

The Meaning of the Exodus for Stand-Your-Ground Culture

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
An' why not-a every man.

Even as the enslaved crafters of the black faith tradition affirmed the absolute freedom of God, that is, God's transcendence, they also recognized that the power of divine freedom is expressed through God's movement in the world. God's very freedom, they recognized, was expressed in God's delivering others into freedom. The progenitors of the black faith tradition affirmed God's enduring presence and movement in human history; in other words, they recognized God's immanence.

Within African religious traditions this was the significance of the lesser gods created by the Great High God. These lesser gods consti-

tuted the divine presence in African life. They testified to the fact that "God is not without the world, and the world is not without God." They reflected the ongoing divine activity of God in human history. These lesser gods served as mediators between the Africans and the Great High God. It is worth repeating that it is perhaps in this way that the African religious heritage laid the foundation for the enslaved African's acceptance of Christianity. Jesus is easily accommodated within this African theological framework as perhaps a lesser god, or perhaps even an ancestor. For sure, the lesser gods of the African religious tradition provided a theological foundation for another essential claim of black faith: God is in the world. Therefore, not only would a story such as the exodus, which reveals God's presence in history, be consistent with the African religious heritage, but undoubtedly it was this heritage that attracted the enslaved Africans to the exodus story in the first place. For the exodus was not just a story of God's presence in history, it was also a story about the freedom of God.

Reverend Reed, an ex-slave, said this: "The children of Israel was four hundred years under bondage and God looked down and seen the suffering of the striving Israelites and brought them out of bondage."³⁷ Reverend Reed's telling of the exodus story is instructive. Reverend Reed first makes clear that God is the one who initiates a relationship with the Israelites. This fact further affirms God's freedom. For the freedom of God means that God acts first. God's actions are compelled by who God is, by God's own essence. They are not dependent on human actions or anything external to God. The recognition that God acts first is consistent with the theological principle that God creates out of nothing: *creatio ex nihilo*. God's creative act was a free act, motivated only by who God is in God's self. The same is true of God's presence in human history. German theologian Karl Barth said this: God is "the free partner of humanity in a history which [God] inaugurated and in a dialogue ruled by [God]."³⁸ Reverend Reed makes it plain, "God looked down and seen." Reverend Reed goes on to specify what God saw: the bondage, suffering, and striving of the Israelites. Reverend Reed's witness to God's move-

37. Quoted in Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 1.

38. Karl Barth, "The Humanity of God," trans. James Strathearn McNab, in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, ed. Clifford Green (London: Collins, 1979), 48.

ment clearly indicates that what moved God was not any exceptional aspect of the Israelites themselves. Rather, God was moved by their condition of bondage and suffering as well as their striving to be free. Consistent with who God is and who God created humans to be, God was moved to free the Israelites from their bondage. In so doing, God freed them to live into their divinely created selves. Reverend Reed's story accords with the biblical narrative that reads: "I have indeed seen the affliction of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of the taskmasters, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians . . ." (Exodus 3:7-8).

The exodus story points to the fact that God chose to free a people from circumstances that were contrary to who God created them to be. God's choice was motivated by the very freedom that is God. God chose the Israelites because they were a people in bondage. The Israelite's particular historical circumstances serve as the historical context through which God reveals a universal concern for all people. The context itself is revelatory. For the context of God's revelation is consistent with the very nature of God. In this instance, it reaffirms the very freedom of God.

