

Podcast Transcript

August 5, 2018

Scripture: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15, John 6:24-35, and Ephesians 4:1-16.

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The Ratio of Miracles to Labor

<<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 and welcome to “The Word is Resistance,” a project of SURJ-Faith. In this podcast, we explore the common lectionary through the framework of soulful resistance. This is an invitation to examine how sacred Jewish and Christian texts respond to the Now: the morphing faces of white supremacy, the lingering project of empire and its relationship to Christianity, and crass exercises of power that harm community and divide our spirits.

The music you hear is a live recording of a song gifted to the freedom movement by Dr. Vincent Harding, “We are Building Up a New World.” The group you hear singing is “No Enemies,” a multi-racial group of activists and musicians in Denver, Colorado who come together for “movement choir practice” to bring singing back into direct actions and other movement spaces. This particular “choir practice” is from 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.

Before we dig into scripture, I’d like to introduce myself and set the stage.

My name is Haven Herrin and I serve as the Director of Soulforce, a 20-year-old LGBTQI organization dedicated to sabotaging Christian Supremacy and reclaiming our spirits. I come to this work as a white person—and artist, and dancer, and earth-tender—who knows that resistance to white supremacy is a significant part of healing my own soul.

To further place myself, I am recording this today from my home in Salem, Massachusetts, original home of the Nahum Keike people. I offer my gratitude and a humble invitation to the original keepers of this land to join us here today in our work if they wish. Thank you, ancestors, for the graciousness to be here today and pursue justice together.

It's important to say that this podcast is crafted especially for white people—white people challenging, supporting, and collaborating with other white people as we take action to end racism and white supremacy, and to do so by being in alignment with the leadership of people of color. We welcome reflections from everyone and especially appreciate feedback from and accountability to listeners of color.

Now I invite you to breathe with me. Just a few calming breaths that can help you locate yourself inside your skin today. I encourage you to feel your rib cage and your lungs give your heart a strong hug with each in and out of your breath. It's a good reminder that we can be our own source of encouragement and soothing in these harsh times.

You are so welcome here. I am really happy you are taking the time to explore what our theological, practical, and creative responses can be, especially as we near the one-year anniversary of violence and terror fueled by white supremacy in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11th and 12th. In this podcast, I am taking on the question of how we balance the wide-open optimism of, in the Christian parlance, miracles and the Holy Spirit with the earthly duties of leadership, labor, and self-work.

I have so many questions! What is the right ratio between miracles and elbow grease, especially in moment of political and moral crisis? When God gives you bread and grace, what have you rightly signed up for in return? How do we titrate the right level of agency and ownership of this reality, even as we keep trying to offer a proper invitation to divine possibility, which so many of us need to call on in these times?

For this scriptural journey today, I am looking at these texts: Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15, John 6:24-35, and Ephesians 4:1-16.

I'll end the episode with suggestions for your own healing and action. The folks organizing against white supremacy in the symbolic space of Charlottesville and Washington, DC, and others taking up solidarity actions across the country, are welcoming your support and witness right now.

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World.">>

<<"Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long.">>

Let's recap each of the scriptures in use this week.

First, Exodus 16 reports the experience of the Israelites in the desert, grumbling about the harsh conditions and lack of food, looking over their shoulder at their previous captivity and reminiscing about the ample food they at least used to have under enslavement.

In response, God covers the camp in meat and manna, providing a feast as indication of God's relationship with the Israelites. But it doesn't feel like a no-strings-attached kind of generosity. God calls it a test. God says: "I am the Lord your God," which feels like it has a parenthetical: "and you are mine," notation to it.

John 6 references the manna from heaven in Exodus as a crowd gathers to discuss the scene of the fishes and loaves that, under Jesus's hand, were miraculously multiplied until thousands were fed. People are gathered around Jesus, their rabbi, learning how to be in relationship with God and honor that generosity.

And finally, the text from Ephesians 4 ruminates on what it would mean to be unified in one faith, in one understanding of Christ, and in one orientation toward God. The people are guided to: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

So that's the aim of this project called Christian community. And what is God's role in the relationship?

The text reads: "Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Each of these stories, in their own intense way, point to a gift-giving kind of culture. A world built on reciprocity where our spiritual well-being and survival turn not on transactional relationships with each other or with the divine but on a recognition of sharing, gratitude, and, ultimately, responsibility. A culture premised on: "You are mine and I am yours, and we are in it together."

