

Protagonist Corner

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In the midst of the uprisings in Baltimore, one of my colleagues, a white male like me, expressed the confusion coming across his facebook feed. “Some of my black friends are saying, ‘White people, it’s time for you stand up and say that black lives matter!’ Others are saying, ‘White people, it’s time for you to shut up and listen!’” My colleague and I tentatively agreed that both kinds of responses are called for in these times. The hard part is discerning when which response is required. Such is true not only for white people at the end of 2015, but more broadly, for the church in Advent. We are torn between a radical, active posture of living into a heavenly reign that has already invaded our world and a humble, empty-handed waiting for that reign to come to fruition.

Like the cyclical nature of Advent, we find ourselves circling around to the issue of race in America. More accurately, the whole nation finds itself spiraling around again to a reality that people of color navigate daily but that white people have the privilege (by and large) to ignore. The “peculiar institution” of slavery has forever marked the peculiar history of our nation, and preachers everywhere find ourselves uniquely equipped by the stories of our faith to address concrete, systemic sin and the pain that rises from it. I say uniquely equipped because the language of sin is more relevant to addressing contemporary racial wounds than any other.

Sin speaks of a condition that we cannot escape by our own choices. It is a concept that the American myth finds almost impossible to swallow, which is why it evokes so much resistance when spoken from American pulpits. And yet the word describes the reality in Baltimore, where I live, better than any other. What other word can account for the fact that every black man I know in this city has at least one story of a humiliating encounter with the police? What other word can account for the complex reality that studies of police officers show that all officers demonstrate an implicit bias against young black men, including officers who themselves are black? What other word can account for the deep disparities in household wealth, life expectancy, or the likelihood of going to prison than the word that makes clear that our best selves are marred by histories and cultures that shape us in ways beyond our choosing?

Conservatives, by and large, apply the concept of sin in individual, spiritualized ways that ignore historical realities. The gnostic Jesus that descends from this mythic cloud never says a mumbalin’ word about racial injustice, economic systems of oppression, or criminal policies that leave more black people disenfranchised today than during Jim Crow segregation.

Liberals, squeamish on sin, express worry that this language shapes a passive people who are forever washing their hands of responsibility, waiting for a Jesus of the least of these to come and save us while we sit by and do nothing. I’ve found the opposite to be true. Confession leads to a kind of truth-telling that makes relationship possible—first with God, but then with other people.

One of the inadvertent, negative results of the Civil Rights Movement is that white people learned to substitute correct language *about* race for *actual relationships* that cross racial boundaries. As a result, white people, on the whole, still live at a safe

distance, literally and figuratively, from the injustice leveled against people of color and the pain that results. From a distance, we can work on getting our talking points correct without ever risking ourselves in relationships that could challenge us and transform that pain into real healing.

The good news in Advent is first and foremost that Christ enters into that pain and actively transforms it. This is why black theologians can speak of the “black Christ” present in and among people of color. White people who are in relationship with black people know what they mean. There is a power that rises within the heart of the black community, a power most evident in the black church. It is the power of a people who have survived countless crucifixions who still sing of hope and the promised land that is just around the corner. Liberal white Christians, by and large, have treated black people as charity cases, a “cause” to be helped, when the truth of the matter is that the black church is a kind of clay jar that holds the truth of gospel.

Much has been written by white theologians about the decline of the power of the church in North America. But the gospel is alive and well, and has been for a long time, in the disestablished, vulnerable black church. In Advent, we are invited to see the places where our God enters, vulnerable and almost imperceptible, discounted by some in power, but pursued as a threat by the Herods of the world who recognize the true power that resides there.

The church is invited to meet Christ in this vulnerability: the church can’t stay still. The night after the uprisings in Baltimore, an invitation came from residents of Sandtown-Winchester where Freddie Gray was arrested before dying in a police van. The streets were like a war zone. People were afraid of police, gangs, and the National Guard. No one knew what might happen next. Police helicopters hovered all night, a constant, unnerving drone. The grocery store had burned down, and since it was the end of the month, some were already out of food. A number of us walked the streets and listened. Neighborhood leaders invited people to come and listen to those most deeply affected by the violence and unrest. So we gathered that night around tables brimming with food to listen to fears and to pray for a way forward.

I have walked those streets and others in our city many times since the unrest. With others in BUILD, a 37-year-old citizens’ power organization of churches, synagogues, schools, and community groups, I have challenged mayors, police commissioners, and business leaders to get out from behind their desks and into the streets to know the pain of the people we are all obligated to serve. Sometimes I have listened; other times I have argued with brothers and sisters of many colors as we have discerned where God is leading us, together, to meet Christ and how Christ is calling us to die to sin so that we might be alive to the new creation that we see rising from the ashes of our city of ruins.

In the weeks afterward, I have often found myself in conversations with white people outside of the city who are literally afraid to drive into it. I find myself feeling deeply sorry for them. Christ is alive, and they know him only as an idea, not as wounded flesh who speaks of life not from the distance of division and pain and suffering, but in the midst of it! The risen Christ is here, marked by violence but forever freed from it, and they still live in fear! A friend said to me recently, “White people need to have more courage in engaging these relationships.” Perhaps. Or maybe we all need to be reminded of where to find our Lord and the powerful joy that arises from those vulnerable places only because Christ lives there.