

## Podcast Transcript

3.12.2023 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

- [Exodus 17:1-7](#)
- [Psalm 95](#)
- [Romans 5:1-11](#)
- [John 4:5-42](#)

<<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:

- Hello everyone, welcome back to “The Word is Resistance,” the podcast where we are 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 people, about our role in resistance, in showing up, in liberation?
- Our theme music, *We are building up a new world* is Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement sung by a multi-racial “movement choir practice in Denver CO in December 2014. It was led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freaney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.
- I’m Rev. Jean Jeffress. I’m a pastor in the United Church of Christ in Northern CA. I serve a church in area famously known as the Silicon Valley. I live a bit north of there in Oakland. Both where I live and work exist on the unseated and ancestral lands of the Ohlone people who are still here praying for, and loving this land. This podcast is a project of SURJ-Faith and is particularly designed for white people, white Christians – the idea is that white people will talk to other white people about race and white supremacy. We believe white people like many of you listening now, and 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. We’d love to hear from you and especially from people of color, and from listeners all faith traditions who might be checking us out. We’d love to hear how you think we’re doing.
- The Word is Resistance.

Well, here we are with our teeth pretty well sunk into Lent. Week 3 is upon us and here at TWIR, we are turning our focus toward addressing, interrupting, and pushing back against anti-Jewish readings in the gospel selections from this season’s lectionary. Sadly, there is no shortage of work to be done in this area. Today’s passage is from John which is particularly problematic. In Adele Reinhartz’ commentary on John in the Jewish Annotated New Testament, she points out several important things. Among them are the repetition of the term “the Jews” in reference only to the priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes while Jesus and his followers were also Jewish. But Jesus and his followers are never lumped in with “the Jews.” The Samaritan woman in today’s passage refers to Jesus as a Jew, but the author calls him an Israelite. In addition to this, John’s gospel filled with binary language and images; darkness vs. light, flesh vs. spirit, believer vs. non-believer. And, “the Jews” seem always to be on the negative side of said binaries.

Importantly, Reinhartz writes, “It must be emphasized that the gospel is not anti-Semitic in a racial sense, as it is not one’s origins that are decisive but one’s beliefs. Nevertheless, John’s gospel has been used to promote anti-Semitism.” She goes on to say, “John’s harsh statements about “the Jews” should be understood as part of the author’s process of self-definition, which required the drawing of a boundary between the followers of Jesus and Jews of Judaism. This distancing may have been particularly important if the ethnic composition of the Johannine community included Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles [...]. This explanation does not excuse the gospel’s hostile rhetoric, but it may make it possible for readers to understand the narrative’s place in the process by which Christianity became a separate religion, to appreciate the beauty of its language, and to recognize the spiritual power that it continues to have in the lives of many of its Christian readers.” In other words, as I often say, it’s not the text’s fault that it gets interpreted poorly and misused. Throw in a couple thousand years of Christian interpretation, the fact that most Christians probably do not spend time with Hebrew and Greek which limits one’s ability to gain a deeper understanding of the text, and a shit ton of lazy theology, and voila, we end up with anti-Jewish New Testament interpretation. We end up with wrongly equivocating the Pharisees et al with Judaism itself. We end up with a Jesus who seems opposed to Judaism itself instead of some of the religious leaders. We end up on a trajectory that we all know leads nowhere good and that somehow, by a deeply suspicious coincidence, leaves the true holder of power, Rome, out of the argument. Let’s see if we can’t walk through some of this mess.

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

Here’s the passage from John 5:2-42 (NRSV)

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.<sup>6</sup> Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”<sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

<sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?<sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”<sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,<sup>14</sup> but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”<sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”<sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’;<sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”<sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.<sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus

said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

<sup>27</sup> Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” <sup>28</sup> Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup> “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” <sup>30</sup> They left the city and were on their way to him.

<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” <sup>32</sup> But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” <sup>33</sup> So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. <sup>35</sup> Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. <sup>36</sup> The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup> For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ <sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

In the book *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power*, Botswana postcolonial feminist biblical scholar, Musa Dube wrote a commentary of John 4, the story of Jesus and Samaritan woman. In this commentary, she illustrates this passage as imperial ideology in motion. Empires expand their territories – Jesus and his crew head to Samaria a place of ancient animosity and racial tension between the Hebrews and the Samaritans. Jesus encounters a woman, who, Dube suggests, represents the land itself, something to be entered and conquered. He then discredits her religion, telling her she doesn’t know what she worships and then he tells her her own story. Jesus mansplains. Then he tells the disciples to go ahead and reap what the did not sow, go ahead and take that for which you did not labor. And after all this, after Jesus discredits these peoples’ worship, co-opts this woman’s story, then townspeople come to Jesus and they are ones who end up calling him the Savior of the World. That, right there, is the logic of empire – to subjugate a people in such a way that ultimately, they turn to the subjugating power for salvation. It’s brilliant. It reminds me of that song, [“Kiss Me Son of God” by They Might Be Giants](#). The first verse says:

“I built a little empire out of some crazy garbage  
 Called the blood of the exploited working class  
 But they’ve overcome their shyness and their calling me Your Highness

And the world screams, “kiss me son of god.”

