

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered the one faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.

“...it is clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” Those words from Hebrews spoke to me this week: *they desire a better country*. I hope that’s true for all of us—that we desire a better country. Certainly a better one than we are living in right now. And it’s clear that, for us, as for our forebears in the faith, we cannot get there by going backwards, but only by going forward.

We are still learning more about the mass murders in El Paso and Dayton, but it is clear that at least one of the shooters—both of whom were young, white men-- was motivated by White Supremacy. White Supremacy is a form of moving backward—but it’s back to a time that never really existed.

This is a hard time for America. It is a time of reckoning—of deciding what kind of country the United States is going to be. And the ones who really have to do that reckoning are those of us who are white Americans. It’s our reckoning, because we’ve always told half-truths about our history and about our values—and then wondered why this nation was so divided.

Our founders declared, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.” They did really mean “men,” but they didn’t really mean “all,” because they went on to encode into the constitution the enslavement of men, women, and children—as long as they were of African descent. And that was after they’d stolen the land from the brown-skinned men and women and children who were living here when they first arrived.

Some of us keep thinking we’ve gotten beyond that mindset of white entitlement, then something happens to make us realize we haven’t. For me, it was when Trayvon Martin was killed, and his murderer was released on the basis of a Stand Your Ground law.

That was the moment for me. An armed white man had stalked an unarmed teenager all over the neighborhood, even when police had told him to back off; he shot him on property he didn’t own; and then a jury declared him not-guilty based on Stand Your Ground. The clear assumption was that all ground is inherently white ground. Trayvon was the one who was threatened and the one who was killed, but there was no ground for him to stand on. No ground on which he was allowed to defend himself.

I couldn’t get my head around it—around how a jury could have acquitted the shooter-- until I read Kelly Brown Douglas’ book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. In it, she offers the insight that black American Christians and white American Christians both base our understanding of this nation’s history on the Exodus story--*but* each group has claimed a different part of that story. The faith of African-American Christians is based on the part of the Exodus story in which God liberates a captive people and leads them into freedom. The faith of the nation [and by ‘nation’ she means the white nation] is based on the

conquest part of the story, in which the Israelites cross over and claim the Promised Land, and seek to wipe out the inhabitants, all in the name of God.¹

That's where Manifest Destiny came from--the belief that God had destined this continent for white, American conquest. And in the name of Manifest Destiny, this nation has displaced and raped and enslaved and slaughtered anyone who got in its way—anyone who wasn't consider white. All while proclaiming this nation's godliness and goodness.

It's a whitewashed story, and it lays the groundwork for this moral schizophrenia we are experiencing now, in which good is called evil and evil is called good. And it lays the groundwork for fear—fear of the brown “invaders” who are coming to take this nation away from the white people to which it “rightfully” belongs. The white people who built this nation and made it great.

But that, in itself, is a lie, and a whitewashing of history. And as long as that's the story we tell—the story that white people built this nation and built the church—we will never have that better country that our hearts desire.

In her book, *Dear White Christians*, Jennifer Harvey tells about the Maryland Diocese of the Episcopal Church, which, in 2003, formed a task force to look into how each of their churches had profited from slavery. It was eye-opening, and it transformed the relationships of white and black members of the task force. One member, Dave Clark, is a white man who joined the task force with the specific desire to undermine it, because he saw the initiative as just another example of an “entitlement effort.” But as he learned how deeply entangled with slavery and black oppression the diocese had been, and how much of its wealth had been built on the backs of black people, his understanding changed completely. He says, “...we finally understood there has been a great injustice that was evil and wrong done to a group of people in ways that the general public has no concept of...Where...the committee got traction was in beginning to deal with the reality of the need for some reparation of that evil.”²

What if we Presbyterians did the same with our denomination's history? Presbyterian theologians were among the most eloquent and vocal defenders of slavery, based on “biblical” interpretations. What about our own congregation's history? Our welcome statement hearkens back to the words of Dr. Ramage in 1963, but what about before that? How did the church get this land, and whose was it before we were here? Where did the wealth come from that paid for this

¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015) 137.

² Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 233-234.

building? Who actually made the bricks? Whose sweat went into the construction of this place? In other words, how, specifically, has this congregation profited from white supremacy?

And what about our own families. For those of us who are white, how have we benefited from homestead acts and housing laws and banking practices and employment opportunities that were denied to people of color? And if we really want to face history, I think of the Peace and Justice memorial in Montgomery. I've heard a number of African-Americans voice the shock they felt at discovering names of family members there who were lynched. What about if names were put to the white folks in those horrifying photos, gathered under lynching trees, laughing and pointing as though they were at a party. How many of us might be confronted with the names of our own, esteemed ancestors?

Unearthing and facing that history is hard and scary work, but it's what every historically white denomination and congregation and individual needs to do if we're ever going to purge the myth of white supremacy from our subconscious minds.

And it's work that every white Christian needs to be doing if we're truly going to be Christians, at all, because every spiritual gift we have, we owe to a man who wasn't white. Jesus wasn't white. Neither were any of his forebears—yet even that history, we have whitewashed. We know, intellectually, that Jesus and the disciples weren't white and that God transcends race, but when every image we look at is white, what's imprinted in our deepest selves is the image of a white God, and of a faith that was established by white people, whether that's what we intend to believe, or not.

It's terrifying for us white people to think what we might find if we start looking deeper—and that's why we are generally so resistant. Truth is terrifying. We yell and kick and claw and, yes, we shoot to keep hold of our whitewashed history. We have to get beyond our fear, because when white people are afraid, brown and black people suffer and die. Our adherence to the lie of White Supremacy tears children from parents, herds brown people into concentration camps and massacres them in a Walmart; our fear of facing the lie of white supremacy, the lie of our own goodness as a nation, hangs black people from trees, and guns down teenage boys while they're walking home from the convenience store. There is no greater threat to the lives of brown and black people than the fear of white people.

But there is a different way. *All of these died in faith, says Hebrews, without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who*

Speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country,

I desire a better country—don't you? Like Abraham and Sarah, like the Israelites after they escaped from Egypt, we are wandering in a wilderness, seeking a homeland we have never seen, but for which our hearts long. We will never get there if we keep using the old maps based on false stories—the stories of white goodness and moral superiority. We have to let go of our fear and face our truths, so that we can be set free to cross over into that better land; and the only way to get there is to follow our brown-skinned, foreign savior. It's his goodness, not our own, that will show us the way.