

# Come This Wilderness – Abolition and the Gospel, Part 1

June 8, 2020 – David R. Weiss

*NOTE: In this series of posts\* I'm NOT offering a detailed explanation of how police abolition would work—there are others who can do that far better than me. Rather I'm presenting a series of images to help white Christians in particular hear in these calls to Defund or Abolish the Police some surprising echoes of biblical themes ... and to encourage us to consider whether God is doing a new thing once again today. I did not set out to write this series; this one came tumbling out ... and then the others started to follow.*

I hear the nervous shuffling of feet among my family and friends. From some the derisive laughter that carries more than a hint of unease beneath attitude. I'm uneasy, too. I do not know what lies ... out there, up ahead. I only know what lies behind—and that I am not going back.

Defund, dismantle policing?! The challenges—and the possibilities—run *far* deeper than either phrase or any sound byte can suggest. I may unpack some of them in another essay. Here I only want to re-frame the emotions that rise within us at the prospect of such unimaginable change.

Because I wonder. Were there any Egyptians who—having endured those ten ruinous, calamitous, riotous plagues—chose to pack their bags and leave with the Hebrews on that first Exodus?

I mean, I really wonder. If I had seen how their God inspired them to yearn for lives they'd not yet known, to break at last their years of bondage—which, plagues or not, meant *choosing wilderness* as their way out—had I seen this with my own eyes, would I have had the courage then, to leave behind my comfort, *long built on the back of their servitude*, to join them on a journey toward some ... imaginary promised place?

I'd like to think I know, but all I can do is wonder. If all I knew (besides their brutal lot in life—inextricably tied to my personal peace) was that, beyond the dried up seabed, they were headed somewhere marked on the compass only as lying in the direction of Beyond. And toward something called Beloved. Would I have lifted my Egyptian feet to walk besides those former Hebrew slaves?

Standing as I am—as you are, too—at the edge of a land I have never seen, I honestly cannot fathom what it means to safeguard a community's life after defunding, dismantling the police. But, for that matter, just as honestly, had I been an Egyptian or a wealthy Southerner (likely even a barely-getting-by Southerner), I suspect I could not have fathomed what it would mean to reshape my life without slaves beneath—their oppression the unquestioned infrastructure deemed essential for life back then.

But even in my not knowing, I remain persuaded (against my own fears) that they—slaves, black people, Native Americans, undocumented immigrants—*know things we do not know*. Things we cannot imagine. I don't think they know the route to that next place. But they know, better than all the rest of us put together, the folly of reforming an institution whose very formation (via Southern slave patrols) was intended to *unform* the idea of freedom in those to whom freedom was denied.

The Exodus tale agrees, it seems. The story says—to be as pointed about it as possible—that of all the policy papers that might've discussed “the future of slavery in Egypt,” *the truest point of view came from the underside, carried by the cries, the anguish and the anger of those enslaved*. And if their cries questioned the value of even robust reforms and opted instead to defund and dismantle Pharaoh's slave economy and culture by their Exodus, then our Scriptures say that viewpoint carries truth. Although, in truth, we've done our best to tame that tale, contain it to another time and place. Surely such disruptive steps for freedom have no claim to truth today.

But I wonder. Because the logic—the *theo*-logic, God-driven understanding—of that story seems to say that still today those who feel a knee laid heavy on their neck have uncanny insight into the damning ways that persons and societies, cultures and institutions, “innocent” policies and practices prioritize white knees over black necks. So, I'm uneasy, yes, but I can't help but wonder.

Because to bring it to *this* point, that ancient sacred tale tells me today that black people have a type of knowledge—*an expertise*—about the prospects for reforming the police that those of us who grew up never worrying about a knee upon our neck ... simply do not have. Their knowing is borne of lives ground up generation after generation, borne of labor the wealth of which wound up mostly in our hands (and homes) not theirs, borne of rights ever bounded to ensure our rights (and wrongs) held sway. And now their knowing hums a steady searing truth about the whole project of policing: “All that is familiar, stable, safe ... *is unsafe for you.*”

We wouldn’t doubt that those ancient Hebrews heard as much in the groans that tolled their hours day by day by day. We wouldn’t question their wisdom in choosing wilderness over all that they had ever known. But still we count it prudent to call for slow and measured moves to ease the discomfort of our black siblings just enough to keep them off the streets and keep the system safe ... for us.

We, who have blindly benefitted from all that is so perniciously familiar that it passes just for “normal,” we cannot fathom why anyone would think the unfamiliar, unknown, uncharted idea of life beyond the police could possibly be wise. *But they know.* And in their knowing they make demands that shake us and our good sense to the very core. Alas.

I hear the nervous shuffling of feet among my family and friends. From some the derisive laughter that carries more than a hint of unease beneath attitude. I’m uneasy, too. I do not know what lies ... out there, up ahead. I only know what lies behind—and that I am not going back.

I am uncertain, as you are. Behind me the rubble of so many buildings (only some of which lined our streets, while others towered within our hearts and minds). Ahead, this sudden, unexpected—dare I say, miracle of—dry land where once a sea had blocked the way. And there beyond: this wilderness. Out there, perhaps, a place where we might be ... Beloved. Together. Who knows. Only the journey will tell.

But I say, with fierce and fraught resolve, Come this wilderness. Come.

