

Podcast Transcript
February 19 2023
Transfiguration Sunday
Scripture: Matthew 17: 1-9

Ancestral Fears and Hopes

<<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:

Welcome, friends, to *The Word Is Resistance*, a podcast of Showing Up for Racial Justice, or SURJ. This is the podcast where we explore the weekly Christian scripture readings with an eye toward racial justice and collective liberation.

My name is Nichola Torbett. I use she/her pronouns, and I’m recording this here in what is now known as Oakland, California. This is the unceded homeland of the Ohlone people who are still very much here and active and taking leadership in this movement town.

This podcast, as many of you know, is aimed at white Christians like me who want to respond to the call to dismantle white supremacy. We recognize that as white Christians, we have our own particular work to do - that it is our responsibility to learn how to resist the forces of white Christian supremacy from which we’ve benefitted and with which we are otherwise complicit. We are seeking to find and uproot white supremacy, settler colonialism, ableism, and other forms of oppression wherever they show up, including in our own Christian tradition. We are defecting from the systems, structures, ideologies, and habitual ways of being that uphold supremacy of all kinds.

And in their shell, we are building up a new world.

That’s also the song you are hearing throughout this podcast. 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 last time I was with you, I was talking about salty departures—about assimilation into whiteness and the possibility of resistance to it. I remember saying that we are not so much headed home as we are headed into the fertile and generous darkness—a new world, the glorious

hem of which we can only begin to touch. None of us alive today has ever known a world without white supremacy AND the deep assumptions that underpin it, assumptions that have become a kind of common sense even though they are relatively new relative to the long history of human existence on the planet. None of us here on Turtle Island has known a world without settler colonialism and the deep assumptions that underpin that, either, though there are a number of cultures within this land that have resisted taking them on. We've never before been to where we are headed, and so this new world we are "building up" is going to feel strange, destabilizing, and probably no small bit scary.

Years ago I had this really strange dream that consisted of one word against a black background, appearing over and over again, first big and then small, in bright pink and then in turquoise, receding and then advancing in the style of THE ELECTRIC COMPANY—do you remember that kids' show from the 1970s and 80s? (Apparently it really made an impression on my baby psyche, so much that it continues to give shape to my dreams.) Anyway, the word I dreamed that night, over and over, was *transmogrification*, and no, I did not know what it meant. I had to look it up when I woke up. Turns out it means "to transform in a surprising manner" or even "to transform into something magical or monstrous."

I found myself remembering that dream today as I thought about the scripture for this week, which is about what churchy people call "the transfiguration," a transformation that is wondrous but also truly terrifying for the disciples—like, they just really freak out and don't know what to do. I suspect the Kingdom of God, the reign of love, the new world free of all forms of oppression, will be like that—so wondrous and beautiful and also, "oh my god, what the fuck???"

So this week, we'll hold some space for the "what the fuck???" Because that's real. And we'll also see if we can get some kind of glimpse of this new world that is coming.

<<timestamp 4:46>>

<<Music interlude, verse 1 of "Building Up a New World.">>

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

Our scripture this week is Matthew 17: 1-9 and it goes like this:

Six days later [meaning after Peter said that he believes Jesus is the messiah, and then Jesus told them not to tell anyone, and oh also, he was going to be assassinated by the people in power, and Peter refused to believe it, and Jesus rebuked him—after all that], Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

So, believe it or not, I did not notice until four years ago that this passage is, among other things, about ancestors. Jesus is connecting with and receiving support from the people who came before him. It was Rev. Dr. Earle J. Fisher, in his contribution to *Respiscence: A Lenten Devotional to Dismantle White Supremacy*, who I first saw point out the obvious: that Moses and Elijah are ancestors for Jesus (both of tradition and of place, if not of blood), and he is getting fortified here for what is to come. It had been completely lost on me, honestly, I think because I had never really given much thought to ancestor reverence at all. It was so far from the white midwestern culture in which I grew up that I had never noticed that SO MUCH of both the Hebrew scripture and the New Testament is about *ancestors*. I think in white churches we just read over all of that, kind of ignore it, but it was really important at the time, and I suspect it is STILL important for following through on what discipleship asks of us.

