

Lent of Liberation

Confronting the Legacy
of American Slavery

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Introduction

In 1619, forcibly captured Africans arrived in colonial America for the purpose of providing a free labor force to the expanding British territories in the Americas. The year 2019 marked 400 years since the institution of Slavery began with the first “20 and odd Negroes” who were brought to the British colonies.¹ This institution was sustained until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. However, as lawyer and social justice activist Bryan Stevenson asserts, “Slavery didn’t end in 1865; it just evolved.”²

Throughout these 400 years—starting with those enslaved in America and then with the American Descendants of Slavery—Black people have experienced a Black Holocaust: enslavement, black codes, sharecropping, Jim Crow, lynchings, convict leasing, redlining, restrictive covenants, police brutality, subprime lending, and mass incarceration, all of which have resulted in the ghettoization/impoverishment of Black communities across America.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asserted that because Blacks were targeted for special mistreatment, then Blacks should be targeted for special treatment.³ Blacks who are American Descendants of Slavery can trace their lineage back to American Slavery and the Jim Crow era. This is the specific group that has historically been made to eat the cost for the success of American capitalism. With that, the recent arrival of Black immigrants to the United States who voluntarily came to the U.S. from other countries

would not be included in the American Descendants of Slavery category as their lineage is in another country, and so their justice claim, as it pertains to reparations, would be with the country that enslaved and oppressed their ancestors, and not with the United States.

Four hundred and one years after the institution of Slavery began in 1619, in the year 2020, the world witnessed the blatant disregard for Black life in America, which was on full display for the world to see. People around the globe saw the brutality of a Minneapolis police officer and three fellow officers in the horrific murder of George Floyd that was streamed live. For eight minutes and forty-six seconds, as George lay facedown on the pavement with his hands handcuffed behind his back, one policeman knelt with his knee pressed against George's neck, restricting his airflow. The other two policemen compressed his abdomen and legs, which restricted blood and airflow, as he pleaded for his life. The fourth officer stood watch and attempted to block the view of this criminal act. George cried out numerous times, "I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe!" Realizing he was about to die, he cried out for his momma. As the world watched in horror, George took his last breath and his body went limp.

The world finally saw the targeted abuse that the masses of Black people in America have been asserting for years. Then, an unprecedented eruption took place—there was civil unrest, with protests and marches in every state in America that quickly spread to other countries around the globe. At the writing of this book, the protests are still growing.

It is at this precipice that we invite Blacks, Whites, and people across racial, denominational, faith, and cultural lines to participate in a Lent of Liberation. Lent is a time for personal reflection as we march toward Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. The forty days of Lent are to remind us of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness,

fasting and praying, practicing self-denial to commit himself fully to the will of God. This time was a prelude to his great Galilean ministry, in which he would say “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). Even as the community is erupting in protests, there are still those who push back because White supremacy is so ingrained in our nation’s DNA. Lent is a time of denial, but not denial of the truth—the spirit of Lent must lead us to confront the legacy of American Slavery head-on if we are to overcome the centuries of White privilege at Black expense.

Included in each daily devotion is an excerpt from the documentary book *The Underground Railroad: A Record* by William Still.⁴ William escaped from the bondage of Slavery as a child along with his mother. As an adult, he committed his life to assisting Black bondservants to freedom through the Underground Railroad in the 1800s. It is estimated that William assisted over 800 slaves in their quest for freedom and he documented the testimony of those he assisted. As a result of William’s documentation, the reader hears up close and personal the testimony of the slaves who escaped on the Underground Railroad, which showcases their humanity. They were people, not property—they were someone’s husband, wife, sister, brother, grandmother and grandfather.

This devotional also imparts little-known facts about how the institution of Slavery actually built America, and how ongoing oppression has affected Black Americans. Since Black history is not usually taught as a part of American history in the U.S. school system, more false narratives are circulated about Slavery than fact. In the words of Yvette Carnell, cofounder of #ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery, a grass-roots reparation movement), “There can be no peace without justice, but there can be no justice without truth.” Through scriptural reflection and questions to ponder at the end of each daily devotion, this

devotional prompts the reader to move from compassion to action for the cause of racial justice and to reflect upon ways that they may have contributed to racial injustices. These questions may appear to be tailored to only White people; however, this book is written with the belief that the White supremacist view is an ideology—it is not based on skin color and certainly not based on fact. Thus, many ethnic groups in America adopt the White supremacist views to assimilate into the dominant culture, and can be agents of White supremacy—even some Blacks! Na'im Akbar, noted scholar and psychologist, espouses that some Blacks have an anti-self disorder whereby they see themselves through the lens of White supremacy. With the slave rebellions that occurred prior to the abolishment of Slavery, each rebellion was sabotaged by a Black enslaved person who served as an informant. Consequently, all skin folk ain't your kin folk! A misnomer is that the White supremacist is the person who advocates violence against Blacks or promotes hateful, racist language. That's too simplistic a definition—White supremacy involves more than the act of committing physical violence against Blacks. White supremacy operates in business suits, through decisions made in the boardrooms of corporations; through the laws and policies enacted on the senate and congressional floors, and at the state and local level; in the structure and administration of the public school system and at colleges and universities; in courtrooms in the halls of *justice*; and through law enforcement, to name a few. White supremacy affects every aspect of life in America, and is most detrimental to Black life. According to Dr. Kevin W. Cosby, pastor of St. Stephen Baptist Church and president of Simmons College of Kentucky, a historically Black college and university, "White supremacy is the mythology that everything great, and of importance, and of significance in America was created by Whites, and if this greatness and importance is going to be sustained, Whites must continue to be in control."