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NOTE: Twenty-four years ago, while teaching a First-Year Seminar on Intro to Bible at Notre Dame, it was common practice to begin my class with a prayer. In September 1996 I wrote this prayer to open our class the day we discussed the Exodus. Time to pull it out and use it again.

God of freedom and justice, give us the wisdom to feel a bit of fear as we read these passages. Give us the uncomfortable honesty to see that we today stand closer to Egypt than to the Hebrew slaves. In a world where many live like slaves so that a relative few can live like kings, *we are among those who wear purple.* When third world citizens—or when the poor in our own cities—clamor for justice, too often and too easily, like Pharaoh, we ignore your demand that we let your people go. Forgive us, Lord. Do not harden our hearts, but soften them. Awaken in us feelings of compassion. If we would truly be your people, move us to place ourselves alongside those persons whose company you have chosen to keep: the weak, the forgotten, and the outcast. Exodus means freedom for slaves, Lord. We know that. But for royalty, Exodus means sacrifice. Give us the courage—and the humility—not to resist the freedom you intend for others. Indeed, give us the courage—and the humility—to welcome their freedom as the basis for our own. AMEN.

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## Throwing Jesus Off a Cliff – On Abolition and the Gospel, Part 2

June 30, 2020 – David R. Weiss

The congregation ... was pissed. (Okay, Luke says “filled with wrath/rage” (KJV/NRSV) or simply “furious” (NIV), but “pissed” works, too.) In fact, they were so pissed, that this synagogue sermonette, the very first public message in which Jesus announces his “platform,” *is nearly his last*. Luke tells us that the congregants “filled with rage, got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” Luckily, for Jesus, Luke adds quite matter-of-factly, “But he [Jesus] passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” (The full scene is in Luke 4:16-30.)

It isn't entirely clear what so provokes their anger, but there are a few clues. Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Some scholars note that Jesus stops reading right before the ‘really good stuff,’ where it says: “And the day of vengeance of our God.” (Is. 61:2) That is, Jesus announces good news to the Jews, but he stops right before he's supposed to announce judgment on the Gentiles.

Luke describes their reaction as being “amazed at his gracious words” (NRSV), but the Greek behind “amaze” is more ambivalent than we might guess. It can mean ‘puzzled,’ even ‘disoriented,’ and if his listeners were waiting to hear about God's anger being unleashed against their enemies, then perhaps they were, in fact, “puzzled, disoriented at his gracious words [because there was no vengeance in them.]” But Jesus doesn't leave it there. Apparently sensing their desire for an angrier God (angry at the Gentiles, of course!), Jesus takes a teachable moment ... and rubs salt in it. He says he's brought no miracles with him to his hometown, and reminds them of two key incidents in the lives of other prophets when God's grace was poured out precisely *upon Gentiles* rather than Jews. No wonder they're pissed. Hometown boy—“Joseph's son”! (you know, the handyman's boy!)—grows up, forgets where he came from, and snubs his own people.

No wonder these folks are ready to throw Jesus off a cliff. *But we are, too.*

And that's what I want to talk about today. In case you missed it, *Jesus has just placed abolition of prisons, police, and ICE at the heart of his gospel message*. He's named the poor, the prisoners, and the oppressed as the central recipients of the Lord's favor. And those blind who recover their sight? Well, there will be others whose actual vision Jesus restores later in the gospel accounts, but in this passage—given the context and the parallelism often used in Hebrew poetry (this is Isaiah's prophetic poetry after all)—“the blind” are those who have been in solitary confinement, now blinking their eyes against the light as they are drawn up out of a dark pit where they've been held.

For Jesus, *abolition is God's work*. Yet many of us, when we hear “Defund the Police” or “Abolish the Police,” cannot help but say “What?! Wait, you can't do that!” And we say it as good Christians committed to “law and order” in our communities. But ... when we say that on impulse, *we are the ones rushing to throw Jesus off a cliff*. (And even as I say that, I'm looking for the nearest exit in case any of my good Christian friends start looking for a cliff with my name on it!)

But seriously, if Jesus declares that abolition is God's work (which he does!), and if Jesus claims God's work as *his work* (which he does!), *then he also commends abolition to us as our work*. That would be ... discipleship. And if we find that so hard to believe today, that says more about the domesticated Jesus that's been preached to us than about the foolishness of the idea itself. I'd argue that Jesus died in faithful witness to God's abolitionist agenda—and that the church was born as a resurrection community bearing witness to abolition in its imagination and, at least initially seeking to live it out in its life. So maybe we should, too.

I'm not even close to being an expert on abolition as a philosophy or practice or strategy or policy. But I've spent the last several decades listening for the rising call of justice in the biblical tale, and in my initial reading in abolitionist literature I hear *a lot* that resonates with biblical faith. I'll write more about some of these things in the coming days. Here are just a few images to get started.

The historical truth of American policing is not pretty. It is wholly bound up with white supremacy and protecting the property and wealth of the rich. In the South this took the shape of slave patrols specifically commissioned to terrorize slaves into submission and to capture any who sought their freedom. It was a system designed to attract, cultivate, and reward racist sadists—most of whom went to church every

Sunday. After slavery ended the slave patrols helped birth the KKK as well as the Southern police whose job was keeping Black people in their place. In the North policing originated in the need of the wealthy to control the restless masses of poor, immigrants, and Blacks. In a manner only slightly less brutal than Southern slave patrols, Northern police were used to harass and intimidate and brutalize—particularly those who agitated for fair wages or working conditions, or who simply lamented their grinding poverty, or even those who just dared too raucously to celebrate life.<sup>1</sup>

In other words—listen carefully—from *their inception as organized rural-local-state forces, police have been those whose actions Jesus' words in Luke 4 were precisely aimed to overturn*. It is fair to say that there is no chapter of American history in which police have not posed a threat to the safety of black, brown, and red bodies in this country. This is not to indict every individual officer, but it is to utterly indict the police system. Policing was established to make sure that Mary's *Magnificat* was never more than a quaint song that soared in choral strains but *never* took shape in the streets of America.