The point of identification with the exodus story for the enslaved did not lie in their exceptionalist claim to be the chosen people of God. Rather, the identification was based on the recognition that their historical condition was the same as that of the Israelites—a condition contrary to the freedom of God. So they reasoned if God freed the Israelites, God would free them. They understood the universal meaning of God's revelation through the particularity of the Israelite story. As Howard Thurman explains, the enslaved knew that "God is no respecter of persons, what He did for one race He would surely do for another."³⁹ Thus they sang that if God delivered Daniel, "why not-a every man." With particular reference to the exodus they sang,

Go down Moses
Way down in Egypt land
Tell ole Pharaoh
To let my people go

39. Thurman, *Deep River*, 21.

What the enslaved understood and testified to in song is that God's preferential option in the exodus story is for freedom. This is the way that we are to understand the centrality of the exodus story in black faith. It confirms that God's intention is for all people, including black people, to be free to live into the goodness of their very creation. It is only in freedom that people are able to reflect the very image of a God who is free from all human forms of bondage. This understanding has implications for the two faith claims in the stand-your-ground-culture war.

An Exodus Response to Conflicting Faith Claims

The faith claims of the nation rest on the notion that Anglo-Saxons are the "chosen" people of God. In this instance, as we have seen in our discussions, chosenness is connected to blood. This very fact betrays God's concern for all God has created. More particularly, it does not accord with the contextuality of God's revelation in the exodus story. In short, that God chose the Israelites is first an indication that God chooses to be in the world. Second, it indicates God's preferential option for freedom. What it does not indicate is God's choice for any particular people above all other people. The exodus story tells us that God's choice of the Israelites was not about blood, but about freedom. The story says that God looked down and saw that they were in bondage, not that they were Israelites. This is not to negate the fact that in the Old Testament (Hebrew scriptures) God enters into human history through the life, culture, and history of the Israelites. Nor is this to deny the special meaning this may hold for Jewish traditions. Nevertheless, the particularity of God's revelation is not the same as divine exclusivism. It does not suggest that there are only certain people who are deserving of God's care and freedom. To reiterate, it is through the particularity of the revelation of God that the universal meaning of God's freedom can be found.

Furthermore, any suggestion that God's identification with a particular people is a matter of blood ruptures the distance between human beings and God. What is most troubling, it allows for humans to see themselves as God and thus to equate their story and their history as being God's very story and history. God is reduced to a human creation, while humans are elevated to a divine status. The dangers of this are immense, as we have seen in the Manifest Destiny war. In this instance,

God is made into a “defender and guarantor of the presumptions” and brutality of America’s Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism.⁴⁰ God’s absolute transcendence and God’s creative initiative are vitiated. The inherent difference between humanity and God is lost. For this reason the freedom of God must become the measure for all that is said about God. Indeed, God makes this clear in an interaction with Moses.

When God heard the cries of the Israelites and recognized their oppression, God commissioned Moses to go to the pharaoh and tell him to let the people of Israel go free. Unsure of who this God was, and by what divine authority he could make demands of the pharaoh or even speak to the people of Israel, Moses asked God who precisely God was. He asked for the name of God, to which God responded, “I am who I am. . . . Say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:14). In this proclamation the freedom of God is asserted. Even as God has proclaimed that the Israelites are God’s people, God’s identity is not attached to the Israelites. To know the Israelites is not to know God. God’s identity is connected to God’s very free movement in history. More importantly, God’s identity is not a stagnant identity. God says: I am who I am. In the very use of a verb as a name, God clearly self-identifies as movement, an ongoing presence in history. In other words, God is to be known by the way in which God moves in the world. God is not to be known by being identified with any particular people. God may be with a people, and can best be seen from the vantage point that is theirs in a particular context, but God is not those people. That is, no one people can have an exclusive claim on God. In the end, the movement that is God’s very identity is defined in terms of a deliverance from bondage into the freedom that is life. In giving Moses directions for setting the people of God free the identity of God is clarified. Essentially, the exodus story preserves the freedom of God, and as it does so it affirms the essence of God as freedom.

A Nonliberating God

There are, of course, other aspects of the exodus story that are problematic. The freeing of the Israelites from bondage is not the end of the

40. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, repr. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 43.

story. In choosing the Israelites, God promises not only to free them from bondage but also to bring them to an inhabited land. God says, "I have come down to deliver them out of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites." It is with this promise of an occupied land, with a later promise to destroy the people who occupy the land, that a sanctified narrative of Manifest Destiny emerges. There is no one who speaks more to the problems associated with the exodus story, particularly for black faith, than womanist theologian Delores Williams.

