

One New Book for the Preacher

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TaNehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 152 pages.

I had a friend who was a church secretary for over forty years. She retired in 1983 and kept the congregation under her watchful eye until she died five years ago. She told me a story about when she was a girl growing up in Red Springs, North Carolina. A young black woman had come to live with her family, staying in a spare room. The girl had nowhere to go, and they took her in. She cleaned and washed and helped out for several months, becoming part of the family—until one night after midnight a loud knocking came at the door. When they opened it, there stood members of the local Ku Klux Klan, all bedecked in their robes and hoods. They had come for the young woman—and to save himself and his family, there was nothing that her father could do but hand her over. They never heard from her again.

My friend told me this story to explain why her father stopped attending church. He had recognized the voice of one of the men whose face was shrouded by a hood; he was the Clerk of Session of the Presbyterian Church.

I read *Between the World and Me* because I had previously read a June 2014 essay by Coates in *The Atlantic* called “The Case for Reparations.” (It remains available online.) Both the book and the article are required reading for Christian preachers (but especially white American preachers) in the weeks leading up to the 2016 elections and in the waning months of President Obama’s second term as our first African American president. I cannot guess your reactions to either book or article, but in fairness (trigger warning?) I begin with my own.

I am surprised at their impact upon my heart and mind since they captured my attention. Each holds me enthralled. To read them is to be humbled, surely, but also to be unexpectedly energized. I have been retired for nine years. I wish I were forty-five with the responsibility of a pulpit and a Church School classroom—and with the wisdom of accumulated years, a wisdom tempered and sobered by the re-emergence of public racism not heard in this country since my childhood and youth.

My reaction has also been influenced by serving a congregation in the capital of the Confederacy for twenty-five years, a church which had its beginnings eighteen years before the outbreak of the Civil War. The first pastor of Richmond, Virginia’s Second Presbyterian Church, Moses Drury Hoge, organized the church in 1843 and died while still pastor in 1899. I have been marinated in the stories, customs, and recollections of glories—and of wounds that have never healed.

Neither article nor book induced guilt, but rather in more ways than I can describe in this limited space, each produced a profound experience of God’s grace and providence, for me personally, yes, but also for the ragtag, predominantly white, mainline denominations that are embedded into the warp and woof of our fractured republic. Has America ever been other than fractured? The texts were revelatory. They awakened in me more realistic (and even penitent) understandings of my past

life and ministry, reminding me of forgotten encounters that will become evident as this article unfolds.

The readings help me understand what we glibly call “white privilege,” a limp, distorting euphemism that dares to account for the destruction and evil we (and our ancestors) have perpetrated on Africans, first of all—and then upon African Americans. My eyes are opened to how I personally (and we white people collectively) have essentially become who we are through the suffering of our black brothers and sisters in this land and people of color beyond these shores. This involves, surely, the entire racial myth upon which Western civilization has been built, at least since the beginnings of the European enslavement of Africans and codified into law in Virginia in the seventeenth century. Such legal violence also existed in Massachusetts where it was equally harsh. The “ruling poobahs” of Boston were required to declare that Phyllis Wheatley (the first published African American poet, 1753–84) was human before her poetry was allowed in print. Only human beings were permitted to publish, and by law, Wheatley was not human.¹

The suffering and destruction that our brothers and sisters have endured is not only about our wealth, as many recent books have documented.² That suffering undergirds the ways in which we continue to interpret reality: our faith, theology, culture, philosophy, science, and history. It has been and will long continue to be the foundation of our existence as a nation.

Between the World and Me is an extended letter to Coates’s son Samori. It is part memoir and part instruction, an autobiographical sharing of wisdom about what it means to be (and to grow up) black in America. The letter is filtered through the lens of personal experience, family, and Coates’s own history: as a child of the ghetto, as a student at Howard University, as a husband and father. The climax of the book is the account of a college friend’s murder by an African American policeman who was never held accountable. His friend was an upper class privileged black student, the son of a physician. The last twenty pages or so of the book is the account of an extended conversation with the student’s mother, Dr. Jones.

Coates’s writing is poetic, with phrases and expressions worth savoring and mulling over for their aptness and beauty. This single sentence summarizes the black experience in the (so called) New World, in which Coates describes the duration and meaning of slavery: “They transfigured our bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.” Presbyterian (and much institutional Christian) wealth was made by cotton and tobacco and the buying and selling of slaves. Many institutions, sacred and secular, still derive their economic sustenance from these enterprises.

Coates sees much, if not most, of white America as built upon the continued destruction of black bodies. He writes that he had to learn (from his father, painfully) how to protect his own body from violation. He realizes that it could be taken from him by a whim, by a miscalculation, as was the life of his friend at Howard. The police had mistakenly tagged this capable, high achieving student as a drug dealer, which was why a policeman followed him into his middle class neighborhood and finally shot and killed him. This destruction continues into the present and is manifest now by police shootings. The inspiration that provoked the “letter” to Samori was Coates’s son’s reaction to the announcement that the officer who shot Michael Brown³ was acquitted. He saw that Samori was weeping.