One of those deep assumptions underpinning white supremacy is this idea that we are individuals separate from our ancestors, that we don't come from particular bloodlines with particular legacies, particular blessings and burdens. It's as if each of us is born with a clean slate, a fresh start, with the whole world before us, as if our ancestors' blood doesn't run in our veins. Each of us who is WHITE, that is, because certainly that has never been true for Black and indigenous people in the United States. Think enslavement following the condition of the mother. Think the "Indian blood law" in Virginia that stripped civil rights from anyone with substantial Native ancestry, or the blood quantum laws still used to enumerate and decide the fate of people of Native American ancestry, or the so-called "one-drop rule," which assigns mixed race people to the race with lower social status in situations demanding racial classification. (This rule, by the

way, was upheld as recently as 1985, when a Louisiana woman was mandated to change her race from white to Black on her passport.)

But for white people—those people who can legally classify themselves as white—it goes without saying that we should be able to self-determine our lives. I remember taking a degentrification class—that’s degentri-FUCK-ation—as part of the People’s Skool of Poor Magazine, here in Oakland, and in that class, Tiny Gray-Garcia unpacked the whole notion of what she calls “the away nation.” There is this idea that in order to become a real grown-up, you have to leave your parents’ home, ideally to “go away to school,” and then create your own separate household apart from your parents. She has us watch movies that reinforce this trope—the struggle of young people to “individuate” and go away to school. Like an expert mapmaker, Tiny drew the connections for us—how this expectation supports capitalism. “Every offspring must buy their own forks!” I remember her crowing. “It’s not good enough to use your mama’s forks! Or her china!”

And of course, it leaves our parents to age on their own, or with hired healthcare support, or in expensive retirement communities, if they can afford it. And if they can’t...well, let’s not talk about that.

Even as I write this, I feel the challenge of it. To be honest, I felt like moving away from small-town Ohio in the 1980s was *the only way I was going to survive* as a queer person, and I’ve talked to Tiny about that, and she has heard me. And also, of course, that same logic has pushed the vast majority of Black and Brown people out of San Francisco, just across the Bay here, and now Oakland, too—a turn of events that can’t be separated from the arrival of white queer people like me (even though, of course, it is driven by forces so much larger than us—big tech corporations, big banking, and the real estate market, if we want to name the real villains.) And yet, Tiny has a point—I am on Ohlone land here, making this place safer for white people who can afford eventually, to displace me, too. I can’t totally dismiss her critique. It’s one of those things that, once you hear it, you can’t un-hear it.

And so we hold the complexity.

But we were talking about ancestors. And actually, complexity is a good word for that, right? For many of us who are white? For years, I would squirm when BIPOC movement leaders here would invite us to call in our ancestors, like, um, I’m not sure you really want them here?! A lot of us white folks feel really uncomfortable with our own ancestors and what they have done, and for really good reasons. I am descended from the Gaines family, which played a huge role in the colonization of this land starting in about 1650. Although the Gaineses who had the *biggest* plantations descended from a different brother than my mom’s family did—can you hear how I’m squirming here?—my direct ancestors enslaved other humans, occupied vast swaths of land,

fought in the Indian wars, and fought on both sides of the Civil War. It's a mess. And it's really, really hard to get myself to look at it. I would read these articles on Wikipedia about events they participated in, and I'd literally dissociate and be unable to remember what I'd just read. I did not want to look at it. Unlike the disciples who could not be okay in the face of Jesus' and his ancestors beauty, I can barely stand to look at the horror. I get why they passed out! I can imagine it!

But here's the thing: I don't think we can ask this country to look at its history, much less begin to make repair, unless we are willing to do the same.

I'm so grateful that my white housemates felt called to this work around the same time I did. It has been so much easier to do this work with friends. We signed up for ancestry.com-- yes, even though it's expensive, and who knows who is profitting from it. Complexity at every turn! We took a class called "Roots Deeper Than Whiteness" with the organization White Awake, which I highly recommend, as I do the work of David Dean, who was part of it for a long time. We also took Ancestral Lineage Healing classes through Ancestral Medicine. Which is run by a white guy initiated in the West African Ifá tradition—more complexity!—but which is training people around the world to assist others of all backgrounds in connecting with ancestors. (Full disclosure: I am currently training to be a practitioner in this modality myself because I am so convinced that it is vital to untangling the mess we're in.)

And what I'm finding? Is that my ancestors are desperate for me to set things right. They want to make repair for what they participated in. It is a part of their healing as well as mine.

