

## **Claim the Good News**

Hello, and welcome. This is Rev Margaret Ernst and you're listening to the Word Is Resistance.

This is a podcast where we explore what Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression.

We are in changing times, changing context, changing conditions: yet the empire structures and mindsets of white supremacy and racial capitalism is strong and will continue to take all of our lives and work, and prayer and words, to bring down and transform our current realities into the new world we dream of as people on the road of discipleship.

Speaking of new worlds...The theme song you heard is a recording of Dr. Vincent Harding's song for the freedom movement, "We are building up a new world." This recording is from 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 Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

What do our sacred stories have to teach us, as white people, and as White Christians, about our role in resistance, in showing up, in liberation?

We ask this question because ever since we started this podcast in January 2017, we have said that we firmly believe in White Christians naming, claiming, and doing our own particular and vital work to end white supremacy.

I'm going to be talking about some of what I believe that critical work to be now, four years and four days after Rev. Anne's first podcast. The first episode of this podcast dropped three days before the inauguration of Donald Trump.

In big moments of change, I always like to go back to first things. I had the great fortune to be a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School where, Rev. Dr. Emilie Townes, the great womanist thinker and question asker and ethicist often told us, "Do your first works over."

Let's do our first works over.

In the very first episode of this podcast, this was a total experiment of speaking as White Christians to other White Christians about the lectionary text to find a word to guide us in our work against racism. Rev Anne recorded from her friend's recording studio, chased by chickens in a winter garden.

It was a time when, so many white people, three days before that inauguration, asking ourselves, how did we get here? What is going to happen? How could this man have been elected? *This is not us.*

In that first episode, Anne oriented us this way in January 2017, said this:

“Many of us have “woken up” in the last couple of years to the reality that people of color have been telling us is the truth of who we are as a country: White supremacy, class division, xenophobia, misogyny, ableism, homophobia/transphobia – systemic oppressions held in place through violence and benign neglect. This is who we are. But it is not *\*all\** that we are.”

This week, there is a different president just three days in office, whose election was made possible by Black led, multiracial electoral justice work in places like Georgia, and Wisconsin, and here Pennsylvania, on Lenape land, where I live and where I’m recording from in the city now called Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In backlash to the work that has shifted who is in presidential office, white supremacist militants try to violently seize power to defy the democratic election, just two weeks ago.

If you’ve got a lot of feelings all over the map, trust me, you’re not alone.

Maybe you’re feeling confusion. Uncertainty. Joy, contradiction.

Boundless hope, bounded hope. Release.

Trauma pent from the past four years and beyond and before that finally opening up and showing up.

Maybe you’re numb.

Maybe you’re feeling a little free-er, more imaginative, more loving.

Maybe you’re feeling closed off. Cynical as hell.

Maybe you’re looking for guidance.

Maybe you’re grieving someone lost to the moral catastrophe of the pandemic that has now 400,000 people in our country over 2 million people on our planet.

Maybe you just desperately want a hug from someone you haven’t touched in 9 months.

Maybe you’re feeling the sun on your face.

Maybe you’re feeling what a member at my church said last night to a meeting of my church’s governing body. Her name is Leslie Hamilton and she’s a Black queer woman poet and mama and change maker and she described her feelings this week as “hope on a razor’s edge.”

“Hope on a razor’s edge.”

Do your first things over, Dr. Townes said.

I wondered about my ancestors: what it meant to them to establish a system of governance without kings, which they had been the only thing they had known in their recent memories and the memories of their ancestors.

On Wednesday I was filled with hope and grief and release and a strange wonder at this thing that we call democracy, its revolutionary origins, its violent origins, its chaos, its order, and our particular inheritances and expressions of it that keep on being formed and reformed - not just in our electoral politics but in people’s movements and solidarity economies and around kitchen tables and in the streets and on the block.

Whatever your feelings: honor them, and welcome them in. And let’s talk about the Good News. Let’s celebrate the people in our lives who laid everything down on the table to get Trump out of office as our white supremacist in chief.

