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*Reflections on an American Pilgrimage:
Can We Face the Truth?*

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Micah 3:1-12

In January my wife Beth and I took a 4,400-mile, 17-state road trip on the Civil Rights Trail. We visited scores of museums and historic sites. Today and the next two Sundays the sermons will explore our experience through the lens of biblical texts.

We had never traveled in the South before. We covered a lot of territory and even more history – a lot more than you can by walking, our usual mode of undertaking pilgrimages.

We already knew much of what we would see on the trip, but we came to understand it in new ways. The journey was eye-opening, and difficult.

We had expected to focus on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, but it became much more. It turned out also to be a monthlong drive through the ruthless story of human enslavement and its lasting impact on our country.

By the time we got home it was clear that this had not been merely a *Southern Pilgrimage*; this was an *American Pilgrimage*. What we experienced spoke not only of southern history, but of American history. This was the narrative of our nation, and it is a cruel story.

I was invited to preach in New York on the first Sunday of January, so our pilgrimage began in that *northern* city. We saw *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Hamilton* on Broadway. Both shows reminded us of the roots of our nation...*Hamilton*, with its hip-hop music throwing new light on the creation of America and the principles enshrined in our founding documents; *Mockingbird*, with its portrayal of an America that never got those principles right.

We visited a National Park site in Lower Manhattan, tucked in among the tall buildings, called the African Burial Ground. There we read this note from history, dated October 25, 1697, when the vestry of Trinity Episcopal Church declared...

“That...no Negroes be buried within the bounds & Limitts of the Church Yard of Trinity Church, that is to say, in the rear of the present burying place & that no person or Negro whatsoever, do presume...to break up any ground for the burying of his Negro, as they will answer it at their perill.”

1697.

In other words, no more Black people were to be buried among the white bodies in the Trinity churchyard, not even in the back of cemetery where they had been relegated. The Church was involved in this difficult national narrative, from the start – and not only the Episcopalians. We visited a number of historic Presbyterian churches across the South, with their balconies for enslaved and free Black people.

Those Africans in New York had a problem. Where were they going to bury their dead? They had become *outsiders*, even in death. They found empty land beyond the safety of the city walls that they began to use as a graveyard.

In 1991, 300 years later, the federal government began excavation on that same site for several new buildings, and uncovered the long-forgotten African Burial Ground. More than 15,000 persons of African descent, both enslaved and free, were buried there, the largest such site in America. That was our first stop on the Civil Rights Trail – in Lower Manhattan, many miles from the South. The memorial to the unnamed Black folk compelled to live, and die, in a land not their own, was hallowed ground.

The first Africans arrived in Jamestown in 1619, and as the local economy grew, so did its appetite for cheap labor. The colonists adopted laws permitting the enslavement of people, and began forcibly importing Africans to build their new home, intentionally developing an immoral economic structure, from the start.

“Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel,” the prophet Micah says to those who designed such systems long ago in ancient Palestine,

“(You) Who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!... Because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.” (Micah 3:9-10, 12)

Many of us are familiar with the sixth chapter of Micah, where the prophet asks, “What does the Lord require of you?” The answer is one of the most beloved lines in scripture: “To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

The prophet is not so gentle in his earlier words. On the contrary, his rage is unmistakable.

“Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel!” Micah says.

“Should you not know justice? -- you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; ...Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation.” (Micah 3:1-2, 5-6)

The prophet's anger at Israel for its treatment of the poor and those who labor among them is well-placed. He names the terrible truth of an unjust system that creates and maintains wealth for the few, at the expense of those it treats viscerously.

He is addressing not only ancient Israel; the prophet is speaking to our nation, as well.

In Savannah, Georgia we entered a weathered brick building where the words "Old Slave Mart" can be made out over the entrance, in the red brick. It's just off the harbor where ships unloaded enslaved people. At the docks, merchants would put the newly-arrived Africans in chains and march them toward nearby pens inside dozens of warehouses. Once locked up, they would be fed and cleaned and rested to recover from the cruel voyage through the Middle Passage - to be prepared for sale.

We walked through rooms whose bricks had witnessed the horror. We listened for ancient echoes of anguish, and we heard the prophet's plea:

Should you not know justice? -- you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones?

The trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans would continue for nearly two hundred years, until outlawed by Congress in 1808 - but enslavement would continue to thrive in the South until the Civil War.

We visited a lovely public square in Montgomery with a huge, beautiful fountain in the center, located near the Alabama River – where boats disgorged their human cargo in the 19th century. Back then that square served as the town’s bustling market for the sale of enslaved Africans. Nearly half of the people sold there, we learned, were separated from their families, never to see their children, or siblings, or parents again.

Among the most heart-wrenching things we read were newspaper ads placed after Emancipation by family members searching for lost loved ones:

“I was the last one sold out of nine in 1860. My mother and eight children were sold in Clarksville, Tenn., to Clark Cummings, a speculator. Mother was sold to Thomas Hughes, near Clarksville...The next, Major, was sold the same day I was...I heard he went to Alabama. I was sold to a man in Mississippi named James Pollard, and he caused me to be run to Texas. I heard that mother and five children were living in Logan County, Kentucky. Mother’s name was Letty. Address me at Paris, Texas.”