And what's more, my judgement of them is also a judgment of myself. And of other white people. Which makes me less effective as an organizer. I am much more effective when I am motivated by love. The work of seeing my people as full, complex human beings facing a myriad of conditions I've never experienced—that work does not let me off the hook for making amends for the harm they did and that I continue to perpetuate. Far from it! It draws me to it, for their sake and my own. For everyone's sake.

And here's the thing: As we turn toward our ancestors with love—with longing for them to be made vital—we are fortified for the work of building up a new world. Jesus looks back for the strength to look forward into a demanding future. We can do the same.

<<Timestamp 16:09>>

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

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

Speaking of ancestry and things that we often miss in reading scripture from a white American perspective, let's talk about this mountain.

I have read this passage dozens of times, and I have never thought about the mountain. Whose land is this? Who has access to this mountain? Is it accessible to the crowds of hurting people down in the valley, petitioning the other disciples for healing?

No one knows where the transfiguration took place, if it did, if it is not just a plot device, but many people think it took place on Mount Tabor, a roughly 2,000 foot mountain in the Jezreel Valley of southern Galilee—land that is currently contested in the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians and that was part of the “promised land” supposedly given to Abraham and Sarah’s descendents but also occupied by Philistines, for sure, and probably also Canaanites and Midianites, at least. (And by the way, there is a very compelling theory that the people who became ancient Israel might have actually BEEN Canaanites—peasants fleeing oppression in the Canaanite city states and eventually joined in coalition by people of other ethnicities—but that’s too much to go into today!) Today, there is a monastery on top of Mount Tabor, which is kind of ironic given Jesus’s apparent rejection of Peter’s suggestion that they privatize the experience with their own personal huts atop the mountain.

But the mountain symbolism is deeper than this, calling up Moses’ encounter with God at Mt Sinai, which may or may not be the same as Mt Horeb. Sinai is believed to be derived from a semitic word for moon, and Horeb a semitic word for sun, and many believe that these mountains were sacred places for the worship of moon and sun deities before they became associated with Yahweh.

And all of this makes me think about the contemporary struggle over Mauna Kea, a mountain sacred to native Hawaiians and currently embroiled in controversy as the state University of Hawaii plans to build a gigantic telescope on its most sacred peak. Mauna Kea is foundational to native Hawaiian creation stories in which the mountain is an ancestor to the people indigenous to Hawaii.

There is also Mount Rushmore, the monument to US presidents built in a part of the Black Hills sacred to the Lakota people, and which they call “the heart of all that is.”

I don’t have any smart things to say about this. I have only questions: Whose sacred mountains get protected, and what does that protection entail? What would it mean for us to consider the mountains our ancestors? Or the forests? Or the sea? How would we move differently if we tried on this view of the land? Could it help us resist Peter’s fearful and understandable desire to privatize our mountaintop experiences? Is there a glimpse here, somewhere, of the new world that is coming?

<<Timestamp 20:33>>

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World”>>

<<“Courage, people,: don’t get weary, though the way be long.”>>

Finally, since we’re talking about ancestors and luminous moments and glimpses of the more beautiful world to come....I didn’t want to close this episode without talking to you about a new ancestor whose legacy we can carry forward. Oakland is in mourning for local activist, baker, and white antiracist Jen Angel, who died last week after being robbed in a parking structure. Jen was beloved by so many here and known for her fierce commitment to abolition.

This is the statement released by her closest people last week:

Friends and family of Jen hope that the story of this last chapter of her brilliant, full, dynamic life is one focused on her commitment to community, on the care bestowed upon her and her family by the people who loved her, and on the generous and courageous role of countless health care workers and public servants who fought to preserve her life. We know Jen would not want to continue the cycle of harm by bringing state-sanctioned violence to those involved in her death or to other members of Oakland’s rich community.

As a long-time social movement activist and anarchist, Jen did not believe in state violence, carceral punishment, or incarceration as an effective or just solution to social violence and inequity. The outpouring of support and care for Jen, her family and friends, and the values she held dear is a resounding demonstration of the response to harm that Jen believed in: community members relying on one another, leading with love, centering the needs of the most vulnerable, and not resorting to vengeance and inflicting more harm.