When 'Defund' and 'Abolish' started showing up on posters and in hashtags everywhere, a lot of people second-guessed the "branding" of those phrases. *They can't be serious, so why use phrases that sound so absolute? Besides which the phrases (which must be mostly evocative, since they can't possibly be serious) are too negative*. These are the reactions of persons who've never had their blood run cold when a police light flashes behind them. And I don't mean a momentary racing of nerves—I've had that when stopped for speeding. I mean the chilling of blood that tells you *your life is in danger*. Once you've known that fear, then 'Defund'—or better yet—'Abolish' are not at all negative phrases. They're life-giving, liberating utterances. The very fact that white people saw fit to second-guess them just reveals how little we know of the desperation that characterized the people Jesus set at the center of God's abolitionist energy.

Would you believe that in the 1970's—I was hitting my teenage years then—there were actually penal experts who expected prison abolition to happen ... soon?<sup>2</sup> There was a growing sense that prisons were not effective either at deterrence or rehabilitation and that a civilized society could—of course—do better. And then you know what shifted? Well, a bunch of things. Civil rights threatened to let that *Magnificat* echo in American life until the New Jim Crow rolled in. Economic shifts and political shifts also played a role. But ... *so did Christianity*. That's right. As mainline liberal denominations waned and evangelical Christianity rose, so did the ease with which we as a public imagined that vengeful God that Jesus' first audience longed for. Christianity slipped from (an admittedly limited) vision of a renewed society to an interior, moralistic faith that traded in fear of otherness and prepared a nation to cast "others" of all sorts endlessly into cages.

In July 1980, as he accepted the Republican presidential nomination Ronald Reagan claimed God as the chaplain for his presidency, asking "Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely?" Meanwhile Black men continue to cry out, "I can't breathe." Moments later he concluded, "God Bless America"—the first time a presidential nominee used those words in a speech. He later used the same phrase to end his State of the Union address—as has every president since then. During his eight years in office the prison population rose by more than 300,000 persons, effectively doubling—and disproportionately putting persons of color behind bars. It's fair to say that Reagan publicly—presidentially—*baptized* mass incarceration as a Christian endeavor. And no president since has dared to do otherwise.

Jesus, however, only ever announced an abolitionist God. *It might be time for us to do the same*.

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<sup>1</sup> "Origins of the Police," David Whitehouse: [www.libcom.org/history/origins-police-david-whitehouse](http://www.libcom.org/history/origins-police-david-whitehouse); "The History of Policing in the United States," Gary Potter: [www.plsonline.eku.edu/insideloook/history-policing-united-states-part-1](http://www.plsonline.eku.edu/insideloook/history-policing-united-states-part-1)

<sup>2</sup> For this paragraph and the next see Joshua Dubler and Vincent W. Lloyd: *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons*, Oxford University Press, 2020, esp. pp. 65-103.

## Follow the Drinking Gourd – Abolition and the Gospel, Part 3

July 4, 2020 – David R. Weiss

*NOTE: In this series of posts (beginning [here](#) and [here](#)+) I'm NOT offering a detailed explanation of how police abolition would work—there are others who can do that far better than me. Rather I'm presenting a series of images to help white Christians in particular hear in these calls to Defund or Abolish the Police some surprising echoes of biblical themes ... and to encourage us to consider whether God is doing a new thing once again today.*

*+ "Come This Wilderness," June 8, 2020; "Throwing Jesus Off a Cliff," June 30, 2020.*

"Follow the drinking gourd." When Black people escaped from slavery and began their flight to freedom, this phrase served as their all-natural GPS system. Traveling by night to avoid capture-beating-and-return or summary execution by the police,\* they looked to the night sky and "followed the drinking gourd" (the Big Dipper, used to locate the North Star) as a heavenly compass to ensure their northward movement.<sup>3</sup>

\*Yes, police were called "slave patrols" at the time but they later *became* the police, and until we see—and feel—the weight of that deadly *and unbroken legacy* between Black people and armed patrols, we haven't yet even begun a conversation that acknowledges their history ... which is our history from the other side.

Perhaps this phrase—"follow the drinking gourd"—can help us white people<sup>4</sup> understand the twinned meaning of phrases like Defund the Police and Abolish the Police. They strike us as impracticably, indeed foolishly immediate and as well as frightfully absolute. They're neither ... and both ... and, well, it's complicated. No seasoned abolitionist (the movement for abolition has been around *for decades*, so, yes, *there are seasoned scholar-activists of abolition*) expects total defunding and abolition will happen overnight.

Still, unlike some of the memes initially circulating on Facebook and some of the comments appearing in news articles, for those who identify as abolitionist, this call to abolish is absolute (and they would say it's the delay that remains frightful), even if they recognize it won't be immediate. And only if we can also hold in mind this paradox of 'absolute-though-not-yet' can we begin to really reckon the challenge that abolition poses to our world today.

