

Podcast Transcript

8.13.2023 and Pentecost 11A

- Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 and Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45b • 1 Kings 19:9-18 and Psalm 85:8-13 • **Romans 10:5-15** • Matthew 14:22-33
- Title: #WrestlingWithRomans - A Better Proclamation
- Description: What is the good news that Paul longs for his beloveds to tell each other again and again, in the midst of Rome's lies? Join Rev. Liz Kearny in unlearning what the empire's religion has taught us about "confessing with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead," and find out what Paul says will actually save us.

Content warning: Mention of suicide

#WrestlingWithRomans #Proclamation #GoodNewsThatIsActuallyGoodNews
 #StopCopCity #CopCityVote

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 that liberate all of us?

My name is Rev. Liz Kearny. My pronouns are she/her.

I am an ordained Presbyterian Church U.S.A. pastor living in 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 so glad to be back with you for this 11th Sunday after Pentecost as we continue #WrestlingWithRomans!

This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians—white Christians engaging with other white Christians in conversations about challenging every system that threatens life. 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.

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

These Romans texts got me time-traveling, y'all. When I hear the words, those words you'll hear later in the text - "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" - I'm a high school student all over again, right back at a fundamentalist evangelism camp I attended one summer, where one of the main teachers literally told us - and I am not exaggerating - that we should be looking at people walking around in places like the mall as if they have a sign on their forehead that says "bound for hell," to motivate us to tell them about Jesus in order to save them from eternal damnation.

It's the kind of teaching I'm still peeling back the layers of, trying to understand how it formed me in those years when my brain was still developing. It was toxic water I drank just about every day from a polluted stream of Christianity that is based in fear-mongering, "who is in and who is out" binary theologies that the far right is counting on to organize our beloveds in support of systems that have no interest in caring for them, for us. Systems that steal our labor, shame our bodies, vilify those who are black and brown, poor and disabled, trans and queer, or all of the above. Theologies that so many parts of Romans have been co-opted to support. Theologies that form in us the "imperial flesh" that Brigitta helped us understand a few weeks back that Paul was trying to help us unlearn. And if we could just get underneath all these layers of harmful interpretation, we'd hear a song - the liberating melody Paul was singing to his people.

As I wrestled - and *I do mean wrestled* - with this text, I find it is about **proclamation**. About speaking to those around us about good news. About what is in our heart that flows out of our mouths. But it is an entirely different proclamation than I was introduced to at fundamentalist evangelism camp almost 20 years ago. So let's see what Paul can help us unlearn and then learn anew about the kind of proclamation that gets all of us free.

This is Romans 10, verses 5-15...

5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' 6 But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in

your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” ’ (that is, to bring Christ down) 7‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?” ’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8But what does it say?

‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ 12For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’

In this passage, I do feel like Paul is still singing that love song to his people that Rev. Anne helped us listen for in last week’s podcast. And as the song continues, Paul takes another opportunity to remind us of the “us” we truly are, the “us” Rome keeps trying to break apart but that Paul is determined to weave back together, the “us” that Dr. Sharon Fennema told us about a couple episodes back, that is Paul’s “vision for his Roman comrades of what it means to truly be in solidarity, to truly hold as central the experiences of their marginalized and oppressed comrades, to truly divest from their privilege and invest in collective liberation.”¹

In verse 5, we get a reminder of the Torah God gave the Jewish people through Moses, teaching them how to live with each other in ways that resist empire every single day. Here, Paul is quoting Leviticus 18:5, where God is basically saying to Moses - don’t live like the Egyptian empire you just left, who enslaved you, and don’t replicate ways of empire as you go into the land of Canaan [which is another podcast for another day], but “keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 18:5). I can imagine Paul, as he paces back and forth while his scribe is writing furiously to keep up, pointing to his Jewish siblings who he is picturing in his mind and saying these words about the Torah that has brought them life.