Even though Coates is a self declared atheist who has no use for the notion that

the suffering of black Americans is redemptive, his writing sometimes betrays his own immersion in black Christianity. The suffering of his people is what finally allows him to see that he is not special because he is black and helps him understand that this suffering is part of all humanity's suffering of which he himself is a part.

The foundation of our so called democracy is based upon an artificial definition of race. "I saw," he writes, "that what divided me from the world was not anything intrinsic to us [as black Americans or black people] but the actual injury done to us by people intent on naming us, *intent on believing that what they have named us matters more than anything we could ever actually do.* (Italics are mine.) In America, the injury is not being born with darker skin . . . but in everything that happens after." His point is most poignantly illustrated by President Barak and Michelle Obama.

My reading of Coates draws out of me recollections, as iron filings are drawn to a magnet. I remember an insight I gained as an interim pastor in Nashville. In November, 2009, I attended a several day long symposium commemorating (at the same time) the 20th Anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 50th Anniversary of the Nashville protests for equal accommodations. As I listened to pastors from East Germany speaking about their experiences on the same stage with pioneering pastors of the Civil Rights movement, I began to realize that I, too, grew up in a police state (in Alabama and in Georgia). Not for me, of course, but for African Americans. They had no law enforcement or police to protect them from whatever mischief whites might connive to do against them: whether lying about their conduct, outright theft of their possessions, verbal and physical abuse, or lynching. No more protection than East German Christians could expect from police in their Communist state. Coates reminds us in this book that African Americans in many places are barely more safe today.

Coates writes to Samori after listening at length to Dr. Jones, the mother of the slain Howard student, speak about the death of her own son: "Don't pin your struggle on their (white Americans) conversion." That word of advice is passed on to Samori.

Might this not be where the church of Jesus Christ may legitimately stake a claim? *Between the World and Me* tells not a new story, but the old, old story of the Western and American experience. *Between the World and Me* offers preachers and congregations, in the words of Leonard Pitts, "the courage to confront the history that made us."⁴ If courage is not what we need, then the words and the compelling narratives of our complicity in and profit from slavery (from Jim Crow and segregation, from private prisons, and from the continuing, if sporadic, war on African Americans in our cities and towns) give us preachers the warrant we need to bring Holy Scripture to bear upon our ongoing, and recently re-articulated, American dilemma.

We could begin with an extended meditation on Deuteronomy 15:12 - 15, which Coates uses as a superscription before his article in *The Atlantic* (June 2014):

And if thy brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing today. (KJV)

In addition to Deuteronomy, there are the teachings in Leviticus regarding wealth and poverty, the remarkable story of Naboth's vineyard in I Kings, and the writings of the prophets.

There is a veritable goldmine of narratives from Luke and Acts: the story of Zacchaeus is a model text, and do not forget the hapless Ananias and Sapphira. There is the parable in Luke of the rich man and Lazarus, which concludes with Jesus' most chilling words in any of the four gospels: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, then neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (16:31).

For those readers who have access to the Reformed documents, there are many confessions, especially the contemporary ones, which issue strong calls to social justice. But equally helpful perhaps, and more surprising, are the ancient ones, like The Westminster Shorter Catechism, as well as John Calvin's exposition of the Ten Commandments. Catholic Social Teaching as well as encyclicals cover these matters as far back as the 19th Century (*Rerum Novarum*, 1891).

Finally, all of our homiletical excursions into such delicate and difficult matters in white pulpits need to be undertaken with genuine humility and not a hint of arrogance or of that spurious "enlightenment" which so easily assumes a position of superiority when we stand "six feet above contradiction." The word of God convicts, of course, but the word of God convicts preacher and hearer together, and never more so than after reading *Between the World and Me*. Without genuine humility how will we be credible?

Therefore I believe the overriding text for such preaching (or in a series of sermons) will be best taken from St. Paul in 1st Corinthians 1: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" As Paul begins, he writes, "Consider your call." We white denominations need to consider our call. Is it now a call to repentance? All along the ages we helped forge this country out of a wilderness, land that we stole mostly with violence from other nations. And we helped to build, with prayer and fasting and word and sacrament, the economy of our nation—North and South—on chattel slavery. By the standards of the gospel, that makes us weak and foolish indeed. But out of such foolishness, weakness, and depravity, God has brought grace upon grace: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, the Grimke sisters of Charleston, South Carolina, Rosa Parks, Andrew Goodman (martyred in Mississippi in 1964), Martin Luther King, Jr., and countless African American congregations who believed that God's promises were true. And those promises were true, are true even now, and by their witness and the witness of God's word, ever will be. God has all along this toilsome way called also as witnesses unnamed and unremembered ones who have followed and carried the cross—and have given an eternal witness. There has rarely been a more appropriate time for such preaching.

We speak now against the day when our Southern people who will resist to the last these inevitable changes in social relations, will, when they have been forced to accept what they at one time might have accepted with dignity and good will, will say: "Why didn't someone tell us this before? Tell us this in time?"

William Faulkner, in response to Southern white reaction to the 1954 Supreme Court decision to integrate schools.

Notes

1. Told by Dr. Katie Canon at a gathering at Union Presbyterian Seminary in 2001.
2. Among others, Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told, Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).
3. The young African American shot by police in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014.
4. Leonard Pitts, "Courage to Confront Our History," *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 1, 2016.