So let's return to that drinking gourd. The end goal of following it was uncompromisingly absolute: freedom in the North (the Northern states or Canada). Nobody followed the drinking gourd with a goal less than that. However *the practical meaning* of following the drinking gourd could be quite different from one context to another. Does it mean cross an open field or hug the edge? Follow a riverbank or ford the stream? Skirt a mountain or wind one's way to the top and over? Bide your time—or run like hell? "Follow the Drinking Gourd." It's one phrase with a singular admonition—an uncompromisingly absolute end goal—and yet a multitude of ways to put into practice.

So, too, with defunding and abolishing the police. Given our present political and social realities, abolition won't happen next week or next year. But before we place too much weight on the reality of those social conditions (which I'll address in another essay), it's important to be clear: some large portion of the challenging social conditions that have seemed to make police so necessary are the direct result of our having decided as a nation (ruled largely by white Christian men) that we would

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<sup>3</sup> It's unclear just how historical the now famous song "Follow the Drinking Gourd" is. But, whether the song, with its detailed "map" of verses, traces back to the Underground Railroad or was a later creation that honored the many northward journeys made, there seems to be no doubt about "the drinking gourd" as a reference to the Big Dipper to maintain a northerly route.

[www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/Collection\\_Story.htm](http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/Collection_Story.htm); [www.casanders.net/music-history/the-true-story-of-follow-the-drinking-gourd](http://www.casanders.net/music-history/the-true-story-of-follow-the-drinking-gourd); [www.freedomcenter.org/enabling-freedom/history](http://www.freedomcenter.org/enabling-freedom/history).

<sup>4</sup> I'm following the Columbia Journalism Review in choosing to capitalize Black but not white as a racial designation. [www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php](http://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php)

rather invest in police than in societal justice. *We made that choice and built the brokenness of our world around that decision.* But that's another essay.

As with following the drinking gourd, the pursuit of police abolition will happen step-by-step—year-by-year—and will follow different paths in different places. And yet, just as for those who followed the drinking gourd, the end goal is also uncompromisingly absolute: *abolition, a community without prisons and without police.*

Here, too, I'll ask you to bracket for the moment whether such a community is truly possible or purely utopian. I'll argue in a later essay that the best reason for believing it's possible is that *if it isn't, we all die.* The only path forward toward a livable future is a path that involves the renunciation of capitalism and its exploitation of both people and planet. That path is obviously fraught with complication. But, besides being abolitionist, it is also *PROFOUNDLY CHRISTIAN* and if we cannot imagine it as truly possible and worthy of our best imagination and most concerted energy then we have already betrayed our children and grandchildren to a future wracked by both human and natural violence the scale of which humanity has never known. But that's another essay, too.

Bottom line in this essay: despite their resounding call, the movement to Abolish the Police is not about simply trying to erase police forces from our communities tomorrow—*except that, of course, it is.* And only as we acknowledge that paradoxical character can we fathom the true nature of this call.<sup>5</sup>

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, at 70 one of the Black matriarchs of abolition, has been working on prison abolition, (close kin to police abolition) for over thirty years. She is unflinching in her commitment to close every prison, yet readily acknowledges, “No abolitionist thinks the system will disappear overnight.” For her, abolition is *both* a long-term goal and a short-term angle of strategic vision. That is, abolitionists ‘test’ the ‘legitimacy’ of any proposed short-term police reforms by whether they work to lessen the footprint of policing or simply further entrench it in our communities.

“We have to act with the urgency of the moment and the patience of a thousand years,” says Mariame Kaba (about 50), another one of the Black women visionaries whose work (both in theory and in practice) on abolition is measured not in years but in decades. “This will take generations, and I’m not going to be alive to see the changes,” she admits—although that admission has not dimmed the fire in her soul one bit. She could just as easily be commenting on the Sermon on the Mount. We Christians are heirs to a gospel vision no less demanding; we’ve simply managed to negotiate with God for terms of justice that strike us as more ... ‘practical.’

William Morris, a ‘proto-abolitionist’ (he was a Marxist-socialist artist-writer noteworthy for writing *News From Nowhere*, an 1890 futurist novel in which prisons have been eliminated) wrote in 1885, “Every age has had its hopes, hopes that look to something beyond the life of the age itself, hopes that try to pierce the future.” The vision of contemporary abolitionists holds such hope and is determined to pierce the future.

Would that we, rather than negotiating downward the claim of the gospel on our lives, chose to embrace it with the same passion as these abolitionists embrace their work. If and when we do, we might join them in rewriting the next chapter of our shared history, piercing the future with the gospel and abolition.

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<sup>5</sup> I’ve read pretty widely on abolition now, but the ideas and quotes below (including the quote by William Morris) come from these sources: [www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html); [www.truthout.org/articles/minneapolis-organizers-are-already-building-the-tools-for-safety-without-police/](http://www.truthout.org/articles/minneapolis-organizers-are-already-building-the-tools-for-safety-without-police/); and regarding how an abolitionist viewpoint assess the merits of specific reform measures: [www.truthout.org/articles/police-reforms-you-should-always-oppose/](http://www.truthout.org/articles/police-reforms-you-should-always-oppose/)

## The Poor Will Be With You Always – Abolition and the Gospel, Part 4

July 8, 2020 – David R. Weiss

*NOTE: In this series of posts (see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)\*) I'm NOT offering a detailed explanation of how police abolition would work—there are others who can do that far better than me. Rather I'm presenting a series of images to help white Christians in particular hear in these calls to Defund or Abolish the Police some surprising echoes of biblical themes ... and to encourage us to consider whether God is doing a new thing once again today.*

*\* "Come This Wilderness," June 8; "Throwing Jesus Off a Cliff," June 30; "Follow the Drinking Gourd," July 4*

They are among the most careless words Jesus utters: "The poor will be with you always." Careless, because the poor have paid so dearly for them over the years.

