

Podcast Transcript

3.19.2023 and Lent 4A

- 1 Samuel 16:1-13 • Psalm 23 • Ephesians 5:8-14 • **John 9:1-41**
- Description: Journey with Rev. Liz Kearny as she gets into some real talk with John, the Gospel writer, about the way he tells the story in John 9. How might understanding John's context help us see our own patterns of trying to find belonging in who we are against, rather than in solidarity with one another? As we resist anti-Jewish rhetoric in this text, how might we find our way back to each other? #ResistAntisemitism #AllWeHaveIsEachOther #Solidarity #Belonging

Transcript available here: <https://surj.org/our-work/surj-faith/twir/>

<<Music: "Building Up a New World," 1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>
<<"We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.">>

[Intro and Transition:]

[Intro:]

- Hi everyone. Welcome back to The Word Is Resistance, the podcast where we're exploring what Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression - the context in which we are living today. Through Christian scripture and our various traditions, what support can we gather, especially as white folks, in finding our mutual interest in movements for liberation?
- My name is Rev. Liz Kearny. My pronouns are she/her. I am an ordained Presbyterian Church U.S.A. pastor and chaplain serving on the occupied ancestral homelands of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in so-called Longview, Washington. I'm a member of the SURJ Faith organizing team and I'm feeling so grateful to be with you today.
- This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians—white Christians talking to other white Christians about race and white supremacy. We believe white Christians have a responsibility to commit ourselves to resisting white supremacy, settler colonialism, the cishetero-patriarchy, antisemitism, ableism, and every system of oppression that stands in the way of our collective thriving. We are called to show up and disrupt these powers and principalities wherever we find them, especially through the Christian tradition.

- This live recording of Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement is of a multi-racial “movement choir practice” in Denver, CO in December 2014, being led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

[Transition:]

*<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>
<<“Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.”>>*

[Main Content:]

This week, we’ll be unpacking the Gospel text for this Sunday, March 19th, 2023, the 4th Sunday in the season of Lent, in Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary. As you already know from the other fabulous The Word Is Resistance podcasters who have been companioning us in this season so far, we are paying special attention this Lent to the ways anti-Jewish interpretation, rhetoric, and theology show up in our own Christian sacred texts and in interpretations of those texts throughout history, into today. We are making it our practice for this Lenten season and beyond to disrupt those readings, which have been designed by Christians seeking to hoard power for centuries, targeting our Jewish siblings with violence and scapegoating them as a way to avoid accountability for the oppression they perpetrate. I want to start by saying “I’m new here” - it was not until I got involved in organizing with SURJ Faith that I really understood just how much anti-Jewish theology and biblical interpretation I have ingested and then repeated throughout the course of my life and into my current ministry. I was recently telling our beloved SURJ Faith Coordinator and fellow podcaster, the Rev. Anne Dunlap, that I have been so grateful to be welcomed into learning to be and do better in this area after being so late to this critical part of the work to dismantle every system of supremacy. And if you are new to this like me, I want to repeat the words Rev. Anne said to me: “You are so welcome and it is never too late or ‘so late’, there’s just, you’re here now and that is what matters.”

Before we dive in, I’d invite you to join me in a breath prayer to center ourselves.

If you can, put your feet flat on the ground. Without changing it, notice the air going in and out of your body. Notice that the ground beneath you is holding you, without you even having to think about it.

As we inhale, we will pray, “I am beloved.” As we exhale, we will pray, “May I build beloved community.”

Breathe in: I am beloved.

Breathe out: May I build beloved community.

Breathe in: I am beloved.

Breathe out: May I build beloved community.

Breathe in: I am beloved.

Breathe out: May I build beloved community.

Our text today comes from the Gospel of John, which is honestly one of the worst texts when it comes to those that have bolstered Christian dominance and anti-Jewish oppression throughout history. The lectionary passage is John chapter 9, verses 1-41, but I'll summarize through verse 12 for us and only read verses 14-41.

The passage starts with Jesus and his disciples seeing "a man blind from birth" on a walk. The disciples ask Jesus if the man or his parents sinned, that he would be born blind. Jesus says that sin was not the cause, and that the man was born blind so God's works might be revealed in him. Then Jesus made some mud with his spit and put it on the man's eyes, telling him to go wash in the pool of Siloam to be healed, which the man did. Then the man was able to see. Everybody who knew this guy wanted to know, "Is this the same person?" and the man kept having to say "I am the man." With Jesus no longer around to answer anyone's questions about all this, we pick up the text in verse 13...