Williams cautions against using the exodus story as an indication of God's commitment "to set the captives free." She argues that if one takes into account the full exodus story, and not simply the event of a peoples' deliverance from bondage, then it soon becomes clear that God does not show a concern for the freedom of all people. Williams points out that the God of the exodus event fails to liberate those who are not Israelite and those who are not male, suggesting perhaps that there is a certain exclusivity to God's movement in history. She says, "when non-Jewish people . . . read the entire Hebrew testament from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slave, there is no clear indication that God is against their perpetual enslavement."⁴¹ Adding to the problem, Williams says, is the fact that the exodus story also reveals a God who permits victims to make victims of others. Addressing her concern for the centrality of the exodus event within black faith, Williams warns that the Israelite exodus from Egypt must be read as a "*holistic story* rather than an event."⁴² Doing so, she argues, reveals a God who sanctions "genocide in the land of Makkedah, in Libnah and in the Promised Land."⁴³

Williams is right. The exodus story does indeed reveal troubling contradictions in understanding the freedom of God. Moreover, it portrays a God who sanctions Manifest Destiny missions. These contradictions are not to be casually dismissed. Nevertheless, they are instructive.

41. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 146.

42. *Ibid.*, 150.

43. *Ibid.*

Ironically, as troubling as they are, they point to the freedom of God. That God is free means the way God moves through history sometimes may elude human understanding. Thus, the freedom of God is a reminder that the claims we make about God may not always be about God. In this regard, the exodus paradoxes are a reminder that the reality of God is always more complex and dynamic than our very faith claims about God. If we are going to take the freedom of God seriously, we must be reconciled to the fact that we may not always know what God is doing in the world. What must be trusted, however, is faith in the knowledge that God creates and intends all people to be free.

As important as the exodus story is to black faith, it does not provide the final word, and perhaps not the authoritative word, on who God is in history, especially for black people. The Jesus story serves as a "new exodus." Through this story God as freedom is confirmed, along with the manifestation of God's freedom as life, and, as we will see, as love. It is through the Jesus story that the justice of God becomes clear, perhaps providing a counternarrative to the promised-land narrative of Manifest Destiny.

Furthermore, the annihilation of a people in the promised land suggests the distance between God and the world. That is, while God is in the world, all that is in the world is not of God. It could always be the case that the biblical story of the takeover of Canaan says more about the people telling it than it does about God. This is what the enslaved recognized when they testified to the freedom of God, and thus realized that what their enslavers said about God was not true. Inasmuch as claims about God were incompatible with their experience of God, then those claims were rejected. Those claims did not have theological authority. The freedom of God that the enslaved experienced became the adjudicating principle of their very faith claims. This has implications for the black faith tradition.

The core of black faith, as we have demonstrated, is a belief in the freedom of God. The recognition of God's freedom contests the claims of ideologies that denigrate black bodies. It is an adjudicating principle of black faith. However, if the freedom of God serves as an adjudicating principle, then it must also serve as a principle for self-critique. Simply put, if the central claim of the black faith tradition is that God has a preferential option for freedom, then the black faith community

must be held accountable to that claim. This means, as Williams suggests, that the black faith community must not be blind to the ways in which it is complicit or participates in denying certain bodies the freedom that God has given them.