The scene takes place in a house not far from Jerusalem and not long before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. It's one of only a handful of incidents recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 14:3-9 || Matthew 26:6-13; with a variation in Luke 7:36-50) and *also* in the John's Gospel (John 12:1-8). The details shift a bit from one telling to the next, but in each case a woman anoints Jesus (either his head or his feet) with nard, a very costly ointment. And it doesn't sit well. Some of those present (Matthew specifies Jesus' disciples; John singles out Judas) complain that that this jar of ointment—worth as much as \$20,000!<sup>6</sup>—could've been sold and the money used to aid the poor.

Seemingly unaware that his mic is live, Jesus retorts, "Dude(s), for Christ' sake, in a few days I'll be dead! Not to be too blunt, but she's sort of just anointing my body for burial. And besides, *the poor will be with you always.*" (Okay, that's paraphrased, but only a bit—and the comment about the poor is exactly what he said.)

Yesterday (July 7, 2020), the Movement for Black Lives unveiled their "Breathe Act," a proposed set of sweeping federal legislation that would change how we think about policing and prisons, community safety and wellbeing, accountability for the system, and self-determination for Black communities.<sup>7</sup> Although the bill stops short of seeking to abolish police and prisons, the first of its four sections does aim to "defund the police and divest from incarceration" at levels that many of us—especially those who are white<sup>8</sup>—will find, frankly, impossible.

Our common sense tells us—and Jesus confirms it—that the poor (and the police and prisons) will be with us always. *That's just the way it is.* And to think otherwise is dangerously utopian. Or is it? Why are we so quick to read Jesus' words in a way that reassures us that we don't really need to alter our lives or this world in response to his message? If we listen to almost everything else he says, it pretty much asks us to turn our lives upside down (which might well flip the world as well).

Is it any surprise, after 400-plus years of having armed patrols organized to terrorize them, that visionary black leaders want to imagine—no, they want to *legislate*—a world where that state-organized terror no longer exists. And our best response is to say, "But that's just the way it is"?!

In her poem, "Home," Somali poet Warsan Shire writes these haunting words about refugees:

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<sup>6</sup> Both Mark and John say the ointment could have been sold for 300 denarii, and one denarius was equal to one day's wage for a general laborer. Today a minimum wage worker, working a 10-hour day, earns \$75, and 300 times that equals \$22,500. Of course, it's impossible to accurately compare wage values across differing time periods, cultures, and standards of living. But another passage (Mark 6:30-44) suggests that 200 denarii could buy enough food to feed five thousand persons. The point is, *this was one pricey flask of nard.*

<sup>7</sup> I'm not here to discuss the bill; I only mean to challenge our (white people's) knee-jerk reaction to it as unrealistic. You can find the bill summary here ([www.breatheact.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-BREATHE-Act-PDF\\_FINAL3-1.pdf](http://www.breatheact.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-BREATHE-Act-PDF_FINAL3-1.pdf)); and news story here ([www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/7/7/1958803/-What-is-The-BREATHE-Act-This-bill-decenters-incarceration-and-puts-funds-in-communities](http://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/7/7/1958803/-What-is-The-BREATHE-Act-This-bill-decenters-incarceration-and-puts-funds-in-communities)) and here ([www.apnews.com/68ae4df39c5fdc5038fc3b764b1a8217](http://www.apnews.com/68ae4df39c5fdc5038fc3b764b1a8217)).

<sup>8</sup> I'm following the Columbia Journalism Review in choosing to capitalize Black but not white as a racial designation. [www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php](http://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php)

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark ...  
you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land ...<sup>9</sup>

Is it possible that we who find a world without police so unthinkable ... is it possible that we have never known what it like to live—daily!—in the mouth of a shark? Or on land so dangerous—daily!—that even a rickety boat on the water seems safer?

I want to go *further* than this (and I will in another essay). Because abolition is NOT simply about the erasure of uniformed terror. It is also and ultimately about the wellbeing of communities, as the other three sections of the Breathe Act attend to. (Though again, to be clear, the Breathe Act is NOT an abolition bill. I reference it because it was just introduced, and it *does* seek sweeping and—to many of us—unimaginable changes.) But perhaps the alarm we feel at the prospect of life on the far side of police is bound up with an uneasy intuition of how much the relative comfort of our lives hinges on systems (including policing) that maintain the grinding discomfort of other lives.

Although it is those who die at the hands of police whose names we come to know, as Derecka Purnell writes in *The Atlantic*,<sup>10</sup> “most victims of police violence survive. No hashtags or protests or fires for the wounded, assaulted, and intimidated.” Most of the time, police simply “manage inequality by keeping the dispossessed from the owners, the Black from the white, the homeless from the housed, the beggars from the employed.”

