourselves into pieces and choose one thing.

This is the work of an evil system, one that works to dehumanize and separate, separate us from the divine, separate us from the earth, from each other, both in our own groups and other groups, and separate us from ourselves.

But we are a whole people and part of the whole of society, a necessary and vital part of the whole. Unilateral power is always looking up, working to insulate itself and maintain its superiority at all costs.

It's disconnected from the full reality of the wreckage that it's causing, both the wreckage to those on and toward the bottom, but also the wreckage it's causing itself.

[22 : 58] The wreckage is different for the top than it is for the bottom, but everyone is harmed in this system. Everyone is harmed in this system in different ways and that needs to be examined both by the dominant group and those on the margins, but everyone is harmed.

And those of us on the margins have a deep knowing about this that the center generally doesn't have because they haven't had to focus their attention on both the outside in and the inside out. And this can certainly be an extra burden and it can come with a lot of emotions and things to process in determining how to best navigate it all.

Be gentle with yourselves. Take the time that you need to in this process. But I think it can also be a blessing because of how we are uniquely positioned to understand what it will take for things to change and to pursue this vision in partnership with our creator for true liberation.

We are the ones who can cry out and speak the truth about what is and has been going on. We know and remember clearly our stories, the stories of our ancestors and the truth of the detriment.

[24 : 25] We are the ones who have the right to hold accountable those in power and call for change. And I imagine this was similar for Jonah and the Hebrew people.

And maybe that is why God called Jonah because of Jonah's position on the margins. Because of how he was familiar with the acute harm being done by the empire of his day.

Because of how he could see from the outside in and the inside out. So we see a reluctant Jonah go and he delivers God's message and the people stop or maybe more accurately pause their evil ways.

They put on sackcloth to show their sorrow. God shows them mercy and Jonah is angry. And if you get a chance this week, read chapter 4 for yourself and see what kind of rises up for you as you discern what's happening.

But for the sake of time and starting to bring us to a close, let's choose one of the potential reasons shared earlier for why Jonah might have been angry.

[25 : 36] Maybe it's the one that is connected to feeling like for the Ninevites it really was a shallow repentance and God was still choosing to show them mercy. Many of us as BIPOC folks have witnessed and maybe even been token parts of performative showings of reconciliation.

And I can understand why Jonah might be angry, right? It's wearing and it's exhausting navigating a system that we didn't create and at its core is working for our subjugation and destruction.

We've seen and been a part of our people's resisting, demanding change and pursuing justice. And I wouldn't really categorize the work as kumbaya moments.

But that's often what we've seen reconciliation be reduced to. And what does this word reconciliation even mean in the context of the history of this country which has never had a time of being conciled in the first place?

I often, I think I'm maybe made up conciled or valued. And though advancements have been gained and then lost and then gained in this painful and scary back and forth, we still live in the same system.

[26 : 58] It's painful to take the risk of speaking truth to power, of crying out and committing to the work of reconciliation and then not have there be any lasting sustainable change.

To not know who's really committed to the work and who will hang in there when things get hard.

And it will get hard to decide to stay in predominantly white spaces as they're changing and not know if ultimately you and your people will be harmed again.

What did reconciliation mean to Jesus? To our brown on the margins of his society, Jesus, whose ministry and being was about reconciling the world to God's self.

I don't have all the answers in the least but I do know that it's far from the examples we've seen of a white person apologizing to a black person and then things going back to business as usual.

And it doesn't happen just because racially diverse folks are in the same room or part of the same congregation. But I do believe there's an opportunity here in this table community to actually practice liberation into being if we are intentional about it.

[28 : 16] And I think that as BIPOC folk we have a unique role to play here just as Jonah did and that we have a Messiah who understands because of his own position on the margins.

In the same book De La Torre writes ignored for centuries by Eurocentric Christian theology was that Jesus as fully human was put to death like so many others then and now by civil and religious leaders who saw him as a threat to their power.

Jesus was a victim of empire. The importance of the cross for the world's marginalized is that they have a God who understands their trials and tribulations because Jesus God in the flesh also suffered trials and tribulations.

The good news is not so much that Jesus was crucified but that Jesus rose from the dead not to show off God's power but to provide hope for the crucified of every time and place that they too will ultimately be victorious over the oppression they face.

We have a Messiah who understands who is with us because he is us. Ultimately we will be victorious.

