

“Jesus was a Refugee and Love is a Homecoming”
 Advent 3C (December 16, 2018)
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone's shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

Last Sunday, NPR's All Things Considered did a story on The Slave Bible from the 1800s.¹ Michel Martin reported that the Bible is currently on display at the Museum of the Bible in Washington D.C. “Used by British missionaries to convert and educate slaves,” “what’s notable about this Bible,” says Martin, “is not just its rarity, but its content, or rather the lack of content. [The so-called Slave Bible] excludes any portion of text that might inspire rebellion or liberation.” “Anthony Schmidt, associate curator of Bible and Religion in America at the museum, says the first instance of this abridged version [of the Bible appeared in 1807, and was] titled, *Parts of the Holy Bible, selected for the use of the Negro Slaves, in the British West-India Islands ...*” According to Schmidt, “about 90 percent of the Old Testament is missing [and] 50 percent of the New Testament is missing.” “Put another way,” he continues, “there are 1,189 chapters in a standard protestant Bible. [The Slave] Bible contains only 232 [chapters].” (Clearly the Bible is a dangerous text for oppressors.) Passages that “could have prompted rebellion were removed from the Slave Bible. For example: [the portion of St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, which says,] ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’” A passage such as this that erases the distinction between slave and free, and declares all people equal, was considered to be too dangerous. And verses that reinforced the institution of slavery - verses that pro-slavery people liked to quote in the 1800s - [were preserved. Such as another passage from the New Testament that says,] ‘Slaves, be obedient to your masters ... , with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.’” The original purpose of this heavily edited Bible was to give the slaves just enough Bible to Christian-ize them, but not enough Bible to “incite rebellion.” “Educat[ing] African slaves [in this way],” says Schmidt, “would prepare them one day for freedom, but at the same time would not cause them to seek it more aggressively.”

Something must have been in the air in the early 1800s, because the Slave Bible wasn’t the only heavily edited Bible around. In 1804, Thomas Jefferson produced the first part of a two-volume text that we now call “The Jefferson Bible.”² Part two was completed in 1820. “The Jefferson Bible” is a shortened title. The actual title is a mouthful: “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth, being Extracted from the Account of His Life and Doctrines Given by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; Being an Abridgement of the New Testament for the Use of the Indians, Uncomplicated with Matters of Fact or Faith beyond the Level of their Comprehensions.” “The Jefferson Bible,” for short. What’s notable about this Bible is that Thomas Jefferson used a razor and glue to cut out from the four New Testament gospels most of the teachings of Jesus, leaving behind all the miraculous and supernatural stuff that Jefferson didn’t believe. He then pasted what he cut out into a new text. In a letter to John Adams, Jefferson described his meticulous work as follows: “In extracting the pure principles which [Jesus] taught, we ... have ... strip[ped] off the artificial vestments There [is] found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/09/674995075/slave-bible-from-the-1800s-omitted-key-passages-that-could-incite-rebellion>

² Cf., <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-thomas-jefferson-created-his-own-bible-5659505/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Bible

been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book ...” Jefferson went on to call this operation, extracting “diamonds [from] a dunghill.”

While most of us today don’t have the time (or patience) to cut and paste Bible verses in order to create a new Bible, the cutting-and-pasting operation is something scholars have long argued that we all do in our minds when we read the text. This is kind of cutting-and-pasting is more than just highlighting and underlining favorite inspirational verses in our personal Bibles at home. It’s a mental operation that affects how we read. Our identity, our state in life, and life experiences - these are our reading partners when we study scripture; or, maybe better, these are the lenses through which we read the text. Or, as Anthony Schmidt, the curator of the Slave Bible exhibit says, ““One of the points of the exhibit [is to demonstrate] that time and place ... shape how people encounter the Bible [P]eople don’t look at the Bible or approach the Bible or read the Bible in a vacuum, [he says]. [How they interpret it is] shaped by their social and economic context.”” My hope when people see the exhibit, he says, is that people will ““be more cognizant of why [they] read something [in scripture] a certain way.”” Schmidt’s point is one of the reasons why during the Civil Rights movement Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the white southern clergy who criticized him, could look at the same Bible and come away with completely different messages: Dr. King emphasizing justice and liberation; the white clergy emphasizing law-and-order.³

In my former life as an evangelical, I was a Calvinist, believing that before time God predestined and scripted all things, and that human beings are basically just living out the script now. It was an easy position to hold when reading a passage like, say, Isaiah 45 where the sovereign God is, as Isaiah says, “like no other ... Form[ing] light and creat[ing] darkness, ... mak[ing] weal and creat[ing] woe” It wasn’t such an easy position to hold when reading those passages where God interacts with humans, even changing course in response to human decisions - passages such as Jeremiah 18 where God is like a potter responding and adjusting to human clay. Jeremiah says that God will change plans based on human decisions. In other words, there’s no script, just divine hopes for us. As an evangelical Calvinist, I didn’t know what to do with passages such as Jeremiah 18 and the dozens and dozens of other passages like it in scripture; and so, while reading the Bible, I would hiccough over them; I would skip over them, and try to ignore them: read and hiccough, read and hiccough; cut and paste. Such a practice is pretty harmless when you’re a privileged, white, heterosexual, 23-year-old male, trying to figure out in the safety of seminary just how sovereign God is. But reading and hiccoughing, cutting and pasting, can be deadly when using the Bible as a weapon to tell a gender-fluid teen that God doesn’t love them because God only made two genders, Adam and Eve; or to tell a gay man that God doesn’t love him because of who he is; or to tell women to submit even to abusive men; or to tell slaves to obey their masters; or to tell Martin Luther King Jr. to stop breaking segregation law, because St. Paul says, “obey the governing authorities”; or to tell refugees and migrants fleeing hellish conditions that they have no welcome in this country of immigrants, because, as St. Paul says, “we need to obey the governing authorities,” and immigrants should obey the law. In the wrong hands, as feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “the Bible can be hazardous to our health.”