And because most of us are white, employed, housed, owners, it’s easier for us to blame police dysfunction on bad apples rather than an altogether bad system. Purnell observes, “Perhaps there are bad apples. But even the best apples surveil, arrest, and detain millions of people every year whose primary ‘crime’ is that they are poor or homeless, or have a disability. Cops escalate violence disproportionately against people with disabilities and in mental-health crises, even the ones who call 911 for help. The police officers who are doing the ‘right thing’ maintain the systems of inequality and ableism in black communities. The right thing is *wrong*.”

So maybe Jesus *knew* his mic was live, and maybe the disciples heard a biting sting in his remark that we tend (prefer?) to miss today. The novelist-essayist Kurt Vonnegut remarked that he was weary of hearing ‘good’ Christians excuse the ongoing suffering of poverty by citing Jesus’ words that “the poor will be with you always.”<sup>11</sup> He countered—with uncanny insight for someone who wasn’t even a self-identified Christian—that Jesus was responding to Judas’ *feigned* concern for the poor (which is exactly how John presents it). For Vonnegut, then, the passage “says everything about hypocrisy and nothing about the poor.” In words fringed with prophetic sarcasm, Jesus is saying to Judas—and to the rest of us: “*So as long as you fail—daily!—to see me in the least of these around you, your world will always include poor.*”

The persistence of poverty—and policing and prisons (the overwhelming majority of those who are policed and imprisoned are also poor)—doesn’t reflect God’s priorities; it reflects ours. And when Jesus says, in a word of bitter commentary on the smallness of our imagination, “The poor—and the police, and the prisons—will be with you always,” he isn’t confirming our world, *he’s calling us to change it*. Abolitionists are on that same page. We should be, too.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.facinghistory.org/standing-up-hatred-intolerance/warsan-shire-home](http://www.facinghistory.org/standing-up-hatred-intolerance/warsan-shire-home)

<sup>10</sup> [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/how-i-became-police-abolitionist/613540/](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/how-i-became-police-abolitionist/613540/)

<sup>11</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, “Palm Sunday Sermon” in *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (1981).



## When Stones Shout – Abolition and the Gospel, Part 5

July 9, 2020 – David R. Weiss

*NOTE: In this series of posts\* I'm NOT offering a detailed explanation of how police abolition would work—there are others who can do that far better than me. Rather I'm presenting a series of images to help white Christians in particular hear in these calls to Defund or Abolish the Police some surprising echoes of biblical themes ... and to encourage us to consider whether God is doing a new thing once again today.*

*\* ["Come This Wilderness,"](#) June 8; ["Throwing Jesus Off a Cliff,"](#) June 30; ["Follow the Drinking Gourd,"](#) July 4; ["The Poor Will be With You Always,"](#) July 8.*

It's pandemonium as Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Crowds are waving palm branches and strewing them, along with their cloaks, on the road leading into the city. Jesus has chosen—*deliberately, provocatively*—to ride into the city on a donkey: a rich symbolic echo of a prophetic passage in which a Jewish king enters Jerusalem humbly, mounted on a donkey, and then proceeds to establish peace. The day drips with hope and longing.

Unbeknownst to us when we read that Palm Sunday passage, it's quite possible that on the same day, another procession enters the city from the opposite side. That would be Pontius Pilate, escorted by imperial cavalry and columns of soldiers. His arrival—like Jesus' arrival—was timed to sync with Passover. Except, while Jesus was there to celebrate Passover as the great Jewish festival of liberation, Pilate came to ensure—with his display of brute force (a bit like stationing state police and National Guard troops around cities)—that the only liberation celebrated was a distant memory.

So Jesus' entry and its accompanying pandemonium were fraught—especially for those Jewish leaders who'd struck an uneasy but (for them) workable coexistence with Roman rule. Which is why, when those persons waving palms alongside strewn cloaks suddenly launched into choruses of "Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in God's name to bring peace!" suddenly those Jewish leaders tried to get Jesus to calm the crowd. But Jesus replied, "If these, who acclaim my coming in such joy and jubilation, were silent, I tell you, the very stones would shout out."<sup>12</sup>

I did not imagine six weeks ago that I would become such a strident voice for police and prison abolition. But as I dug past the hashtags (which are *powerful* hashtags—I do *not* second guess the choice of rallying around "Defund the Police" or "Abolish the Police"), I was caught off guard ... by the gospel. *Abolitionists are the very stones shouting out today.*

The more I've read, the more I've heard in abolitionist writings themes that resonate *deeply* in the heart of biblical faith. And while I haven't been surprised cognitively at how quickly and loudly white Christians have voiced dis-ease with these ideas, I have found myself emotionally grieving, because our reaction of discomfort at any notion of abolition reminds me how ... estranged ... we've become from our own heritage. We were born—baptized, *commissioned*—to change the world through our practice of reckless, abundant love. And yet, in the face of abolitionist "Hosannas," we've become those religious leaders asking for silence, lest our uneasy but workable coexistence with the ways of power be upset.

The creation stories in Genesis assert a number of profound truths about the nature of humanity. (These stories never intended to relate cosmic or earth or human "history," but they do seek to carry the deep sacred wisdom of our religious ancestors and that's what I'm lifting up.) I'll name three things from these stories that strike me as relevant in abolition work.