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14 Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' 16 Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. 17 So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19 and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' 20 His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' 25 He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' 26 They said to him, 'What did

he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' 27He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' 28Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' 30The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' 34They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' 36He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' 37Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' 38He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. 39Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' 40Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' 41Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

PHEW. Ok, that was a lot! I'm a runner, and reading through this passage reminds me of when I go out on a run when it is raining hard and I have to leap over puddles every few steps. There's so much ableism in the text itself and in so many interpretations of this passage throughout history, and then the writer has set up the story so that Jesus and the quote unquote "Jews" are pitted against each other, as if Jesus wasn't a Jew himself. I feel like I can't even find good news in this passage for all the ableist and anti-Jewish mud splattered on my body.

First, I want to notice some things in this passage that many disabled theologians and close readers have noticed before me.

Notice that John doesn't give this man born blind the dignity of a name.

Notice that once this man can see, his neighbors don't know - and show little interest in learning - how to engage with him apart from his disability.

Notice that mostly people talk *about* this man instead of *to* him, and when they *do* talk *to* him, it is to only interrogate him about his newfound sight.

Notice that Jesus puts mud on this man's eyes without the man's consent, and it seems like the writer is expecting that we'll think that's a great thing Jesus did.

Notice that no one believes this man's own account of what has happened, because he is asked 4 times *how* this healing happened, and no matter how many times he answers them, they just.

Keep. Asking.

I hear echoes in all these noticings of testimony I've heard from disabled folx - the feeling of being invisible some times and hypervisible the rest of the time. Of being talked *about* more than talked *to*. Of having their agency violated and rarely being asked if they consent to their body being touched or talked about. Of having assumption after assumption made about their experience, asking them to show up and speak as a quote unquote "inspirational person," but not having their ideas about what a just community would look like integrated into the same community asking for their take on that question.

These noticings and my understanding of disability justice have been deeply shaped by the series the podcast team led us through this past summer - so I encourage you to go back to Rev. Anne Dunlap's episode kicking off the disability justice series on June 19th 2022 so that you can start digging in there.

Alright, let's get into addressing the anti-Jewish rhetoric in our text today, knowing that we can't truly dismantle any form of oppression without working to dismantle all of them. None of us are free until all of us are free.

Honestly, after sitting with this text for a bit, I realized that a lot of my beef is actually with the gospel writer themselves. And in the spirit of calling them in, the way my friends at SURJ Faith have called *me* in when it comes to resisting anti-Jewish rhetoric in our sacred texts, here are some things I wish I could say to John about over a good, strong cup of tea.

"John, I notice that you conflate the Pharisees and the Jews together in your telling of this story. The phrase "the Jews" pops up more than 70 times in your writing. But, John, let's be honest here - You actually never use that phrase to describe Jesus and his disciples, and *they were Jewish too!* I wonder if you realize that the *impact* of writing that way is to make Jewish people into Jesus' enemies.¹

Something I've noticed in myself too, John, is that I have been formed into a culture that wants me to think and treat people according to binaries. And reading the way you've written this story, I wonder if that's something you struggle with too. It seems like you want us to see non-Christ-confessing Jews as "the bad ones." I notice that, throughout your Gospel, you use language like "darkness, flesh, death and the devil" when you are talking about Jewish folx who won't follow Jesus, and you use words like "light, spirit, life, and God" to talk about Jesus and his followers.² You may not have had a way to know this, but that binary language of "Jesus

¹ Adele Reinhartz, "The Gospel According to John," *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Second Edition - Fully Revised and Expanded*, pg. 172.

² "Children of the Devil (Jn 8.44)," *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Second Edition - Fully Revised and Expanded*, pg. 194.

good” and “Jews bad” has been used time and time again since you were alive in horrifying ways to perpetrate violence against Jewish folks, fueling antisemitic rhetoric from Nazi Germany to today’s American white nationalists.