Dr. Cosby went on to say, “The race problem cannot be eradicated until the attitude that Whites must be in control is eliminated.” In other words, the Apostle Paul says, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Consequently, Whites and all ethnic groups, including Blacks, are encouraged to take a moment after each devotional reading, for introspection in regard to your views and relationship with Black people as it pertains to the question asked; especially reflect on your relationship with Blacks who are the American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS), as opposed to Black immigrants who voluntarily came to America from another country, as ADOS are the bottom caste in America and are despised. Historically, Blacks are in the company of Jesus of whom Scripture says in this Messianic prophecy, “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hid their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem” (Isa. 53:3 NIV).

I encourage you to share this devotional book within your circles of influence—with spiritual partners, members across faith traditions, organization members, friends, and family members. During these forty days, you may want to join with others on a video conference and read the daily reflections together, or gather weekly to discuss how you’ve been affected by this Lenten experience. Resources to facilitate group study and preaching on this material are available for free download at www.wjkbooks.com/LentOfLiberation. You may want to organize a worship service to communally lament America’s 400-plus years of injustice and pray for the liberation of American Descendants of Slavery. In 2019, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of African slaves’ arrival in the British colonies, St. Stephen Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and Simmons College of Kentucky (America’s 107th and Kentucky’s oldest historically Black college and university) held a 400th year commemoration ceremony engaging

Blacks and Whites of all ages and faith traditions in a litany of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation to the truth. Acknowledgement of the truth is the necessary first step to reconciliation. Complete reconciliation between Blacks and Whites in America comes when Whites become advocates in the fight against systemic racial injustices and in the call for reparations, and when justice is finally given to the American Descendants of Slavery. The twenty-page program for this ceremony, with litanies, readings, Scripture passages, and songs, is available for purchase online and can be adapted for your context.⁵ Be encouraged to join with those of other races and ethnicities, and let the purpose in our hearts and the work of our hands be united for racial justice.

Day 1



[T]hese mothers, with their handsome daughters, were valued on the ledger of their owners at enormously high prices; that lustful traders and sensualists had already gloated over the thought of buying them in a few short years. Probably not one of those beautiful girls would have brought less than fifteen hundred or two thousand dollars at the age of fifteen. It was therefore a great satisfaction to think, that their mothers, who knew full well to what a fate such slave girls were destined, had labored so heroically to snatch them out of this danger ere the critical hour arrived.

—The True Story of Rebecca Jones and Her Three Daughters, Sarah Frances, Mary, and Rebecca, and Caroline Taylor, and her two daughters, Nancy, and Mary

So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine. And I said to her, “You must remain as mine for many days; you shall not play the whore, you shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with you.”

—Hosea 5:2–5

In this biblical passage, Hosea's wife is on the auction block at a diminished value. It was the same with these five captive girls. The price paid for them might be high, but their value as human beings was diminished by their treatment as mere objects to be sold, placed on an auction block for the purpose of creating profit. Some were enslaved as profit generators; some (women) were enslaved as pleasure generators. These girls in the opening narrative were pleasure generators, the same as Gomer. The price paid for Gomer is miniscule because she had become devalued.

The only man who would purchase Gomer was Hosea, although she had no monetary value. The fact that Hosea wanted her is what gave her actual value in society. The fact that he committed himself to her with *hesed*, an unending, covenantal form of love, gave her value. Hosea's love was not exploitive, because the prophet declares his loyalty to Gomer: "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you" (v. 3 NIV).

There's a possibility that in her patriarchal society, Gomer could not survive without dependence on a man. Perhaps she had no option but to sell herself into Slavery. When American chattel Slavery ended, because reparations were not given to the enslaved, many had to sell themselves back into enslavement as sharecroppers simply to survive.

Some are quick to condemn Black people who have put themselves in situations like Gomer's, but they fail to address the systems and structures that force people into such desperate situations. They are in a survival mode. Gomer was in survival mode in a survivalist culture. Some Whites believe that Blacks sell drugs or engage in prostitution or other illegal behavior because of a degenerate culture. To be Black swimming against the tide of systemic racism often means to have no options. We thereby create the Gomers. It is survival.

We will never understand Black America's present circumstances without understanding past and present injustices and exclusion. This is what we will seek to do in these forty reflections.

What Black organizations or Black activists can you connect with to better understand the unjust laws and policies that contribute to high crime in Black communities?

In what ways can you use your platform or influence to advocate for just policies for Black people?

FACTS ABOUT BLACK OPPRESSION

First Arrivals

When John Rolfe wrote in his diary that “twenty negars” arrived in Virginia in 1619, it was evidence of the earliest presence of Africans in the English colony. This was one year before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in the *Mayflower*, but nearly one hundred years after blacks had been in Spanish and Portuguese colonies. . . . So vast an operation was the European Slave Trade that it ravaged towns and villages along the West African coast, and the interior, for three centuries of dogged destruction of the African homeland to build a white homeland in the ancestral territory of another people.

Molefi Kete Asante, *The African American People: A Global History* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 41–42.