1. Human beings are *imago Dei*: the Latin means "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:26-27) This has often been owned by us arrogantly, as though it makes us "better than" the rest of creation. And owned by us racistly—how else could we have dared to enslave others? But this creation tale appeared in Israel's life at a time when the people were living in exile. Bereft of king, temple, and even land, arrogance was not an option. The truth carried by this designation is closer to Jesse Jackson's declaration, dating back to the 70's "I am somebody"—or to the "I am a man" placards carried by striking Memphis sanitation

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 19:36-40. On the historical background see Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 1-5.

workers in 1968. To say that we are *imago Dei* speaks a two-fold truth. First, it says that somehow we humans—because we are self-conscious, because we speak, we know, we symbolize and wrap our world in meaning—somehow Something transcendent, some spark of divinity, inheres in us. Second, the very recognition that we carry within us Something from beyond suggests that this “specialness” is held not as privilege, but as gift: ours to acknowledge, but not ours to designate. Thus, *every* human being is *imago Dei*: echoed divinity wrapped in flesh.

2. Human beings are interwoven at the heart. This is true ecologically: from gut to lungs to skin we are interwoven with a host of unseen creatures who “live and move and have their being” in us, even as we have our being through them (the phrasing is borrowed and re-spun from Acts 17:28). But it is equally and more visibly true socially. When the second creation account has God observe that “it is not good for the human being to be alone” (Gen. 2:18), this is an echo of the African recognition heard in *ujamaa*: *I am only because we are*. *Ujamaa*, as a social principle, undergirds a notion of cooperative economics; if the very character of being human is mutual to the core, then we build our life together (or we fail to make a human life at all).

3. We were set in the first Garden to tend and keep it (Gen 2:15)—to exercise our *imago Dei* so that the garden flourishes—our humanity is grounded in the goodness of work. Far from being punishment, work (the expression of *imago Dei* within the cooperative economy of a community) is our most primal vocation. For the Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), work was the locus of our *imago Dei*. We work, as sacred calling, *because God works*.<sup>13</sup> (It’s true that the experience of work as “toil” is ascribed as punishment a bit later [Gen. 3:17], although I think it’s more accurate to reckon “toil” as an inescapable aspect of working in a finite world where time and energy impinge on us.)

When abolitionists cry out—like stones on Palm Sunday—to defund/abolish the police or abolish prisons, they do so because they regard each human life as holding consummate value, even lives that have ripped asunder the fabric of our human community. Their concern is that when we “as a society, model cruelty and vengeance” in our response to criminal behavior, we practice the very erasure of *imago Dei* that we claim to be protecting.<sup>14</sup> And when we do this through state programs of policing and imprisonment we act as though it is ours to bestow or withhold the image of God. Abolitionists know better. So might we.

Abolitionists trace the arc of criminality to economic exploitation and dehumanizing oppression, running from slavery through segregation, structural poverty, and racialized unemployment. In doing so, they assert that until we address the racist ways that white supremacy seeds—and *carefully cultivates*—violence in our society, our rush to incarcerate only manifests our denial of the extent to which we have betrayed the *imago Dei* of so many. Abolition says that the most effective—and I will add, *the most Christian*—way to reduce crime is to invest as a community in eliminating the very conditions that cause it. And those conditions are the dehumanizing and oppressive socio-economic structures of white supremacy ... or as we like to call it, “the American way of life.”

We have made an unholy peace with mass incarceration. Not because it is cheaper or safer or healthier for human community. Only because it benefits white supremacy, the elites who fashioned it, and the twisted set of convictions that uphold it. As Christians, we ought to be committed with our whole lives to *mass incarnation*: the recognition and support of the image of God in humans everywhere. Hopefully someday (soon!) we’ll do that again. Until then, I’m shouting with the stones.

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<sup>13</sup> *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart’s Creation Spirituality*, Introduction and Commentaries by Matthew Fox (Garden City, NY: Image Books), 1980; also Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co.), 1983.

<sup>14</sup> The quoted phrase is from Ruth Wilson Gilmore – [www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html); the theological spin is mine. The other claims I make about abolition, widespread in the literature, are found in this *NYT* piece as well.

## From Mount Sinai to Minneapolis – Abolition and the Gospel, Part 6

July 12, 2020 – David R. Weiss

*NOTE: In this series of posts\* I'm NOT offering a detailed explanation of how police abolition would work—there are others who can do that far better than me. Rather I'm presenting a series of images to help white Christians in particular hear in these calls to Defund or Abolish the Police some surprising echoes of biblical themes ... and to encourage us to consider whether God is doing a new thing once again today.*

*\*["Come This Wilderness,"](#) June 8; ["Throwing Jesus Off a Cliff,"](#) June 30; ["Follow the Drinking Gourd,"](#) July 4; ["The Poor Will be With You Always,"](#) July 8; ["When Stones Shout"](#) July 9.*

I can imagine Moses thinking to himself, "What do you mean 'low battery'?! No!!!!" After almost forty days and forty nights up on Mount Sinai, God finally decides to speak. And were it not for Moses' iPhone battery deciding to give out, we might have a clearer picture of what transpired on that mountaintop shrouded in cloud and lightning.<sup>15</sup> As it was, you'd have thought two stone tablets would hold up well through the ages, but apparently they weren't supported by later applications and the files are no longer accessible. Yes, we have texts but there's a peculiar ambiguity in the text.

The Decalogue—literally, "Ten Words"—refers to ten utterances, some just a single word, that God gives to Moses on Mount Sinai sometime soon after the Hebrews escape their years of bondage in Egypt and begin their sojourn through the wilderness. I'm not actually concerned to debate whether this moment on Sinai was something "historical" (i.e., could we have captured it, had that iPhone battery held out?). Whatever took place at that intersection of slavery-liberation, escape-wilderness, and mountaintop liminality—*whatever took place*—was singularly transformative for Israel's life.