In the framework of the lectionary this week, God has given us food, spiritual accompaniment, and skilled teachers. That is *most*, but not all, of what we need for the task ahead. But God doesn't say, *well, I kitted you out. I fed you that one time, remember, and I gave you prophets, so check back in with me when you've got that unity and peace thing sorted*. Nor is it *I gave you something, be grateful in return, and that's the sum total of our project together*. God is asking for, and supporting, collective accountability and liberation.

God is as invested in our individual relationship with Godself as our relationships with other humans.

What's described in these texts is an active relationship with God instigated by generosity at a scale I am not sure that one can actually earn, God showing up in our time of great duress, and God's understanding that we need community and teachers and *time* to get our people free.

In each of these texts, God and the people seeking God are leaning in for a durable relationship, not fleeting doses of miraculous spectacles for cheap fixes. The miracles are acts of generosity that draw people closer to each other, to God, and to the pursuit of liberation. God gives to the people so that they are stronger for each other and more capable of creating that lasting peace.

If Exodus is act one, wherein God establishes the vitality of their relationship with the Israelites, then John is act two, wherein the people of God explore embracing a relationship of accountability and appreciation, and Ephesians is the final act, wherein the people of God mature, using the gifts and teaching from Jesus to heal their community.

We have a great many gifts that embolden us to show up for each other in these coming weeks. Some of us have the wise words of prophets. Some of us have the charisma and energy of evangelists. Some of us have the patience and insight of pastors. And some of us are teachers with the ability to manifest community through shared learning.

I believe in the work. And at the same time, I want to believe in manna. I need to believe in manna.

I need to know we are not alone in this, that it's not just my actions, your actions, and the actions of everyone who is working for justice that will get us free. I need to, at minimum, believe in the miracle that is our collective organizing creating a revolutionary spark that is greater than the sum of our parts. I need the sustenance of the flamboyant, irrational world of miracles I imagine—the world in which deeply entrenched systems of violence become unmoored and subsumed and all the ample resources of this earth are turned towards healing and joy.

We cannot wait for miracles to save us. They are not a substitute for turning toward divine justice and doing the work. But miracles have their place: They are meant to be acts of generosity that instill reciprocity. They inspire us and banish loneliness and encourage coherent, interdependent community.

<<Brief music interlude, from verse 1 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

Miracles do the work of grounding us in a specific place, time and community, and they demonstrate to us that wild things are possible.

Case in point, Congregate Charlottesville reminds us that our public visibility is succeeding. The coordinated and concerted efforts of many anti-racist activists over the last year have sent the nascent white supremacist groups scurrying and disintegrating. Since that time, Congregate Charlottesville has continued the work of abolishing ICE and fighting racist institutions, using the trauma of white supremacist terror in their town to fuel long-term, systemic change efforts.

As we near the anniversary of the white supremacist attacks on Charlottesville, Virginia, there are many opportunities for you to show up and use your gifts.

The white supremacists clearly organize themselves around symbolic moments and structures, which means we can and should be smart about the focus of our counter-organizing right now.

The Charlottesville Summer of Resistance Committee has put out a call to action for folks in the Charlottesville area to learn about their activities and join them.

Shut it Down DC is holding down the call to action for the Washington, DC response, as white supremacists intend to show out there too.

Congregate Charlottesville particularly invites faith leaders to be involved in these actions or to create public solidarity actions of your own where you live.

And there is always the option of sending a financial contribution. The Charlottesville Community Resilience Fund, which, in their words, “meets the needs of people who face undue hardships imposed upon them due to structural oppression” is a community-driven, equity-based model that sustains some of the people most affected.

I don’t want to be corny or overly sentimental at a time like this that calls for flinty tactical responses, sharp analysis, and strident action. But the lectionary readings this week

suggest that generosity and investment in relationship, not to get something in return but to strengthen the possibility of healing and transformation, is the stuff of everyday miracles.

I encourage you to find your balance in these coming weeks between generosity and filling up your own cup, praying for the as-yet-unseen and doing the nuts and bolts work of showing up with your labor, wisdom, and gifts. I invite you to keep in mind that one person's labor, even a small effort or gift, can in fact be another person's miracle.

Thanks for spending your precious time with me at "The Word is Resistance," the podcast of SURJ-Faith. Thanks to our sound editor this week, Maxwell Pearl, for your labor and support. Links to groups and calls to action will be included at the end of the transcript.

Many blessings and so much gratitude for you and your spirited resistance. Until next time, I'm Haven Herrin.

<<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.>>

Here are links to the calls to action and different leading groups with more information on how to give, show up, and support a robust response to white supremacy this August.

<https://secure.actblue.com/donate/resilience-fund>

<https://cvilleresistance2018.wordpress.com/>

<https://congregatecville.com/call-to-action-for-people-of-faith/>