It reminds me of a conversation between Gul Dukat and Weyoun, two interstellar war lords on Star Trek Deep Space Nine. They are talking about invading The Federation and Weyoun is convinced that the population of earth will need to be irradiated. But Gul Dukat says, “A true victory is to make your enemy see that they were wrong to oppose in the first place. To force them to acknowledge your greatness.” ([Click here to watch video clip.](#))

That’s imperial ideology in a nutshell. Get the people to agree with you and if they don’t actually agree, then make it too dangerous to disagree. Create precarious comfort for some but make sure there’s an ample supply of exploitables and pit the two against each other. Then, if all goes well, they’ll turn to the power source for protection or comfort. The ideology has to replicate itself like a virus. And a virus needs a host.

Dube’s interpretation destabilizes the story for me. I know that scripture, and John in particular is poorly interpreted and misused. I know that responsible interpretation requires acknowledgement of one’s sociocultural location. I know. And it’s hard for me to see Jesus interpreted as a colonizer. And so I scramble to wonder if, perhaps the author of John was utilizing imperial ideology to tell their story, borrowing as it were. Dube points out that Jesus, John the Baptist, and the Pharisees, all contemporaries, were, in essence competing with each other. All had a message to share. John gets executed, so, in the text, we are left with Jesus, a guy seemingly on the outside of the religious establishment and the Pharisees, a legitimately recognized power. The Pharisees were afraid that Jesus’ movement would cause Rome to attack. And Jesus, constantly antagonized by the Pharisees, turns to Samaria to spread his message. Dube says, “Both the Pharisees and [Jesus and his followers] are trying to define Jewish identity during the Roman occupation of Palestine; in particular, after the destruction of their religious symbols – Jerusalem and the Temple.”

I appreciate Dube’s power analysis. Rome had the power and the actions of those under this power are shaped by it. Power is never neutral. Ever. But I cannot unsee the mansplaining, colonizing Jesus. And today, it’s messing with me.

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

But there is another interpretation that I will share. I got this interpretation from our own Rev. Anne Dunlap. Rev. Anne did a webinar presentation a few years ago on the very topic TWIR is tackling this Lent: pushing back on anti-Jewish NT readings, especially in John. I’m going to paraphrase her interpretation. She said, think of Jesus and the Samaritan woman sitting down together and organizing across difference as an act of resistance against Rome. Think about Jesus telling her about this living water and that salvation is from the Jews, which would indicate that it is not from Rome. Think about what it would mean to never be thirsty again in the place where Rome controlled the water. Think about what it would mean for the Samaritans to call Jesus the Savior of the World, as phrase reserved for Rome and its rulers. In other words, think of this

story as a means for the author of John to resist oppression and to spread that resistance, sharing the good news that there is a power greater than Rome and that that power will save the world.

This interpretation that goes down a lot easier for me. It's an act of resistance. It's an undoing of centuries old imperial violence and division. The gospel of John is hard for me for many of the reasons I talked about at the beginning of the episode. These two interpretations are helpful in pushing back on anti-Jewishness because they both turn the dial back to the power source – they help us to remember always that the enemy of Jesus was not “the Jews,” it was Rome. Rome had the power, and power is never neutral.

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

As for me, I'm looking for comfort in my faith this Lent, looking for comfort in my Jesus. I'm tired from pastoral ministry. Not saying that to complain, it's just a fact. And I feel tender in this world where war continues to rage and imperial ideology continues to replicate. What's close to my heart right now is the 385 pieces anti-lgbtq/anti-trans legislation across the country. The lives and safety of a UCC minister and congregation in my Conference were threatened because the church has a organization that support lgbtq youth. They've been holding a youth drag show fundraiser for a few years and it was canceled due to pressure and threats of violence. I'll put a link to the story in the transcript. Thing is, anti-Semitism and violent attempts to control gender roles and presentation are the low hanging fruit of fascism.

When I sat down to read this week's text, I fixated on the living water and I realized I am thirsty again. I am so thirsty.

I will close with an excerpt of a Good Friday sermon I preached in 2019. It was a 7 Last Words service. If you don't know about 7 Last Word services, check out the TWIR Good Friday episode from last year. I had the 5<sup>th</sup> word: I Thirst.

Headline reads, “Volunteers convicted for leaving water out for migrants.”

Jesus says, “I thirst.”

Headline reads, “Report finds Flint water crisis may have killed 119 – nearly 10 times the official death toll.”

Jesus says, “I thirst.”

Headline reads, “This young whale died with 88 pounds of plastic in her stomach.”

Jesus says, “I thirst.”