³ E.g., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”: https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230016/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular_requests/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf

Reading and hiccupping, cutting and pasting - like the Slave Bible or the Jefferson Bible - can affect how we connect scripture to our day. I have to confess that even though I've read that story we heard a moment ago from Matthew's gospel countless times about baby Jesus having to flee with his parents to Egypt, I never connected the dots until recently that the Holy Family was actually a refugee family fleeing political violence at home. I guess I always hiccupped over that implication of the story - the implication that the little child Jesus was a refugee. As Matthew tells that tale, Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father, is visited by an angel in a dream. The angel warns that the child is being hunted; and the angel orders Joseph to flee with his young family to Egypt. What's amazing about this story is its immediacy. Our English translation does a good job of conveying the sense of urgency in the Greek text. Joseph awoke from the dream, took the child and his mother, and immediately fled. It says they fled "during the night" - the very same night he had the dream. I imagine a panicked father - Joseph - awaking from his dream; rousing his young wife, Mary; frantically stuffing whatever necessary belongings they could grab in a moment's notice into a bag; gently gathering up their sleeping child; and running for the door out into the night as King Herod's gang of henchmen closed in. Matthew's story tells the story of the people of Israel in the Book of Exodus in reverse: Jesus in Matthew's story flees *to* Egypt; the people of Israel fled *from* Egypt - fled political violence in Egypt at a moment's notice (not even enough time to leaven their bread), becoming history's most famous "migrant caravan."

Scripture is stuffed full of stories about migrating peoples - people on the move in search of a safe home. Adam and Eve fled the garden of Eden. Cain fled to the East. Abraham and Sarah were wanderers, as was Jacob. Joseph - a victim of human trafficking - was sent away to Egypt as a slave, and then his brothers and the whole family of Israel migrated there, following after him. The Exodus story is about migration, as are the wilderness wandering stories. God even migrates with the wandering exodus people in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. God flees the temple in the prophecies of Ezekiel. The people of Israel were refugees during the Babylonian exile. Jesus urges his followers to flee Jerusalem before the Roman army sacked the city. Jesus himself was a migrant and refugee. St. Paul and many other early Christian missionaries migrated around the Roman world. In St. Peter's first letter, Christians are addressed as "aliens and exiles." In one of Jesus' most famous parables - the Parable of the Prodigal Son, a story we heard a moment ago - a wandering son is welcomed home by a loving father. And, the very roots of Christianity's Trinitarian theology - the very roots of the Christmas story we retell this time of year - are anchored in the soil of migration: that Christ migrated from heaven to become like us. As Deirdre Cornell writes in her book *Jesus was a Migrant* (our community read this Advent season), "Surely a God who migrated from heaven to be born to a refugee family - to belong to a people painfully and intimately versed in Exodus and exile journeys - surely this God would ask us to look for his presence among migrants."⁴

This Advent season we're reading scripture with a different set of lenses - a set of lenses fashioned by our current context, and the news from our southern border. The late Peter Gomes - that famous preacher at Harvard's Memorial Church - once said that while "the texts [of scripture] have not changed," the "climate of interpretation" and the "lenses" through which we read are ever-changing.⁵ Lenses shaped by recent stories - stories like that told by Senator Jeff Merkley, who, after visiting the tent city in Texas where migrant children are

⁴ Deirdre Cornell, *Jesus was a Migrant* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 12.

⁵ Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1996), 99.

being held, tweeted yesterday that the tent city is nothing more than a “child prison camp.” Lenses of interpretation shaped by stories - stories like that of the seven year old Guatemalan girl who died of dehydration and shock this week while in the custody of Border Patrol. Lenses shaped by stories - stories like those told by journalist Paola Mendoza,⁶ who interviewed refugees in the migrant caravan trying to claim asylum in the U.S. - refugees like 17 year old Jocelyn from Honduras, who, like Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus centuries ago, had to flee in the night from a gang of henchmen threatening her life. Jocelyn made it all the way to Mexico City, but was deported by Mexican officials back to Honduras, also during the night. Lenses shaped by stories to help us read scripture differently - stories like that of Jobel, a single father of five, who fled with his family to take refuge in a church in Honduras when a gang of henchmen - like King Herod’s henchmen of long ago - threatened his 17 year old son. They escaped the country by joining the migrant caravan. Stories. Stories that shape how we read - stories like that of Miley and her seven month old son - Miley, who reminds me of Mary and baby Jesus in that story told in Matthew’s gospel. Miley is currently at the U.S. border, but is afraid to cross and claim asylum, because she’s heard rumors that the U.S. government will take away her child. Going back home is not an option for her, but when asked if her journey was worth it, Miley’s eyes welled up with tears as she said, ““Before this journey, I didn’t know how strong I was. Now I know I can endure the unimaginable.””

Lenses shaped by stories that shape our theology - a theology we remember each December during Advent and Christmas: that God migrated from heaven to become like us. And, to quote again from Deirdre Cornell, “Surely a God who migrated from heaven to be born to a refugee family - to belong to a people painfully and intimately versed in Exodus and exile journeys - surely this God would ask us to look for his presence among migrants.” Amen.

⁶ <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a25322677/migrant-caravan-immigration-photos/>