

Podcast Transcript

8.15.21 Pentecost 25A (Out of order)

- [Judges 4:1-7](#) and [Psalm 123](#) •
- [Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18](#) and [Psalm 90:1-8, \(9-11\), 12](#) •
- [1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#) •
- [Matthew 25:14-30](#)

<<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:

- Beloveds, welcome back to The Word Is Resistance, the podcast where we’re exploring what our Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression - the times in which we are living today. What do our sacred stories have to teach us, as white folks, about our role in resistance, in showing up, in liberation?
- What wisdom is there for us as white Christians in these troubled, violent times of pandemics and racial capitalism, and the beauty of resistance?
- I’m Rev. Anne Dunlap, pronouns she/her/hers. I’m a United Church of Christ minister and I’m the faith organizing coordinator for Showing Up Racial Justice (SURJ). I live in the place currently called* Buffalo, NY, here in the homelands of the Haudenosaunee and Erie peoples.
- 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 like us, like me, have a responsibility to commit ourselves to *resisting* white supremacy, to speaking up and showing up and disrupting white supremacy where we find it, including in our own Christian tradition.
- *And we do this work remembering* “We are building up a new world.” 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.
- The Word is Resistance.

So, I’m skipping this week’s lectionary selections

And offering you a word about Deborah, from Judges 4 and 5.

We have some amazing episodes about John’s chapter 6

Conversation about bread -- from Nichola and I in 2018,

And from Margaret just a few weeks ago --

If you are looking for some inspiration about John 6,

Check the transcript and social media,

We'll post those episodes there.

I'm going with Deborah -- which
We actually read on the 25th Sunday of Pentecost
In Year A -- if there are enough weeks in the lectionary year --
There aren't always, which means
We don't always get this text to choose from --

Anyway, I'm going with Deborah
As I was invited to preach this past Sunday
And this was the text.
And given what is going on right now
With the news about climate change,
With the indigenous resistance against
Enbridge's line 3, and the fires and floods
And out-of-the-ordinary heat --
Well it seemed like a good word to offer you, too.

If you're not familiar with Deborah's story,
You'll find it in Judges 4 and 5.
You can pause here and go read it if you like,
It's a little too long to read in its entirety, so here's a quick summary:
Deborah is a judge for the people of Israel,
They are oppressed and threatened by Canaan and the general Sisera,
So Deborah calls together her people to fight in self-defense
Against the massively overarmed Canaanite army.
Amazingly, the Israelites win, with the victory strike
Coming when another woman, Jael,
Drives a tent peg through Sisera's skull.
Fun story!
Chapter 4 is the narrative version
And Chapter 5 is the victory song,
Retelling the story.
The song is thought to be
One of the oldest texts in the entire Bible.

Deborah's story ends with this line:
"And the land had rest, forty years."

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

"And the land had rest, forty years."

What is the land that you know best,
The land where you were born, perhaps,
The land where you've lived longest, perhaps.
What is the land that your bones know as home?

What is that land's shape?
The contours, the edges, the vistas,
What are that land's smells,
Their changing scents over the seasons?
How does the soil feel under your feet,
Under your fingernails?
What grows there, thrives there,
Plants and animals and other beings?
How do the water, the wind, the sun, the moon,
Live and move and have their being?

What does it feel like, in your body,
To remember?
To bring to mind the land where you have dwelled?

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"And the land had rest, forty years."

The land my body knows as home
Is the land where
the Osage, Chickasaw, and Quapaw peoples overlap,
where piney forests and ancient mountains
start reaching out, tumbling out
Into the Mississippi River delta.
Those places are currently called
Monticello, and Little Rock, and the Ozarks,
And the Ouachita mountains, and the Arkansas river,
All in a boundaried area called Arkansas,
Where I was born.
Where generations of ancestors
On my daddy's side were born.
This is the land that nourished me
From my earliest breaths,
With the soft haze of humidity
Drenching my skin and easing my eyes,
The smell of pine needle compost

Scrubbing out my lungs,
Water everywhere, rivers
And creeks and bayous and puddles and ponds,
The palette of landscape
Teaching me every color...
Teaching me...
The way I learned generosity and abundance
From how the soil grows everything with abandon,
More than enough corn and beans and tomatoes –
And let me tell you, there are no better tomatoes
Than the ones grown in Monticello soil –
More than enough, so much to share,
The way the garden shares with you,
The way the river kept me company on quiet sunrise mornings,
Easing my loneliness,
The way the forest offered us safety and respite
When humans got too difficult, too harmful,
Teaching me respect, too,
To take seriously the threats of storms and tornadoes,
The ice storms that uprooted whole entire trees.
The trees. The glorious trees!

