

Sermon for 3 Lent C  
St. John's, Gloucester  
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March 20, 2022

Race is totally made up; racism is totally real. Race is a concept invented to “prove” that White bodied people are superior to people of other skin colors, based on false science. Racism is based in fear. It uses this bogus idea to justify enslaving and abusing people and results in laws, structures and behaviors that are completely real—structures that have caused and still cause uncountable harm.

While “race” is a modern idea, the practice of demonizing and oppressing other people has been around for a long time. Our story from Exodus is a perfect example of both the made-up nature and real consequences for demonizing people who look or act differently than your group. The Hebrew Joseph was sold by his brothers to a trader and taken to Egypt in about 1900 BC. He eventually rose to prominence in Pharaoh's court and with his wise stewardship saved the whole country from famine; he also moved his extended family, the 12 tribes of Israel, into Egypt and saved them as well. He was a hero to the Egyptians, and the Hebrew people were accepted and esteemed.

But over time, the stories about Joseph faded, and the Hebrews started being seen as “those people.” They dress funny, speak funny, don't worship Egyptian gods. A Pharaoh arose who didn't know about Joseph and looked with alarm on how numerous the Hebrews were becoming. Why, they could take over the country! Fear! So the narrative builds—the Hebrews aren't real Egyptians, they are lazy, they are oversexed, producing all those babies, they are stupid, only good for physical labor. And then laws are passed, restricting what they can do. And they are forced into work; they have no army to fight back. They become slaves and then the Pharaoh moves into genocide, decreeing that the midwives kill all the boy Hebrew babies.

You see how a made-up idea causes real and terrible outcomes? When once the Hebrew people were revered and esteemed, over time fear leeeeeeeads to beliefs that they are bad, inferior people. Leading to slavery, oppression, death. And they cried out to God to save them.

Racism is a huge issue in this country, that we are maybe finally starting to own up to. I've started reading The 1619 Project by Nikole Hannah-Jones and a whole host of historians and writers. The book's claim is that enslavement of Black people is not a late, Southern problem in a country pledged to the freedom of all, but something that has been part of this country's DNA from the very beginning. Preserving slavery and racism has been enshrined and embedded in our laws, structures and behaviors from 1619 until today.

You might know that first African slaves were brought to the colony of Jamestown in 1619, 150 years before the American Revolution. But did you know that Massachusetts was the first colony to legalize slavery in 1641, next followed by Connecticut, Maryland, New York and New Jersey? In 1676, white and Black indentured servants and slaves joined forces against rich White Virginians in Bacon's Rebellion. The ensuing fear of uprisings resulted in the passing of “slave codes” in Virginia that associated skin color with slavery and made it hereditary; Whites, no matter their economic status, would have more rights and would always be “higher” than Blacks, because to be Black in Virginia was to be a slave.

Most of the founding fathers were slave-holders and many lived in Virginia, the colony with the most slaves. After the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the British governor of Virginia threatened to free the slaves there; fear of slave freedom then moved Washington, Jefferson and Madison to become active revolutionaries. When they were framing the Constitution, they could have abolished slavery. Many clearly understood the hypocrisy of advocating for freedom and rights while keeping one fifth of the population enslaved, so they covered up references to it. Yet, the document protected enslavers' "property," i.e. enslaved peoples, allowed militias to put down uprisings of enslaved people, and still required free states to turn over runaways to masters from slave states. While the Declaration of Independence claims the right of men to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the Constitution puts into law that it is OK to own other people, because those people are Black and actually not real human beings.

It is no overstatement to say that slavery (and also destruction of Indigenous peoples and cultures) have been part of our entire history, AND that the attitudes and structures that have supported this racism still are in place today. Why is there such a wealth gap between Whites and Blacks, Whites and Indigenous people? Why do health disparities exist, even across similar economic strata? Why are Black people jailed at much higher rates than Whites, and killed by police for driving while Black, walking while Black, shopping while Black? Why have we Whites been taught to fear Black people, Black men especially, and it's just a gut reaction not connected to any reality?

Moses was destined as a Hebrew boy baby to be killed, but his mother hid him and cleverly made sure he would end up in the hands of Pharaoh's daughter, who raised him as a privileged royal Egyptian. He probably had no idea for years and years that he was one of "those people"—those terrible, dirty, lazy Hebrews who had to be beaten to keep them in line. And then one day, he figures it out. "But I'm not like that!" And then he visits the Hebrews, talking to them, learning about them. Maybe he even meets his birth family. And this terrible outrage starts smoldering in him—outrage and shame! He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and in fury he strikes the Egyptian, killing him. Moses flees into the desert.

It was there, years later, that God came to him in the burning bush, today's story. "Moses, I have work for you to do. Go back to Egypt; you are going to lead my people out of slavery into freedom. Go to Pharaoh." Go back? To face his own people, whom he abandoned? To face the Egyptian powers, who could punish him for murder? Maybe that's why his first reaction is, "NO WAY! You have the wrong person!" What a set up to potentially be feared and rejected, even killed by either or both group!

Imagine being connected in this way to both oppressor and oppressed! He is Egyptian, he is Hebrew! God knew that this would be useful. But it meant that Moses had to face his past, his adopted family's dark secrets, the strength and the suffering of his own people. It was the only way forward, to only way towards liberation.

In this country, the deck has been stacked for hundreds of years against people of color. White people—you, me, most people in this congregation, in this area—have benefitted from racism, even though we have not consciously created this system. We are oppressors—not something anyone wants to admit. As followers of Jesus, we don't get the easy out—"I didn't know; I

didn't make the system." Doesn't matter. We have to do the painful work of learning and acknowledging our real history. That this country was built on racism—

on the land and the backs and the deaths of many peoples of color. And the truth that so many people and cultures made and still make amazing contributions that we have never heard about. Once our eyes are opened, we have to change. And honestly, going through life fearing and demonizing other people is not a Jesus way to live. Accepting our truth means grieving the rosy picture that we were taught that is not true; it means working through feelings of guilt and shame; it means confessing that we aren't exactly who we thought we were, it means accepting a bigger, more complex view of the world.

And then it means working to change, to do better, to create a more just society, to make reparations. Yes, maybe even to give back our inherited wealth!

My friend Eileen married into a family with a lot of wealth. She recently found out that the great-grandfather of that family was a lead chemist in the company that polluted and pretty much destroyed the sacred lake of the Onondaga people in NY State. The fate of the lake is mentioned in the chapter "The Sacred and the Superfund" in Robin Wall Kimmerer's book Braiding Sweetgrass. Eileen is gathering other family members together to talk about this part of the family history and to ask, "What can we do? How can we use our wealth to address the harm that was done to this lake and Onondaga peoples to whom it belongs?" This requires great emotional and spiritual strength to face up to history and try to bring healing and restitution.

My great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were missionaries in West Africa in the late 1800's. That was upheld as an exotic and glorious part of our family history. But now I'm thinking about this differently. While the missionary station's emphasis was on training and bringing skills to the native peoples there—along with Christian belief, I am sure—what was really going on? What larger system was in play? Was European knowledge helpful to people who had their own skills and ways of doing things? I don't know, but I know I am looking at this piece of my family history differently. And while we are not wealthy, we have always been rich in education. Is there a way to spend my wealth, my education to empower people who didn't get that chance or to strengthen and uphold their own cultural wisdom?

Moses had to face his history—who the Egyptians were, who his Hebrew people were. It was hard. He made all kind of excuses why he wasn't the right person for the job. But God did not relent, and used him to become the greatest prophet and leader of the Jewish people. What are we called to do? How are we called to face our past and work to bring justice and restoration into our piece of the world? Amen.