And beyond that John, it just isn’t accurate to lump “the Jews” into one big category! Like so many of our communities, first century Judaism was filled with theological diversity. I mean, the Pharisees and Sadducees didn’t agree about the resurrection of the body, and the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls had some very different views from their peers in other Jewish communities - and they were all members of this complex and beautiful tradition called Judaism.³ I think you know this too, John, because you tell on yourself a bit in this story when you say that even the Pharisees here were divided about how to handle this man born blind who could now see!

And John, there’s actually no other evidence outside of what you write that the Pharisees would have even held court like this on the Sabbath or that they would have ever expelled someone from the temple for making the claims Jesus was making. I wonder if you know that a person named Simeon Bar Kosiba was thought to be the Messiah in the 130s by Rabbi Akiva, and no one kicked Rabbi Akiva out of his Jewish community.⁴

I’ve been working hard to understand your context, John, and I’ve been learning that all this binary language about who is good and who is bad in this story, about who is right and who is wrong, about who is in and who is out might have been a way you were trying to help your community carve out an identity. Maybe that’s why you went so far in drawing a line in the sand between people following Jesus on one side and Jews and Judaism on the other.⁵ I wonder if drawing that sharp line felt important to you because your own community probably included all kinds of diverse folx - Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles - and maybe you thought that the best and only way to unify all these folx you love was to tell them who they are by telling them who they are *not*. And my goodness, do I understand that. When I am desperate to belong somewhere, I know how soothing it can feel to try and find belonging by uniting with others around all the people who we say we are better than.

John, I actually saw this recently right in my own neighborhood. Last month, just blocks from me, some folx received antisemitic, white nationalist flyers on their doorsteps.⁶ I heard later that people received similar flyers in Atlanta and Cincinnati that same weekend, and flyers similar to these ones were distributed in Colleyville, Texas last year, where a man held some Jewish

³ Reinhartz, *ibid.*, pg. 169.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 173.

⁶ Matthew Esnayra, “Antisemitic flyers found in Old West Side of Longview,” *The Daily News*, February 10, 2023, https://tdn.com/news/local/antisemitic-flyers-found-in-old-west-side-of-longview/article_6d9e9dce-a0f7-11ed-aa3d-ef0c182308d7.html .

worshippers hostage in their synagogue at gunpoint.⁷ The group spreading these flyers everywhere is a “loose network of individuals connected by their virulent antisemitism”. They are known for trolling Jewish communities.⁸ I won’t repeat most of what’s on those horrifying flyers, but I will say that they blame Jews for everything from COVID-19 to corporate greed.

And the folx spreading that garbage, John? What I’ve been learning is that the “my people are good and those people are bad” binary way of thinking they are using is some Roman empire shit! White nationalist organizers know this stuff will (and is already) tearing us apart. And guess who wins when we turn on each other this way, forming an identity around who we hate and who is ‘other’ from us? It’s the people at the tippy top, John, that small minority of people who know that if the rest of us realized that the source of oppression was *their* hoarding of power and resources, we’d get pissed off enough to join together and demand that they share with everybody! That terrifies them, John! It terrified Roman elites too, which is why they executed Jesus on a cross. Of course, these small minorities will work as hard as they can to spread this hateful and violence-fueling rhetoric, because that is how invested they are in keeping us apart to solidify their unjust hoarding of power.

John, I wonder if on some deeper level, you know that this is a healing story, but not for the man born blind. After all, you tell us that Jesus said “neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Maybe the healing you were longing to see happen in *your* community, the community you are writing to, is what was in your heart as you wrote this. I mean, the man born blind seeing again happens at the very beginning of this story, and you spend the rest of the time telling us what happened in that guy’s community after that. Maybe that’s why you have Jesus speaking directly to this man at the end of the story, really being with him and listening to him and noticing him and tending to him. Because maybe that’s what you wanted for you and your beloveds, John. You wanted all of them to be listened to and noticed and tended to in this way. You wanted them to feel like *they belong*. You wanted them to remember that they belong *to each other*. So many of us fall into shitty ways of trying to belong, John. Ways that might soothe in the moment but end up hurting our siblings - and ourselves - in the process.

I think I see your deep longing in this text, John. And I am longing right there with you. May we give up black-and-white, right-and-wrong, in-and-out binary thinking so that we can instead experience what we were made for - a wild, raucous rainbow of beautiful life and community. May we understand more fully the lies those in power spread to make us compete, to pull us apart, and may we embrace instead the reality that we are better together and that thriving

⁷ Rachel Treisman, “Colleyville, Texas, is among dozens of U.S. cities blanketed with antisemitic flyers,” NPR, February 23, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/23/1082568636/antisemitic-flyers-colleyville-texas>

⁸ Esnayra, *ibid*.

happens when we join as one in solidarity. And may the communities we love so much finally find the healing we are longing for. Amen.