And, let’s talk about work we must commit ourselves to ahead. Let’s cast our nets deep and wide. Like Jesus in the boat at Galilee, let’s keep catching ourselves. Let’s catch ourselves and our people for the work of true freedom and belonging. We are here on the path of racial justice, healing from white supremacy, in unity against the death culture of racism, and we’re not going back.

Let’s do this.

The Word Is Resistance.

**[MUSIC]**

As I write this, executive orders are coming in through the Biden administration that reflect years and years of people under enormous pressure and pain bringing the discipline of democracy to life by organizing in people’s movements: the day in and day out work of folks coming together and dreaming together, saying what is wrong, what hurts, what we need. In prisons. In workers centers and backyard barbecues. In the streets. In congregations, in the park. On Zoom, over the kitchen table.

This is what people dreaming in the midst of terror looks like, standing true in what we and those we love need to survive and thrive.

Today, I celebrate the work of movements that have centered, over and over again, with purpose and power, the survival of those most hurting. I celebrate Black women and queer and trans and undocumented organizers who weren't listened to before in social justice movements and organizations whose labor and vigilance vision have made a way out of no way.

I celebrate multiracial organizing. Working class organizing. I celebrate white people finding their places in movements that make sense and that is in service to collective work. I celebrate all the fits and starts. All the small victories and the large ones. All the failures that led to learning. Every moment folks kept going when the way forward felt too brambly, too full of thorns or questions or hurt to proceed.

I celebrate faith that shows up as strategy and collective care. I celebrate faith that shows up as clarity and alignment of purpose even when the way feels scary and uncertain and unclear. I celebrate faith that shows up in the discipline of relationships and organizing as a practice, not perfection. I celebrate what Charlene Carruthers calls Principled Struggle.

Who are *you* celebrating? Whose struggle and survival has given you life and direction in these past four years? What have *you* survived? What fell apart, and what has broken through?

And how will that celebration impact your commitments moving forward, about your role now, your work, in liberation? This is what's on my heart today. Using the joy and release and relief to make the space to get clear, yet again, on our role as white christians in the work before us. Let's use every ounce of celebration to be balm and fuel for moving into commitments for what we owe organizers and faith leaders of color, and Jewish friends and colleagues, to embrace our piece of the collective work with clarity and with courage.

The time is late, and the time is now.

## MUSIC

The scripture text from this week is Mark 1:14-20, when Jesus comes to Galilee, just after his mentor and initiator in movement away from Empire, John the Baptist. In the wake of the trauma of that arrest, we heard that Jesus proclaims the good news of God, saying:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

In every single way in which I have seen and been a part of working together to end white supremacy and fight for economic justice, I have seen that kingdom of God come nearer. Its mystical reality. Its material reality.

Now, as White Christians, just weeks after White militants tried to violently overthrow the results of the election in the name of our protecting our own identity as white people, I believe our repentance and repair for both the violence at the Capitol done in our names and 400 years of violence done in our name can and should look like many things. One way it can and must look is getting more and more real with political strategy that catch our people from the jaws of white supremacy.

For White Christians, our faith in the good news of Jesus Christ, can look like doing our part to end the white Christian nationalism that was at the core of the birth of this nation and - which is stopping us from living collectively into a multi-racial, democratic future on a planet that we all share.

Our work is not the only work. It doesn't have to be at the center. But it is ours, to claim and to bring to life. It's today work, and tomorrow work, and it's long-haul work. It is hard work. But it can and should be joyous work.

Nicole Mangenelli made a print which I adore, which says "it is a gift to heal the harms of our ancestors. It is also a gift to heal our own."

Here's the good news I see today, in the wake of the horror of what it was like to see white supremacist militants praying in the name of Jesus on the Senate floor, after they tried to find the Vice President to hang him, and to kill Black lawmakers...

Here's the good news I see today, in the wake of seeing white men pray with their arms raised fervently to a Christian God...

*We can and do have the power to undo the collective evil which runs in our own very bones and minds and which is moving in so many ways to continue to catch us and our people into its domination net. We can get ourselves and people out of the domination net and into the net of liberation.*

In the name of Jesus, and every other spiritual reality and way of making meaning that makes us come alive, we *must* claim that power to undo the harm, transform the harm.