Headlines read, “11 killed in synagogue massacre,” “New Zealand mosque shooter a white nationalist seeking revenge,” “Officer acquitted in killing of unarmed Black teenager,” “Killing of transgender people in the US saw another high year,” “Toddlers held under border bridge have bruises,” “22 immigrants have died in ICE detention centers during the past 2 years.”

Jesus says, “I thirst, I thirst, I thirst, I thirst, I thirst, I thirst.”

Every time I think about Jesus saying “I thirst” from the cross, I think about his conversation with the woman at the well. To her Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I give them will never thirst.”

You see, Jesus knows that the state can poison the water in the well, that folks will dump plastic in the well water, that the city will cut that water off right at your faucet. And Jesus knows that we need that water to live, just like he did.

But thirst is not only the body's need for water, it's the human need for justice, the spirit's need for healing. I thirst is every tent city. I thirst is every child needing a hug in an ICE concentration camp. I thirst is every mass shooting, every state-sponsored execution, every pound of plastic in earth's oceans. I thirst is the first century "I can't breathe." I thirst is a cry from God for help.

God didn't trouble the water because everything was fine. God troubled the water because God's people were suffering, and God's people still suffer. We gotta step out of the parched places of privileged whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and Christian hegemony that lull us into a false sense of comfort and deform our humanity and step into the troubled, living water. God is in that water; God is that water. Amen.

My call to action this week is to look up Loomis Basin United Church of Christ and read about the work they're doing to support lgbtq youth. Give, if you can, to The Landing Place, the support group run by the church. To combat anti-Semitism in biblical interpretation, read scholars such as Dr. Wil Gafney. And support Jewish organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace. I'll include info about all this in the resources.

Thank you so much for joining me from wherever you are in this world today. Let us know how your action goes – we'd love to hear from you all – by commenting on our Soundcloud, Twitter or Facebook pages. Tune in for a resistance word from Rev. Liz Kearny.

You can find out more about SURJ at [surj.org](http://surj.org), and our podcast lives at Soundcloud; search on "The Word Is Resistance." We're also on Spotify. Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. 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 this week, Claire Hitchins! Thank you, Claire!!

(Words of blessing/encouragement)

- Blessings to you in all that you do.
- Love and liberation to you all
- Until next time. I'm Jean Jeffress.

*<<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.>>*

~ ~ ~

## RESOURCES

Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, Musa Dube, Chalice Press, 2000.

Youth Drag Show Cancelled:

[https://www.sfgate.com/california-news/article/roseville-drag-show-canceled-northern-california-17819883.php?inf\\_contact\\_key=8c63b4e80339249f573a8931ec00240b4dfbc39d7283b2cb89d5189540b69330&fbclid=IwAR2S8qBSLAZVUcNbSWIVVsWCfsPZZTqizu89WBBc2VQ3ULwmozVWqDR\\_myU](https://www.sfgate.com/california-news/article/roseville-drag-show-canceled-northern-california-17819883.php?inf_contact_key=8c63b4e80339249f573a8931ec00240b4dfbc39d7283b2cb89d5189540b69330&fbclid=IwAR2S8qBSLAZVUcNbSWIVVsWCfsPZZTqizu89WBBc2VQ3ULwmozVWqDR_myU)

The Landing Spot:

<https://www.loomisucc.org/landing-spot>

Loomis Basin UCC:

<https://www.loomisucc.org/>

Jewish Voice for Peace:

<https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/>

Dr. Wil Gafney: womanist Hebrew Bible scholar

<https://www.wilgafney.com/>

## REFERENCES:

Deep Space 9: Season 6 Episode 6

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEsT0z8Fdg8>

John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power. Editors Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley. Sheffield Academic Press. 2002 pp. 51-75.

Kiss Me Son of God by They Might be Giants

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqOSPm2UdRs>

Rome Will Destroy Us: Resisting Anti-Judaism in John by Rev. Anne Dunlap

[https://zoom.us/rec/play/PhBICNLOAEnwOJt6VDTPIOm2RkGMHymCQZe11195d-AUFB214GhKC21IN3Xmp\\_i6Hl90dKazthtHy6f-.KEthDHvMB5JQw\\_7V?continueMode=true](https://zoom.us/rec/play/PhBICNLOAEnwOJt6VDTPIOm2RkGMHymCQZe11195d-AUFB214GhKC21IN3Xmp_i6Hl90dKazthtHy6f-.KEthDHvMB5JQw_7V?continueMode=true)

~ ~ ~

## PERMISSIONS AND COPYRIGHT:

\*"We Are Building Up a New Word," tune public domain, lyrics by Dr. Vincent Harding, used with permission of the Freeney-Harding family. Sung at NoEnemies movement choir practice, Denver, CO, December 7, 2014.

*\*Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations for the Christian podcast are from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.*

*\*Revised Common Lectionary, Copyright © 1992 Consultation on Common Texts. Used by permission.*