I have a scar on my arm still from falling out of a tree
When I was in 2nd grade,
A gorgeous magnolia with her thick blooms bigger than my head.
How else to get as close as you can to such beauty,
Than to climb right up into her lap?

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“And the land had rest, forty years.”

As I mentioned,
This line is the very last line of Deborah’s story,
After the generation of oppression,
After the people crying out to God,
After Deborah calling her forces into battle,
A battle to defend themselves from their oppressors,
The self-defense of a people in which women
Played a crucial role –
After Jael’s winning strike,
After the victory song –
Then:
“And the land had rest, forty years.”

What does it mean, for a land to rest?

What would have to happen,
For that to be possible?

In order to be able to wrestle with this question,
We first need to reckon rightly
With the story of Deborah,
And where it fits in the broader arc
Of the story being told –

Or I might say, “stories,”
Because there are layers of stories,
Layers of meaning-making happening,
Both in Judges and in the narrator’s
Long history that spans from Deuteronomy through
Joshua, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, and 1st and 2nd Kings.
This narrative arc covers the “history” –
“history” in quotes because – well you’ll see --
From the end of the wilderness wandering
After the people’s liberation from Egypt,
To entering the “Promised Land,”
Through the tense period of judges, then kings,
Beginning with David, the split of the kingdom after Solomon,
The destruction of the northern kingdom
By the Assyrian empire,
And finally, the destruction of the southern kingdom
And Jerusalem by the Babylonian empire.

This all matters,
Because as Black biblical scholar Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney says
In her book “Womanist Midrash,”
“The collection and compilation of these sacred stories
Is a response to the trauma experienced by [the] survivors...
In the face of the defeat of the nation
Dismantling of the monarchy,
Burning of Jerusalem,
And razing of the temple.
These tragedies and their attendant horror provide the impulse” --
And now these are my words,
For the layers of meaning-making
We find evident across the Hebrew Bible,
Where ancient, and less-ancient, tales are stitched together
With recent history
To answer the questions brought on by trauma.

We can recognize these layers
In Deborah’s story, for example, which was crafted

During and after the conquest of Israel by Babylon,
Centuries after Deborah's judgeship was supposed to have happened,
And how the crafters include in her story
This victory song that is even more ancient,
Perhaps the oldest text we have in the Bible.

We might think of it sort of like this:
An oppressed people trying to make sense
of the violence of the economic and political life
Of late-stage capitalism in the 21st century in the US...
By crafting a story about the indigenous Pueblo people
Kicking Spain out of Northern New Mexico in August of 1680...
Or a story about Nat Turner's rebellion against enslavers in August of 1831...
And them singing and dancing to a victory song
Their people had composed 500 years earlier,
For a completely different occasion.

Something like that!
Layers of stories
Trying to make sense of trauma,
Of violence enacted on the bodies of humans,
The bodies of creatures,
The bodies of sacred sites and land.

Why did this happen?
Why does this keep happening?
What does it take to be safe? To be free?
Is God with us, or not?

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"And the land had rest, forty years."

What we can tell from archaeology
And eventual oral and written history
Is that the people who eventually became ancient Israel,
Were people indigenous to the land,
Mostly in small communitarian villages
That engaged in agriculture and herding livestock.
They held bonds of relationship
Across territory to defend one another,
But they were not an empire.
They had, really, no political power,
Nothing that would compare with the might of Egypt, say,
or Canaan, or the Philistines,
All of whom were empires and kingdoms
that demanded tribute

From the people they conquered.
Tribute means the imperial elite amass their wealth
By demanding portions of goods from the people,
The people they've conquered and are now exploiting.
Portions of harvests, and of goods such as oil and textiles.
So, food, and medicine, and clothing,
Necessities, carried off to line some king's coffers.

The people of the land, the Hebrews,
They resisted this. They fought back.
Many scholars think these ancient victory songs,
Like this one from Deborah,
Or Miriam's at the Red Sea,
Are reflecting successful resistance against
Oppression and exploitation by these empires.
Miriam's song celebrates resistance against Egypt.
In Deborah's song, "the peasantry prospered"
"they grew fat on plunder" –
Which describes a "Robin Hood" tactic
Of robbing the empire's military and merchant caravans –
Preventing violence against their people
And redistributing the wealth back to the people
It was stolen from to begin with.

You can imagine, that in
Trying to make sense of the destruction of your people
By yet another empire, this one called Babylon,
You would call on these old resistance traditions
That describe victory over imperial violence.
You want, need that reminder that this oppression will end,
That your people have power, agency.
That God will fight for you, through you.
That you have the right to live free,
Maybe even by any means necessary,
And that even the land has the right to rest.