The violence of White Christian Supremacy is *our* pattern and our ancestors' patterns and it is ours to undo, in relationship and with each other and in alignment with multiracial movements for a planet we can share and live on with collective care at the center.

Let's find our places, each with our unique gifts, relationships and resources, get in loving, resilient relationship with each other, and get in motion with the same kind of clarity of purpose

and wise strategy with which so many Black, indigenous and people of color movements and organizers moved mountains under the conditions of Trumpian tyranny.

Take a breath. The Good News of a world without White Christian Supremacy *can be real*. It may seem impossible. But that's what faith is for.

Science fiction writer Ursula K LeGuin said, "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

An adaption of that for our particular work as White Christians for right now may be: "We live in White Christian Supremacy. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

[MUSIC]

I would love to continue to talk about the success of Black led movements right now. Please find time for that to take in the reality of what is possible when people come together and keep doing the work and keep. Please celebrate people of color who made this change in administration possible often against the resistance of unsuccessful, white liberal-led strategies against trump. With that celebration commit to continuing to support their leadership with your heart and your resources, and your trust.

But I will use the rest of the time on *this* podcast to speak with you about context and strategy, in an open invitation for wrestling and building together in the road that lies ahead.

I appreciate Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson from the Frontline, Movement for Black Lives and Highlander center reposting this comment from Joyce Wagner on the day after the attack on the Capitol:

"We need to stop asking "how could this happen?" And start asking (about white supremacist militants):

- where are their weapon caches
- where are their encampments
- where do they train
- who gives them money
- what is their strategy or at least it's next several steps

Ash-Lee also posted: "I lost track of how many times we encouraged folks to take learning about white supremacists/nationalists/paramilitary forces seriously. Their similarities and differences. The

multi-class dynamics. The populist tendencies. Relationships with electeds and law enforcement agencies/officers.”

I, Margaret, will be very honest with you that these are the conversations I am hungry to have and want to know where you are having them. Not just publicly in think-pieces: but behind the scenes and unglamorous ways to build, strategize, and get in motion. What’s working? What’s not? What do we need to do differently? What are the organizing experiments - pastorally - prophetically, politically, that are necessary for the next four years? What seeds have already been planted and growing? What seeds must we plant now and keep tending to until they blossom into a mass movement of white christians saying - like Jews who organize in solidarity with Palestians - *not in our name*?

It’s easy to use a phrase and not define it, to signal rather than speak plainly. So I want to be transparent about what I mean when I am using the words White Christian Supremacy when talking about what we’re up against.

Here I am meaning White Christian Supremacy both the larger superstructure that defines our history in the United States *and* the current expressions of far-right movements which have effectively gained vast resources and followers under the last administration.

I recommend in the Shadow of the Cross by Paul Kivel as an awesome resource to learn about Christian hegemony. White Christian nationalism - the belief in a American as a divinely ordained nation for White Christians, which if we continue to keep it that way, glorifies Jesus. Let me say that again: White Christian nationalism is the belief in America as a divinely ordained nation for White Christians and that doing so glorifies Jesus. I want to study and keep studying that book and other resources to see how I norm Christianity in my daily life, and I want to study the *specific* far right groups that are moving right now, in order to get in their way.

There’s lots of reasons for the rise of the white supremacist right, and I’m going to include some favorite resources on that that we can unpack together. I also encourage you to watch the recording of Dr’s Robin D. Kelley’s webinar with SURJ on White Backlash, and the work of Political Research Associates for deeper dives. It’s also important to say that just like there are different strains of COVID-19 virus, there are different strains of White supremacist ideology currently operating. Some do not claim Christianity. There are neo-pagan forms. There are forms that are atheist. What’s most important is that the uniting factor - their shared and common struggle, if you will - is white supremacy.

I am not an expert, I am a co-learner. I want to credit Tristan Call and Brenda Perez, two friends with whom I intentionally learned more about white nationalist movements as we prepared for counteractions to a white supremacist rally in Shelbyville, Tennessee, and the good work of The Catalyst Project, Political Research associates, and a course taught by David Ferris and Elandria

Williams from People's Hub on the Global Rise of the Far Right for helping me understand what I *do* know about these movements.