And then I feel like he turns to pace in another direction in verse 6, talking to his Gentile siblings when he uses the phrase “the righteousness that comes from faith” as a shorthand for how these folx have been welcomed into the family as they too practice ways of anti-empire faithfulness - *tzedakah* from Rev. Anne in episode 1 of this series.²

¹ Dr. Sharon Fennema, [7.30.23 Pentecost 9A Transcript Sharon.docx](#)

² Rev. Anne Dunlap, [6.11.23 Pentecost 2A Transcript Anne](#)

So we see again that Paul is being like, “Hey you! Yeah, you! Jewish sibling! Gentile sibling! I’m talking to *all y’all* because God has created paths that bring all of us together! We belong to each other. We are an ‘us’.”

Then, in the rest of verse 6 through verse 8, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:11-14, which was a reminder to God’s people that this life-giving way of turning *from* the greed and violence and hoarding of empire and *towards* ways of community care and abundance (y’know, the ways set forth in the Torah!) is *not* something they need to look high and low for or go chasing after like it is really hard to find. No, “the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.”

I already hear this as the polar opposite of what I learned at evangelism camp. Walking around the mall and picturing “bound for hell” signs on people’s foreheads assumes that *I* have the right answer and *they* don’t. That the truth is far from them and so I’d better get my act together and bring it to them. It’s all the same logic white settlers used as justification to steal Indigenous peoples’ land so that they could quoteunquote “save the souls of those savages” and enslave African peoples on that stolen land under the guise of a twisted duty to make them Christian in order to quoteunquote “save them.”

Here, Paul rejects that kind of thinking by reminding his folx of this ancient Jewish text that says “the life giving way of God is right there, in your precious body, where you breathe in and out every few seconds, where you form words, where your fleshy heart is beating.” This must also be his way of reminding his Jewish and Gentile siblings that these systems Rome has set up are the least natural thing in the world. These systems designed to get them to out-compete each other for the scraps thrown to them from Rome’s table that Rome claims to be quoteunquote “justice”? Those systems go against the wisdom God planted right there in our precious, fleshy, breathing bodies. Because actually, as Rosemarie Freeney Harding puts it in her memoir, *Remnants*, “the fundamental condition of the universe is care and love.”³ That ground of our being, that wisdom of the Torah is, in fact, *not* far off, but near, near, near to us.

Next, in verses 9 through 13, Paul sets the record straight about how to orient these precious bodies that are teeming with the presence of God so that we can be truly safe, and he does so with what I feel are two big middle fingers up towards Caesar and the Roman empire.

This is where Rev. Anne’s 4th signpost from last week was particularly helpful for me - the fact that Rome is slandering and lying all over the damn place. Like for example, as Rev. Anne told us, “When Nero [quoteunquote] “mercifully”... allowed the Jews to return to Rome, it wasn’t because he thought they were worthy, it was a way to bolster his own status as “merciful.” ‘Look what I did for these poor people, so unworthy, look how amazing I am.’ Slander.”⁴

³ Rosemarie Freeney Harding, *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism, and Mothering*

⁴ Rev. Anne Dunlap, [8.6.23 Pentecost 10A Transcript Anne](#)

In Neil Elliot's book, *The Arrogance of Nations*, there's this image of a scene molded into a silver cup from 1st century CE, in which "The emperor Augustus is depicted showing mercy to captured barbarians, who clutch their children."⁵ I don't know, but I imagine one of the wealthier citizens of Rome drinking wine from this chalice at a banquet, as they tell themselves, "If the people would just trust this system we have created, if they'll just give the emperor who set this nice table for us their trust, we can save them from what has them clutching their children for dear life." Not so different from philanthropists who say they are here to help the people, but really, it's mostly about the tax cuts they are getting for sharing a tiny percentage of the cream off the top of the massive wealth they gained helping create the conditions that their very quoteunquote "good causes" purport to solve. Slander, lies, garbage, and more slander.

So! We get to this verse I mentioned earlier that says "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved," we must understand that to live in ancient Rome was to know that *Caesar* was demanding that you literally confess him as Lord to stay alive, because his hope was that you'd start to believe in your heart that he had the power over life and death. And if you'd just go along with that program, then you'd be saved. I promised you some middle fingers from Paul, and this is it! "...if you confess with your lips that *Jesus* [NOT CAESAR!] is Lord," Paul is saying, "and believe in your heart that *God* [NOT ROME'S POWER!] raised him from the dead, *then* you will be *truly* safe."