For 40 years. Or 80. Or centuries.

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

*

When we read these stories,
Whenever it says Egypt, or Canaan, for example,
We should also-at-the-same-time be thinking: Assyria, and Babylon.
The trouble is – and this is part of reckoning rightly

With Deborah and the broader story –
And yes I'm about to add more layers to all this –
The trouble is –
Well the trouble is the broader story itself.

We're supposed to be understanding these
Tales of Deborah, of the earlier judges
(because the later judges are terrible)
And their victories – as resistance victories
Against empire.

Except we don't.

We read them as stories of victories
Of God's powerful imperial armies
Against the people of the land.
Against the infidels, the uncivilized,
The savage, the unfaithful, the unchristian.

We read them that way in part because
We're not taught this complexity of what's going on.
And also because ironically,
When we're told the liberated-from-Egypt
People finally get to enter the promised land,
God tells them to slaughter everyone who's already there.
God tells them, essentially, to commit genocide.
God tells them, essentially, to act just like an empire,
Even though the whole entire wandering in the wilderness
Getting tablet after tablet of instructions
Was precisely about **not** becoming
Just like Egypt, just like an empire.

Until they actually enter the land,
And commit slaughter on God's orders.

There is no peeling back of layers
That it going to make that fact not be true.
We can try to excuse it by saying --
And I do this! I did it working on this! --
We can try to excuse it saying:
Well that never actually happened,
The people were never **actually** enslaved **in Egypt**
So they never returned and conquered --
Well, they're just trying to tell a story
About faithfulness to God
And the consequences of following empire's ways --

Well, Canaan is an empire,
Not the indigenous people of the land,
It's really about defending themselves from exploitation.

All of these things, these layers,
Are true. Are true.
And, they don't change the fact that also,
God orders genocide.

And the reason Deborah
is still having to fight off Canaanites
Is because,
According to the narrative,
The Israelites didn't wipe everyone out the first go-round.

And all these layers
Don't change the fact
That once Christianity
Became the religion of empire,
Christianity became God's army,
And Canaan became the people of the land.

Canaan became
The continent of Turtle Island and her people.
Osage scholar Robert Warrior
points out that Puritan preachers often called indigenous
peoples Canaanites, thus legitimizing their destruction
as the US became its own colonizing empire.
It's the same logic that led to
The doctrine of discovery and manifest destiny,
To Indian boarding schools,
To the Sand Creek Massacre,
And to the Enbridge pipelines being dug today
Under the rice fields of the Anishinaabe,
Regardless of whatever a treaty might say.

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"And the land had rest, 40 years."

There's no way to make these stories nice,
To make them fit a nice template
Of resistance that in no way offends.
There's no way to peel back the layers,
Like too many coats and knitted sweaters,
Until we find some comfortable nugget
Underneath it all.

What I want to suggest is,
We have to sit down with the whole thing,
Resistance, genocide, faithfulness, empires,
Trauma, victory, destruction, all of it --
Maybe up cradled in that magnolia from my backyard,
Maybe under the palm tree with Deborah,

Just sit there and ask it all,
What does it mean, for a land to rest?

What would have to happen,
For that to be possible?

And we might notice that
In all the arc of this narrative,
The land only gets to rest 3 times –
3 times when the people are living aligned with God's vision,
Which is not a vision of empire,
But of communal, non-hierarchical
Relationships of mutuality and care for everyone's well-being.

Sitting with this tree,
Holding this messiness of story in our hands,
We might notice these 3 restful alignments, and decide
That genocide of any sort does not belong in that vision.
Whatever meaning the story-crafters
Were trying to make as their people
Were being decimated by Babylon –
We don't have to give our assent to all their conclusions.
We can hold their trauma with compassion,
And we can choose a different way.
We can tell God that our faithfulness cannot include genocide
And hold our tradition accountable
For the harm done in God's name.

Sitting with this tree,
We can center what indigenous people are telling us,
What the land, the land itself, is telling us.

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“And the land had rest, 40 years.”

What does it mean, for a land to rest?

What would have to happen,

For that to be possible?

For the land to rest,
We must reckon rightly with Deborah,
And with the whole of the story
In which she finds herself.

For the land to rest,
We must tell the truth
About all the layers that are happening here.

For the land to rest,
We must recognize
That telling the story
Only as an imperial victory against the savage
Has meant that we,
We who are of European descent,
Have lost our connection to land.