Jen believed in a world where everyone has the ability to live a dignified and joyful life and worked toward an ecologically sustainable and deeply participatory society in which all people have access to the things they need, decisions are made by those most directly affected by them, and all people are free and equal....

Per Jen’s wishes, her organs will be donated, and her committed medical team has informed the family that those organs will serve to lengthen and improve the lives of up to 70 people.

If the Oakland Police Department does make an arrest in this case, the family is committed to pursuing all available alternatives to traditional prosecution, such as restorative justice. Jen’s family and close friends ask that the media respect this request and carry forward the story of her life with celebration and clarity about the world she aimed to build. Jen’s family and friends ask that stories referencing Jen’s life do not use her legacy of care and community to further inflame narratives of fear, hatred, and

vengeance, nor to advance putting public resources into policing, incarceration, or other state violence that perpetuates the cycles of violence that resulted in this tragedy.

We wish for Jen's legacy to be one of deep commitment to safety and dignity for everyone.

May we imagine and stumble toward a world worthy of the best our ancestors had to offer—all of them, including the mountains, the plains, the forests, and the waters as well as the plants, the animals, and the humans.

Amen

<<Timestamp 24:35>>

<<Music interlude, verse 1 of “Building Up a New World”>>

(Call to Action and Outro)

Your call to action, this week, as you might have guessed, is to reflect on your relationship with your ancestors. What is one step you can take this week toward healing that relationship? Better yet, what is something you and your friends can do together to move in that direction? I've put some resources in the transcript, including information on White Awake's offering, “Roots Deeper Than Whiteness.”

I also want to invite you to contribute to Poor Magazine in gratitude for the poverty scholarship I shared with you in this week's episode. I'll put the link in the transcript, but basically, you can go to poormagazine.org and click on “donate.” Thanks for redistributing.

That's our episode for this week. We'd love to hear what you think of it and of the work we're doing here generally. What are you making of it? How are your own movement struggles unfolding, and what are you learning from those? You can comment on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or you can fill out the survey on our podcast page at surj.org. Give us a “like” or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you check out our podcast. As always, we especially welcome feedback from non-Christians and people of color.

You can find out more about SURJ at surj.org. That's also where you can sign up for SURJ-Faith updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links.

Finally, we want to thank our sound editor for this week, Claire Hitchins. Thank you so much, Claire!

That's it for now, friends. So many blessings to you for grounded accountability, deep transformation, and loving connection as we build up a new world. Until next time, I'm Nichola Torbett.

<<Timestamp 26:40>>

<<Music: "Building Up a New World," verse 1>>

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

RESOURCES

Ancestor stuff for white people:

White Awake periodically offers an online "ancestral recovery" course called "Before We Were White" in which participants are encouraged to reckon with the legacy of our ancestors and move toward active repair. Join their mailing list to be notified when they offer it again:

<https://whiteawake.org/about/join-our-mailing-list/>

Beautiful piece on decolonization and "wanting to be Indian" by a white woman with distant First Nations Canadian ancestry

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8sUCUvUIBTgU1NCTnNuZG52TFpLMzFUMWhfX05pR1E2YzIw/view?resourcekey=0-uuXmZHWIYLsiXdSujGCn7g>

"Roots Deeper Than Whiteness" by David Dean

<https://whiteawake.org/2018/10/27/roots-deeper-than-whiteness/>

Donate to Poor Magazine: <https://www.poormagazine.org/donate>

Poor Magazine People Skool: <https://www.poormagazine.org/education>

Also, check out the book written by Lisa "Tiny" Gray-Garcia, Dee Garcia, and the Poor Magazine family called *Poverty Scholarship: Poor People-Led Theory, Art, Words, & Tears Across Mama Earth*, especially chapter 10 on "Community Reparations and Revolutionary Giving: Moving Away from Philanthro-Pimping and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex."

REFERENCES

Fisher, Earle J. "The Prophetic Possibilities of Prayer" In *Resipiscence 2019: A Lenten Devotional for Dismantling White Supremacy*. Vahisha Hasan and Nichola Torbett, eds. Snowfall Press 2019.

Gray-Garcia, Lisa "Tiny"; Dee Garcia; and the Poor Magazine Family. *Poverty Scholarship: Poor People-Led Theory, Art, Words, & Tears Across Mama Earth*. Oakland: Poor Press, 2019.

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