Here's some myths that are important to dispel:

- 1) This is not a working class movement. [Many white supremacist groups are both attractive to and funded by upper middle class and high wealth people who fund them.](#) I will never forget how in Shelbyville how the groups behind the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville came late because they had paid for charter buses to transport them to the the working class community of Shelbyville where they thought they would get sympathy among poor white people, only to be met by 800 counterprotestors from the community and broader area who drowned them out.
- 2) This is not a solely Southern Based movement. Long even before Trump, there were more white hate groups tracked by Southern Poverty Law Center here in my state of Pennsylvania, north of the Mason-Dixon Line than in nearly any other state. A small case on my The woman who has been arrested for stealing Nancy Pelosi's laptop. The uniting factor of the symbols at the capitol - from Auschwitz to the Confederacy - is a shared commitment to white supremacy, not a shared commitment to Southernness.
- 3) These movements are male dominated and patriarchal but have many effective strategies to appeal to white women through its protection of whiteness and specifically Christian values. There are some groups that are more explicitly sexist and anti-woman than others, though like in many forms of fascist movement, there is emphasis on "real masculinity."
- 4) White Christian nationalism have lots of groups and factions that, like in any political or ideological movement, are constantly shifting, changing, forming, reforming and evolving. Leaders rise and fall. They fight each other. They disagree on strategy and tactics. When I was living in Tennessee, we closely traced the moves of Matthew Heimbach, a Neo-Nazi leader who became the locus of infighting and internal drama that ultimately brought him down.
- 5) People are finding belonging, a sense of community in far right white supremacist movements and its many expressions closer to the mainstream and center. Have you seen the viral videos of Proud Boys making pledges to Western Chauvinism? Does it strike you like baptism, and the commitments we make to each other? Making people feel like they belong - within whiteness, Christianity, masculinity, or all of the above - has been a strategy of recruiting young people on college campus and on the internet. We must not

forget that Donald Trump at the Capital attack told people that he loved them while inciting them to violence against lawmakers.

7) Some groups and far right leader people in violence as a tactic for gaining power. Others don't.

8) And here's the sneaky part: there are white nationalists, western chauvinists that adamantly deny that they are racist. There are many that boldly proclaim white supremacy loud and proud, and others that say they are for segregation of the races along and not "mixing." This ultimately ends up in a white domination state in the ideology, but can be used to say they are not racist. This is strange ridiculous reality of white supremacist expressions today that are going into the mainstream.

Nichola, two weeks ago, told us that community is the antidote to despair. As my friends at Workers Dignity in Nashville wrote after the riots, movements are the antidote to white supremacy.

What kinds of movements? How will we think about movement building as white Christians catching ourselves and our people in this time?

There are lots of places we can start, and I don't want to also pretend that this work has not already begun. So much of it has, and is in motion. This is a spiritual fight and a cultural one and a political one. We will need both our power maps and our prayers, our pastoral listening *and* prophetic speech. Our media tools, like this very podcast, and our writings but most importantly our relationships intertwined in a collective way towards specific ends and means with winnable goals now and to be rooted in the depth of our biggest, wildest dreams.

If what Black and Brown-led movements made possible for getting Trump out of power was possible, I hold the faith that we can end the nationalism done in the name of our own faith tradition, become good ancestors, and follow in the way of people's movements, and of Jesus for a shared future. That's some damn good news.

As you learn about these far right white supremacist movements, and I want to be real that when talking here I don't mean some "other" people - these are our families, our pastors, our churches. *This is us.*

As you learn about these movements and how to move against them, take action to fight for the Breathe ACT, a policy platform put forward by the Movement for Black Lives in honor of Black peoples whose lives were stolen by police and other state sanctioned violence. you can learn more and become a community co-sponsor now, at [BreatheAct.org](https://BreatheAct.org), and also please, with your faith

community, check out SURJ Faith's Community Safety for All Toolkit to imagine a world without police.

Thanks so much to Max Pearl, always, for sound editing.

Thank *you* so much for joining me today. resources and steps for action are available in the transcript.

Bye for now.