(<https://blackthen.com/wp-content/uploads/pep-vn/86/864f88c6/the-disheartening-story-of-how-blacks-searched-for-loved-ones-after-being-set-free-7f.jpg>)

Although northern states abolished the enslavement of people in the early 19th century, their economies continued to rely on and benefit from the labor of enslaved Africans in the South. New York banks insured the “property” on southern plantations. New

England textile mills bought cotton from the South. Northern iron-producers supplied Southern markets. The entire country was in this together.

For two and a half centuries our nation lived off the labor of enslaved people. Merchants, preachers, farmers, teachers, storeowners, blacksmiths, investors, doctors, lawyers – all benefitted. Twelve of the first 18 U.S. presidents owned enslaved Africans.

Thomas Jefferson owned 600 people. Do you remember the words he wrote?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Jefferson epitomizes the paradox of a nation that wants to do right, but gets it so wrong.

From New York to Pennsylvania and New England enslaved Africans built America. From the Upper South through the Deep South and into Texas, enslaved Africans and their descendants created the infrastructure, worked the fields, built the banks, and made the ships that they loaded and unloaded. They erected schools, constructed churches, laid the rails, raised other people's children, cleaned their houses, and made their meals.

For twelve generations. For twelve generations they labored in this land and created enormous wealth for the white community. In 1860, enslaved people made up nearly half the population in most of the South. They outnumbered whites in South Carolina and Mississippi, the first states to secede from the Union.

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!...Because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.

The cruel bondage of Africans was our own American Holocaust. For every 100 enslaved Africans who made it to our shores, 40 others died on the way. The labor system that built America was barbaric.

Ta Nehisi Coates says,

“When people talk about slavery, they speak like it was a mistake somebody made while everything else was going great, ... a bump on the road. Slavery isn’t a bump. Slavery is the *road*. There is no America without the enslavement of African-Americans.”

We listened to Coates read his book *Between the World and Me* as we drove across the South through an infrastructure of pain, where enslaved people were kept in pens and sold in markets, where they lived in squalid urban quarters and crowded into plantation cabins, where they were hunted by hounds.

“In the antebellum South,” Coates says, “Owning people was how you built wealth. You aspired to get a piece of land taken from Native Americans and put a (black) body on it.”

<https://around.uoregon.edu/content/ta-nehisi-coates-gets-real-about-racism-sold-out-knight-arena>)

Virtually every place we visited told another story of misery: the displacement of Native Peoples. The Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, Seminole. As we drove through the South we followed the trail of their tears, pushed by our nation to reservations far from home.

The truth about America is that those who controlled the development of this nation did so by creating and embracing the myth of racial superiority.

“Americans,” Coates says,

“Believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them – inevitably follows from this inalterable condition...

But,” Coates says, “*Race is the child of racism, not the father.*” (*Between the World and Me* [New York: Spiegel & Grau 2015], p. 7; emphasis mine)

The social construct of race and the invention of racial hierarchies at the start of our nation provided a convenient – *if evil* – rationale for the enslavement of millions of human beings. That legal system of human bondage may have ended, and we may think of it as a thing of the past, and we may feel as if we had nothing to do with slavery, but the stench of its racism still permeates the land, and we cannot ignore it.

It is America's fundamental problem, the defining sin deeply rooted in our country's soul, the American Dream experienced as a nightmare by millions.

Can we face that truth about ourselves as a nation? That's what the prophets of old asked those in power: Aren't we supposed to be people of justice and equity? Aren't those our values as a nation? What happened to us?

We intended our American Pilgrimage to focus on the Civil Rights Movement, naively thinking that was a discreet period in history, but that freedom movement is not isolated in history. It cannot be separated from the smoldering violence and trauma that enslavement inflicted on Africans forcibly brought to this land, and on their descendants. That immoral system, from the start, and its lingering effects are the nation's enduring shame.

The ancient prophet asks: *Should we not know justice?*

If ever we as a people want to come to terms with American racism and dismantle the structure of white superiority which it built, we will need to face the truth about *who we are* and *what we did*.

To help the nation do that is *our work, the work of the Church*, the work of those who follow one who also was taken and broken and hung up to die, one whose death showed divine solidarity with those who suffer, the very one we remember today as we come to this table heaped, by the grace of God, with gifts of hope - and our possible redemption, if we receive and turn.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

David Shinn

Blessed are you, eternal God, who made the heaven and earth from the power and creativity of your mind. You spoke into the chaos and out came the spinning beauty and mystery of the cosmos. Then with your heart's breath, you animated human beings just a little lower than the angels. Your glory shines forth when soil gives abundant harvest. Oceans dance with the light of the moon. Mountains murmur with delight. Trees clap their hands and flowers burst forth in songs.

When you beloved creatures hate good and love evil, you shed tear for our evil deeds. In response, you rain down your compassion and feed us with repentance and mercy through the prophets of old, and in the fullness of time, through your Son Jesus Christ. When evil becomes insatiable, and light hard to see, Christ shine forth Your light brighter in the hearts of all people. Forgive us. Awaken us. Activate us. Turn us to the way of justice, equity, and loving kindness.

We come this day to your table seeking for bread of life and cup of divine goodness. We come with joy and we come with our petitions. May the Holy Spirit surround all who are grieving for their losses. Bring healing to all who are recovering from surgery and cancer treatment. Grant peace to all who lives with mental illness, and dementia related challenges. Uphold all who are facing addiction. Restore our nation and change its system.

May the living bread and rejuvenating cup be the strength for us to be the instrument of God's love and goodness. As one united body of Christ, let us now pray the prayer so dear to our hearts, Our Father...