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>
 <<“Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.”>>

[Call to Action and outro:]

[Call to Action:]

- For our call to action this week, beloveds, I invite you to gather together a few Christian friends you organize with and/or who are in your faith community and have a watch party and discuss this webinar ““Rome Will Destroy Us: Resisting Anti-Judaism in John” -- a webinar led by SURJ-Faith Coordinator Rev. Anne Dunlap. I promise this will help you be better equipped to engage with anti-Jewish bias in John’s Gospel, which is where the lectionary takes us during this Year A Lenten season, and it will give you more confidence in challenging antisemitism in your own community and in the Christian faith tradition overall. If you’ve only got 30 minutes, another good place to start would be Rev. Anne’s *The Word Is Resistance* podcast on these John texts which I will also link in the transcript for you, in addition to that webinar recording and transcript. Finally, if you are someone who regularly preaches in a Christian faith community, I cannot recommend highly enough that you purchase a copy of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, if you don’t have one already! So much of the background and history I wove into my words to John today came from the essay by Adele Reinhartz on the Gospel of John included in the book. There’s tons of excellent scholarship like this throughout the volume, and, if you’re like me, once you’ve got a copy for yourself, it will become one of your best sermonizing companions from here on out.

[Outro:]

- Thanks as always for joining us. We’d love to hear from you all, and especially folks of color and non-Christian folks, by commenting on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or filling out the survey on our podcast page at surj dot org. Give us a “like” or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you check out our podcast.
- You can find out more about SURJ at surj dot org, where you can sign up for SURJ-Faith updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links. Next week we’ll have a resistance word from the brilliant Rev. Anne Dunlap - you won’t want to miss it! And finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor, Claire Hitchens! We appreciate you so much!

Again, I'm Rev. Liz Kearny, and being with you in this way is something I treasure. I want to close with some words that Rev. Anne reminded me of this week from movement ancestor Audre Lorde, on a panel she participated in at a women's conference that had not integrated the voices of, in her words, "poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians."⁹ Her words speak to every last one of us about our need to cross the divisions those in power are fueling so that we can remember that we belong to each other. Hear now these words from Audre Lorde...

"For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change... In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower."¹⁰

<<Verse 3 of "Building Up A New World, Verse 1 repeated.>>
<<"Rise, Shine, Give God glory, Children of the Light"
We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.>>

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RESOURCES:

Rev. Anne Dunlap, SURJ-Faith Coordinator, "Rome Will Destroy Us: Resisting Anti-Judaism in John", 2.24.20 Webinar for Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)

Video Recording:

https://zoom.us/rec/play/LAoT1s60i_Hdw4DQKZ6J5_Pih0b6Yp6Q2UAIjuukrevpEXOHV1EmPuskNNFpLKQca2pp21bEOZAoVvrA.DZYtOfpXlht_p82c?continueMode=true&_xzm_rtaid=r9I2ThFNOCeZmB_wMwnleA.1678389217463.039e432a9b44752f5b4ef30dae7f54c6&_xzm_rhtaid=113

Transcript:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OZdTYpwKSR8LcLpgrPavZ6cxFQbfbBQe/view?pli=1>

"Resisting Anti-Judaism in John," Rev. Anne Dunlap, *The Word Is Resistance* podcast, Episode #006, Lent 2A, 3.12.2017,

Sound recording:

<https://soundcloud.com/thewordisresistance/31217-resisting-anti-judaism-in-john>

Transcript: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rDvUQhpr5_gv3IYz5fomHDGcgYo0Fxxzk/view

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⁹ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*," 1979, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, pg. 110.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 112.

Adele Reinhartz, "The Gospel According to John," *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Second Edition - Fully Revised and Expanded*, pgs. 168-74.

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https://tdn.com/news/local/antisemitic-flyers-found-in-old-west-side-of-longview/article_6d9e9dce-a0f7-11ed-aa3d-ef0c182308d7.html

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Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*," 1979, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, pgs. 110-113.

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