

One New Book for the Preacher

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Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World, 2017)

Preaching in the age of Trump is no picnic. For over thirty years of ministry, my preacher friends and I have tried to be faithful to scripture and relevant to local, national, and world events, as well as to address the pastoral realities of the congregations we have served. These three decades have seen the multiple crises of rising urban homelessness and rural poverty, wars and rumors of wars, terrorist attacks, earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes, famines across continents, migrations of refugees, escalating gun violence, the frightening degradation of the environment, and the increasingly voluminous #MeToo movement. Through all of these critical moments and developments is woven a tangled and insidious web of racism.

So what's changed with Trump? Public discourse has deteriorated civility and escalated division. Rude disrespect for the other, including overt racist and sexist commentary, regularly engenders applause at big public rallies and occasionally erupts in evil on parade as in Charlottesville in the summer of 2017. Our nation's higher ideals are daily the fodder of ridicule, truth is ever called into question, and the free press has been deemed fake news. If there were ever a credible belief that we could be a forward thinking, generous society where people help each other as the arc of history bends toward justice, that feels now like a dashed dream as phrases like *the common good*, *freedom for all*, and *valuing human dignity* are virtually becoming meaningless in the public square.

Those of us seasoned preachers who have gained a fair measure of expertise for interpreting scripture, consulting biblical scholarship and theological resources in order to relate texts to the world around us, need a different kind of help now. We need more guidance exegeting current movements and social institutions in order to figure out what is happening in a rapidly changing cultural and political milieu. As I write this review on the heels of the Christine Blasey-Ford and Brett Kavanaugh hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, a preacher friend sent me a note lamenting, "I feel like America is slipping away. I have become increasingly aware that America is not a given. America is a choice. And it feels to me that elected leadership is choosing something other than the values of America I have assumed." The mantra from our seminary days of "faith seeking understanding" seems to have morphed into "despair clinging to a modicum of hope."

Since Trump was elected, my preacher friends and I have experienced the left-leaning folks telling us at the narthex door that we are not being prophetic enough while the right-leaning parishioners say they are tired of our sermons being too political. As I confessed to a cohort of pastoral colleagues recently, no matter the text, I feel like I have preached the same four-point sermon repeatedly for the last two years: the world is messed up; we have good reason to be distressed; the future is in God's hands; therefore, we have hope.

Searching for that hope, I am grateful for the scholars and writers of our time who help us better understand the culture into which we dare to proclaim a prophetic and pastoral word: Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Eboo Patel's *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. Whereas I used to lean on the likes of Frederick Buechner, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Maya Angelou for an eloquent and beautiful expression of meeting God at some unexpected intersection in order to drive a biblical sermon home, I now devour these new books about the tragedy of American culture, looking for wisdom and longing for illumination.

Among them, I have especially appreciated having Ta-Nehisi Coates as a conversation partner on the topic of race and the pervasive tentacles of racism in American history and current realities. He has helped this liberal white preacher see through the lens of the black experience in these troubled days of division. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* is a collection of essays originally published in *The Atlantic* during the Obama administration. The title is taken from the hauntingly wistful words of Thomas Miller, the black state legislator from South Carolina elected during Reconstruction after the Civil War, in that brief moment when black people outnumbered white people in the legislature until the south was "redeemed" by laws and terrorism that validated white supremacy. As the title suggests, Coates is now skeptical of possibilities for positive political change, and I can't help but wonder if that isn't due in part to his admitted atheism. This book is filled with important insights about race and culture from a distinguished black public intellectual, but fleeting moments of hopefulness seem to give way to pessimism, mistrust, anger, and resignation. Coates's indictment of left leaning liberals like me is every bit as searing as his assessment of the bigotry that pervades our political and cultural realms. I hear and believe him when he says, "The maintenance of white honor and whiteness remains at the core of liberal American thinking" (362), and having read him, I better understand my own complicity.

Each essay is chosen from one year between 2008 and 2016 and is introduced by a note that gives its context. The book's introduction and epilogue draw the themes together, but as a collection of essays written over eight years, the book lacks a certain coherence. Covering topics from fear of America's first black president to Michelle Obama's dawning sense of race, from the influence of Bill Cosby and Malcolm X to hip hop, from lessons of the Civil War to the Case for Reparations, the book converses with other voices, old and new. It reads in almost equal measure as memoir, social commentary, history, political critique, and even confession. While giving credit to Obama's season in power for his own rising success as a professional journalist, for example, Coates acknowledges his achievements are due in part to his assuaging the guilt of white liberals contending with our own white racism.

Just as the title *We Were Eight Years in Power* revisits how post-Civil War Reconstruction gave rise to new insidious forms of white supremacy, so Coates joins many others in explaining the election of Trump as a backlash to the Obama legacy. The book is meant to be unsettling, ending with the epilogue which both tries to explain and critique the election of Trump. Two years into the Trump presidency now,

I found myself longing for a next chapter that looks toward a more positive swing of the pendulum, but Coates is not optimistic. He continues to be an important conversation partner for any contemporary preacher seeking to sort out the racist mess of our reality, but we still need to count more on the scriptures for hope.