And I don't mean that we don't find nature beautiful,
But that we have lost our relationship to the land itself,
We have forgotten not how to be *in* nature,
But that we are *of* nature,
Made of the stuff of the earth,
Sharing Divine breath with trees and animals,
Moon pulling the tides in our blood,
Reciprocating the land's bountiful gifts to us
By offering them gifts in return.
We have forgotten how to love the land,
And that the land loves us back.

I think that's why we get this line in Judges,
Even if only 3 times,
Like seeds dropped in aching soil,
"And the land had rest, 40 years."

The land itself is its own layer in this story,
Asserting their voice to say, enough.
Enough with the fighting, enough with the empires,
Come back to the land. Listen to the land.

Because
When the land rests, there is no war.
When the land rests, there is no colonization.
When the land rests, there is no genocide.
When the land rests, there is no exploitation.

When the land rests, the people are safe, and thrive.
When the land rests, diversity is honored.
When the land rests, there is enough food.
When the land rests, there is beauty.
When the land rests...the people rest, too.

May it be so
May it be so
May it be so

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]

For our call to action, I'm inviting you to support the indigenous-led resistance to the Line 3 pipeline. GreenFaith and Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light have solidarity actions for folks of faith; you can also follow Honor the Earth, established by Winona LaDuke, for updates and actions alerts as well. We'll have links in the transcript as well as on our social media, including a link to [Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light](#)'s website with action alerts + indigenous-led groups to follow.

Action alerts from GreenFaith/MIPL:

- [Get connected to the frontlines and support resistance camps.](#)
- Sign up for calls in MNIPL and GreenFaith's "It Takes All of Us to Stop Line 3" virtual event series
 - Wednesday, Aug. 11, 7:00-8:30 pm CDT: [Buddhists in the Movement to Stop Line 3](#)
 - Monday, Aug. 16, 5:00-6:00 pm CDT: [Jews in the Movement to Stop Line 3](#)
- [Sign up for the RISE Coalition-led Treaty People Walk for Water](#), a solidarity walk from the Firelight camp to the MN State Capitol, Aug 7-25.
- [Commit to showing up for Treaties Not Tar Sands: Capitol Action to Stop Line 3](#) at the MN State Capitol building on Aug 25.
- Write to Jamie Pinkham at the Army Corps of Engineers:
<https://weprotectthewater.org/action>
- Write to President Biden & your state reps:
<https://www.mnipl.org/take-action/policy/action-alerts/#/19>
- Donate to bail funds and frontlines camps: <https://linktr.ee/stopline3>

[Line 3 Resistance Dashboard](#)

Thanks as always for joining us from wherever you are on this good earth. We'd love to hear from you all by commenting on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or filling out the listener survey on our podcast page at surj dot org. And we'd love to hear from you about how we're doing, especially from folks of color and non-Christian folks who may be checking us out.

You can find out more about SURJ at surj dot org, and our podcast lives on Soundcloud; search on "The Word Is Resistance." Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you listen to our podcast. Transcripts are available as well on our website, which include references, resources, and action links. Finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor, Maxwell Pearl!

(Words of blessing/encouragement)

- Blessings to you in all that you do to resist injustice, and in all that you do to build up a new world.
- Love and liberation, beloveds. Love and liberation.
- Until next time. I'm Rev. Anne Dunlap.

<<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:

Our episodes on John 6's "I am the bread" conversation (Year B):

[TWIR 8.19.18 No More White Nationalist Bread](#)

[TWIR 8.26.18 On Being The Armor of God](#)

[TWIR 7.25.21 God of the Leftovers](#)

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REFERENCES:

*Why do I say "currently called" Buffalo, NY? Indigenous scholar Damien Lee: "When I write, I avoid the phrase '...in what is now Canada.' I use '...in what is currently Canada' to open possibilities for imagining futurities beyond the settler state." Check out this post for more: <http://nativeappropriations.com/2018/02/wakanda-forever-using-indigenous-futurisms-to-survive-the-present.html>

The Jewish Annotated New Testament, NRSV. 2nd Ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, editors. Oxford University Press, 2017. Check all the amazing essays in the back!

Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, “Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne.” Westminster John Knox Press, 2017. 18.

“Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” Robert Warrior. This article appeared in Christianity and Crisis, 49 (September 11, 1989): 261-265. The original journal is no longer in print; the article can be found online

here: http://www.academia.edu/17688887/Canaanites_Cowboys_and_Indians_Deliverance_Conquest_and_Liberation_Theology_Today

I learned about the land loving us back through my community herbalist training and practice; however, Robin Wall Kimmerer also speaks beautifully about this in her book “[Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants](#).”

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