Paul reminds us once again that we need to be grounded in what is TRUE, and the truth is that Rome lies. Rome NEVER makes good on its promises. The emperors - as Rev. Anne walked us through last week - will turn Rome's violence on you in a second if you do not conform to their ways of domination.

What is true in the face of these lies, Paul says, is that if you confess with your mouth that *Jesus* - the one Rome crucified to make an example of because of how he followed his ancestors in stepping out of the Empire's thin blue line - is Lord and believe in your heart that God said "The empire's death machinery never has the last word" as Jesus rose from the grave, embracing that reality with your whole being is what will make you truly safe.

And then, Paul says in verses 11 through 13 that ALL ALL ALL are invited into this grounding in the truth. No one who orients their life in resistance to empire will be put to shame. There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and THAT GOD IS TRULY GENEROUS TO EVERYONE (which, by the way, I hear as a sneer at an emperor who likes to make a show of being generous to only the ones who will surrender to the empire's programming), and that EVERYONE who calls on this God's name will be saved/safe/made whole. All means all means ALL.

⁵ Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations*, pg. 86.

Side note: Paul has made it clear, as Dr. Pam Eisenbaum has written, that “there will no longer be strangers and foreigners. But Gentile need not become Jew, nor Jew Gentile. God created a multiplicity of nations and a multiplicity of nations God will redeem.”⁶ God is drawing *diverse* peoples to Herself without homogenizing them, so Paul is not saying Jews and Greeks are the same, but that *they are called to resist empire together and worship the same God of love.*

And here’s where the proclamation comes in, these words that sound to me like longing and desire and heart-aching in verse 14: “But *how* are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And *how* are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And *how* are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?”

Paul is playing here with the Greek word *akouo* / *akoe* - hear / what is heard, recalling the Hebrew *shema*, “signifying obedient hearing.”⁷ It’s another not so subtle reminder that this beckoning - this great divine longing - *this love song* as Rev. Anne put it - to come home to the truth of God’s loving winning over and above Caesar and Rome’s violence has been there, with God’s people, all along.

In verse 15, after Paul has called all our wild threads back home to the real “us”, after Paul has assured us that the way of life has always been as close as our beating hearts and warm breath, after Paul has called Rome’s promises to keep us safe utter bullshit, after Paul has regrounded us in a belief that will make us safe and a confession that will outlive Rome’s death machinery, after Paul has sung us some more of that love song of longing, Paul quotes Isaiah 52, giving us the answer. “How beautiful,” Paul sings, “are the feet of those who bring good news!” (v. 15)

And Y’ALL, I gotta read you the entirety of Isaiah 52:7 that Paul is quoting here with some context. This is from the part of Isaiah where a messenger, a herald runs “to bring news of deliverance from Babylon, the return of God’s reign, and the restoration to the land.”⁸ This messenger is almost out of breath but couldn’t come fast enough because the victory has been won over empire. God’s people ARE FREE and the Babylonian empire DIDN’T WIN and THEY ARE GOING TO GET TO GO HOME.

Here’s how the entirety of that verse goes: ““How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “**Your God reigns.**”””

Your God reigns. Your God reigns. The announcement is *not* “Your God is *going to be* in charge some time soon.” No, Paul is quoting a foregone conclusion that God has already won. *Your God reigns.* Caesar doesn’t reign, even as you see the propaganda he has hammered into the silver cups of his opulent banquet table. The lies and slander of Rome do not reign even as Rome tells

⁶ Dr. Pam Eisenbaum, *Invitation to Romans*, pg. 64.

⁷ *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, footnote on pg. 307.

⁸ Ibid.

you, Jewish siblings, that you are getting what you deserve and that the best you can hope for is begging Rome for the scraps of justice from the table. Even as Rome tells you, Gentile believers, that you can get just a little bit more ahead if you'll punch down towards your Jewish comrades to win points with the Roman authorities. No, beloveds. *Your God reigns*.

How will we remember the Great Love we belong to? How will we keep inviting our people to resist empire with us and follow after the God who has placed in our bodies the wisdom of abundance and joy? *We* will be that messenger, out of breath with excitement, telling each other, over and over and over and over and over again, *Your God reigns*.