We (Christians more so than Jews, actually<sup>16</sup>) remember it primarily as Moses receiving The Law, the Ten Commandments. We translate the words as imperatives, a list of divine demands: Do this! Don't do that! OR ELSE.

But what if these were words ... *of Promise*? What if, rather than shouted orders from heaven, they read more like a promotional brochure for "Things to Do—Now That You're Free"? I don't mean to belittle them at all. I'm suggesting—quite seriously—that perhaps these words are *the words of a God who is courting Israel's imagination with a description of what their life together could look like*. That would utterly transform how we read them. And the grammar argues for that as a real possibility.

In Hebrew, the present imperative (the "voice" of order) has the same form as the future indicative (the "voice" of description). Context tells you whether someone is ordering you to do something or describing what tomorrow will be like. "Honor the Sabbath (dammit!)" or "Every seventh day we'll rest." The *same* Hebrew word stands behind either rendering, and on account of that failed iPhone battery we simply don't know.<sup>17</sup>

Except for the context. These people are on their way to *a new future*. Indeed, to a life framed by a word unknown to slaves: tomorrow. This divine Presence, having heard their cries of anguish, liberated them from slavery, led them out of Egypt, and promised to establish the conditions for their flourishing is now *luring them* on toward that life together. Imagine these Ten Words spoken by God in this tone of voice, toward a life rooted in reverence and mutual love:

1. I will be your first love, for all the days of your life, and your desire for me shall not wane.
2. I will be for you daily delight and surprise, outstripping any fixed images.

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<sup>15</sup> The scene (sans iPhone) but complete with clouds, smoke, thunder, and lightning is in Exodus 19:16-20:17.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, Jews revere the Ten Commandments as well; but their framework for experiencing them is set within the wider context of Torah—"the Teaching" that shapes the overall pattern of their life. Christians tend to see them more like lightning bolt demands of an omnipotent, authoritarian God. Of course, it's much more complicated than that, but for this essay, that's sufficient.

<sup>17</sup> I learned of this view of reading the Decalogue through the future from Rev. Otto Bremer (1922-2001) a Lutheran ethicist, who credited it to his teacher, George Mendelhall (1916-2016), Lutheran biblical scholar who taught at the University of Michigan 1952-1986.

3. Because my very name—Yahweh—is bound up with the promise of freedom, you will never invoke it to oppress others or to curse them. To do so would render me a stranger to you.
4. Every seventh day you will rest and renew yourselves, rejoicing in our life together.
5. In Egypt your families were ever at risk; now parents will be honored by their children just as surely as children shall be wrapped well in the love of their parents.
6. While murder was your daily wage as slaves, killing shall no longer be known among you; life will be treasured and honored as the gift it is.
7. In so honoring life, you will discover the deep joy of intimacy and fidelity in your unions.
8. Although in Egypt your labor was stolen from you, now theft will be unknown among you, for where justice prevails the property of each will be respected by all.
9. You will not speak falsely of your neighbor, for honor shall be the commonwealth of my people.
10. And you will not find your lives distorted by envy, for you will shape your lives by simplicity and generosity, and you will discover in this way a life brimming with abundance.

We haven't (ever) heard The Decalogue this way. But it is a grammatically legitimate rendition, and I argue *it is both contextually and theologically the best reading*. In liberating the Hebrews from oppression God did not set them beneath a new taskmaster, but invited them to live into genuine freedom grounded in reverence for that which is Holy and that which is human.

The legacy of the Hebrew prophets—both in railing against Israel's repeated slides into unjust relations in their communal life and in calling them to radical hope in times of desolation—that legacy is precisely the legacy of calling Israel back to a life rooted in those Ten Words of Promise.

You can argue about whether the historical realization of that promised life is possible—more accurately, *the extent* to which it is possible. I'll grant that humanity has a poor track record of instantiating justice in society. BUT, BUT, BUT—the core claim of biblical faith is that God is infinitely committed to that project—and that God seeks our partnership in that work. If you wish to break with biblical faith, I can't stop that. But I can ask—on behalf of God—that you not water it down to make it more palatable for those who've managed to prosper under oppression, or those who've managed to dodge the worst of the suffering that is the price of the status quo.

From Moses onward (and right through Jesus!), God's work in human history has been a series of variations on a single theme: "Let my people go." Today's abolitionists, whether they invoke God or not, draw their voice from that same breath. Their words also are Words of Promise, "There is a land without police or prisons." Abolition, not unlike the Decalogue, is much richer than a single declaration of what won't be anymore. It also includes both principles and proposals for what that Promised Life might look like: a life that honors, upholds, and heals hurting communities from the ground up.

Scholars still argue over the exact location of Mount Sinai, but since May 25, Mount Sinai has been at 38th and Chicago in Minneapolis. And from out of the killing of George Floyd, through march and vigil, protest and riot, uprising and art, the surging calls to abolish the police should echo in us as though borne by Moses himself.

We can debate vigorously (though I might prefer that we *imagine vibrantly*, but whatever) the details of how we move toward that promised life. But as Christians, we betray our own legacy and we belittle the transformative energy of God in our midst when we assert, "Oh but that can't be!" *Abolition is our story*. To the extent that we've forgotten this, the Movement for Black Lives and the calls for Abolition, these are the Holy Spirit moving through prophets in our midst today.

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