[29 : 34] I do believe that. It may not happen in our lifetime on this big macro level but I believe we have the opportunity to contribute to that work on the micro level as we live out our lives and that it's a lot of micro moments that cause shifts to the macro.

As we are intentional about how we treat each other, how we carry out community, how we establish our policies and procedures and live into our values, as we're intentional about finding ways to live into the fullness of who we are, resisting the way the world works to marginalize us, we can impact things now.

We can partner with God now, all of us and to me that is the good news. the work is going to look different person to person and group to group based off of our unique identities, giftings, callings and it's up to each of us to consider what that might be.

How might God be calling us to partner in the work of liberation? As a two on the Enneagram, someone who likes to help and do all of the things and can overcommit and wear my own self out, I'm working to build what I think of as a spiritual practice, which is informed by Suzanne Stabile. She's an Enneagram teacher and also a two. And she says to be in the practice of asking yourself, what is mine to do? So I ask myself this a lot.

[31 : 14] What is mine to do? And I'm also thinking about like what does caring for myself look like in the process? So in addition to that, in closing, for real, as we consider what is ours to do, I'm just going to offer two quick recommendations, two pitfalls for us to consider.

The first one is lean into shared affinity. white folks and BIPOC folks, we all have work to do on this journey together, but also separately.

And the work is different given that the impact of this system is different. It's important that we gather in shared racial affinity spaces to check in about what we're experiencing and how we're navigating and how we're navigating this system.

We need time together, particularly as BIPOC folks, to laugh, to heal, to play, to rest, to speak our truth and share our stories.

in a system that works to disconnect us, literally dismember us, when we come together in groups of shared affinity, we get to collectively remember ourselves, remember who we are, but also like remember, right, like put ourselves back together.

[32 : 39] together. The second recommendation is examine how you've internalized this system. White folks and those with identities that place them in the dominant groups of society are conditioned to internalize superiority.

That has to be interrogated. And BIPOC folks and others with identities that place them in the margins are conditioned to internalize inferiority.

and this is through intentional design. Internalized oppression is what you sometimes feel, say, or believe about yourself or your group even when you know it's not true.

Internalized oppression causes folks to blame themselves and each other instead of the system. It fosters shame and isolation. It teaches us to attack and separate ourselves from others in our own group and from other groups on the margins.

We've seen the ways communities of color have been pitted against each other over the course of our history and current realities. So in not interrogating these things and the workings and working to heal and resist all of this conditioning, we inadvertently end up colluding with the system.

[34 : 03] So examine how you have internalized it. Part of this is individual work but a lot of it should happen collectively in community. Pitfall.

First, avoid ignoring your anger. This is hard for me. But anger in itself isn't bad. It can be a signal that injustice is happening and we know that injustice is happening to us and all around us.

But unchecked anger only festers and it can lead to our hearts becoming embittered. And anything that we are stuffing down and not acknowledging is going to find a way to come out and usually it's

in harmful ways.

Be honest with God like Jonah was. Jonah was bold in his anger talking to God and God can handle it. We have a big God who loves us and knows us and is close as our breath.

So don't ignore the anger. And finally, avoid the temptation to move in a way that is really pursuing the same system just in the reverse.

[35 : 19] Desiring the top become the bottom and the bottom become the top. Communities of color on the top and white folks on the bottom. Women and gender expansive folks on the top and men on the bottom.

Queer folks on the top and straight folks on the bottom. It's an understandable temptation but it doesn't actually bring in collective liberation.

Right? It brings punishment. It causes us to villainize each other and it leaves us with the status quo intact. There are multiple facets that make up our identity and power is always shifting room to room based off of who else is in there.

It's important to be aware of that as we seek to navigate power well. Instead of unilateral power which is always going to maintain a top and a bottom, foster a scarcity mindset and try to force us into either or thinking and ways of being, we need a different system all together.

One built on shared power or power with instead of power over. Power with operates in a completely different way from unilateral power and it is what will usher in the beloved community and bring collective liberation for all of us.

[36 : 43] Would y'all pray with me? God, thank you that you are indeed sheer grace and mercy.

Thank you that you are not easily angered, that you are rich in love and that you are always ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness.

help us to discern what is ours to do. Give us the courage to speak and the courage to listen. Be with us in our anger, in our healing, and on this long and winding road toward collective liberation. Amen.