I wrote this with a small gathering of plants from my garden on my desk, yellow and pink roses, a wild purple bergamot bloom, and some rosemary, all tucked into a little mason jar, which I gathered on the birthday of a dear one who died by suicide. As I wrote this, I started weeping, because I wanted to tell this dear one, just one more time, "Beloved, your God reigns. Not the power of empire who kept lying to you about your worth. Not the legislation that tried to make your body into a crime. Love wins. Your God reigns." Even saying that makes me feel split in half, between the part of me that won't ever be over the rage of an empire-soaked world that lies so many of our beloveds literally to death, and the part of me that feels even more driven and committed - broken heart and all - to keep telling my beloveds, every damn day, the news, the good news, that *Our God reigns*. It doesn't feel very true very often right now, but I don't think it felt very true at the time Paul was writing to those beloveds in Rome, either. And maybe that is part of the point. That we keep singing this love song to each other, whispering it in the dark, shouting it in the streets with protest signs in our hands, writing it in the text thread, sharing it on the podcast, and re-telling in the thousands of ways we need to be reminded of it over and over again. Rome talks a big game, but as I've heard Rev. Anne say before, "these systems don't love us." But God has given us - *us* - each other. And *we* love us, y'all. It's why we're here. Maybe what is actually needed is for us to look around, everywhere we go, seeing a sign on each person's forehead that says, "I am a beloved child of God." A reminder of who our siblings are. A reminder of who *we* are. A reminder that no matter how much Rome lies to us, we belong to each other, that "the fundamental condition of the universe is care and love," and that our God who is Love *reigns*. That sounds like the kind of proclamation that can get all of us free.

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

The call to action I have for us this week is to find those places in your own communities where Rome's lies are really loud, and show up to proclaim the truth. Maybe it's showing up to the government meeting near you to give public comment supporting your siblings who are organizing for their basic rights. Maybe it's heading to copcityvote.com to find out how you can support our siblings in Atlanta as they race to get enough signatures this week to put a referendum on the ballot to stop the chopping down of 85 acres of forest for the building of "a

pretend city for police to train in urban warfare and control tactics.”⁹ Maybe it’s signing up for SURJ Faith’s 2-part training series that’s coming up for faith communities of all traditions, in which we’ll explore the current context of authoritarianism in the US, why faith communities are being targeted, and practical tools and skills your congregation can build and practice together - I’ll put the registration link for this in the transcript. Get out there and proclaim good news that is really and materially good news for *all* of creation, for *all* of us. And take some moments along the way to tell yourself that good news too - to put a hand on your heart, to breathe in deeply and say, “I am a beloved child of God.”

[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 another incredible resistance word from the Rev. Anne Dunlap as the wrestling continues. 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 it is one of the greatest privileges in my life to dream and conspire with you about liberation through this podcast. In days like these, I’m sending you every ounce of my love. Until next time.

*<<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:

Links to help you take action:

[Click here](#) to help get the referendum passed in Atlanta, giving Atlanta residents a voice to #StopCopCity!

Community Safety: What If Our Congregation Is Targeted?
A 2-part training with SURJ Faith

⁹ copcityvote.com

With the rise of authoritarianism in the US, attacks on queer and trans beloveds both through legislation and right-wing protesters at drag shows, anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric, as well as the censoring of books and school curricula, we are seeing an increase in the targeting of sacred spaces for violence. Across religious traditions, we are seeing online threats, pride and Black Lives Matter banners torn down, hate speech graffiti-ed on synagogues, violent actors appearing at sanctuaries and disrupting services, and more.

So, **how can congregations be prepared?** Why is this violence escalating, and what community safety practices can we engage in now that also help us build the world we long for? **Join us for a 2-part training series for faith communities of all traditions**, in which we'll explore the current context of authoritarianism in the US, why faith communities are being targeted, and practical tools and skills your congregation can build and practice together. The training series will be led by Christian, Jewish, and UUA SURJ-Faith leaders.

Mark your calendars and click on the sessions below to register now!

[Session 1: August 23, 8-10pmET/5-7pmPT](#)

[Session 2: October 18, 8-10pmET/5-7pmPT](#)

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REFERENCES:

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Other TWIR contributors quoted can be found throughout the footnotes of this transcript, with their transcripts linked.

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