Even with this said, there is no getting around the fact that there is, as Williams asserts, "a non-liberative strand" in the Bible.⁴⁴ There are biblical stories that are nothing less than "texts of terror" for some people.⁴⁵ One such story is that of the Israelites' divinely sanctioned take-over and conquest of the land and people of Canaan. Read from the vantage point of modern-day Canaanites in a Manifest Destiny war, this is the story of Native Americans. Such a story simply cannot be reconciled with a God who stands for freedom. Such a story suggests a God who is virtually demonic. Thus, if the norm of black faith is an understanding of a God who is freedom, then that also means there are certain stories within the Bible that cannot be given authority. If black faith means refusing to capitulate to or compromise with any situation that violates the very freedom of God, then this principle must be maintained even when it comes to the Bible. Therefore no story that compromises the freedom of God, and thus the freedom of those whom God created, can be given authority in the black faith tradition. It must be looked upon, at best, with suspicion. Indeed, the enslaved set this precedent as they refused to grant authority to the Pauline texts that suggested a God who sanctioned slavery. They did not accept as the "word of God" the dictate in Ephesians 6:5 that slaves were to obey their masters. In this instance they treated the Pauline texts as something that Paul believed, but not something that came from God. Such was the case for Howard Thurman's mother. She told her son,

During the days of slavery . . . the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . , as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were

44. Ibid.

45. See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (New York: Fortress Press, 1984).

slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.⁴⁶

For Thurman's mother, God was freedom. She would not grant authority to anything said otherwise about God, even if it was in the Bible. Moreover, even while she was not yet free, she still affirmed the freedom of God.

The point is made: God is always greater and more complex than our words about God. This is the meaning of God's transcendent freedom. If human understanding could capture God, then God would not be God. This brings us full circle in our attempt to understand the enduring meaning of black faith for a black people who are victimized by a stand-your-ground war.

The Paradoxical Meaning of Black Faith

The very black faith claim that because God is free so black people are to be free was made in the context of bondage. This was not a statement derived from black people's current situation. Rather, it was a statement about the truth of God. Black faith is, in this regard, by nature a paradoxical faith. It is a faith born in the cauldron of oppression and giving witness to the freedom of God. It does not resolve the contradictions of black living or the contradictions of faith. And perhaps this is not the point of faith at all. For it is not the case that faith promises to free black people from the suffering and pain of being black in a society saturated with the Anglo-Saxon myth. Rather, it is a testament to a God who is present even in the midst of the particular brutalities of "living while black." This is a God who calls and moves black people toward freedom. Moreover, this is a God that lets black people know that they are indeed meant to be free. The God that is no despiser of blackness has a "preferential option" for the liberation of black bodies from that which denies them a free life. The enduring meaning of black faith is that it allows black people to know that the "contradictions of life are not themselves final or ultimate."⁴⁷ It

46. Told by Thurman in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 30-31.

47. Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986; orig., Howard Thurman Books, 1971), 6.

helps black people to stand in the gaps between being free yet not free, without becoming lost in them.

Black faith, however, is not passive. It does not seduce black people to wait on the Lord to free them. This was not the testimony given voice in the spirituals. Rather, black faith empowers black people to claim the freedom of God that is theirs, knowing that God is fighting with them. The contradictions between black faith and black life have a radicalizing impact. To know that one is meant to be free yet is not free does not create a hopeless spirit but a restless one. This is why we have seen a long line of black people who, in the face of the stand-your-ground cultures of their day, were inspired by faith to destroy whatever impeded their "inalienable" right to be free. There is no one who exemplifies more the significance of black faith in the freedom of God than Ida B. Wells. It was no doubt the gap between the God she believed in and the reality of black lives that inspired her to carry on the fight against the stand-your-ground lynchings of her day. She was sure that God was with her in the sometimes lonely fight against lynching. She made this clear to a group of African Methodist Episcopal clergy who were debating whether they should issue a proclamation endorsing her work. They were reluctant to endorse the work of a "young woman of whom they knew nothing." Appalled at their response Wells retorted, "Why, gentlemen . . . I cannot see why I need your endorsement. Under God I have done work without any assistance from my own people."⁴⁸ She indeed made clear to others that a belief in the freedom of God should empower a people to fight for their freedom, not "wait on the Lord" to free them. This was the message she gave to twelve black men who were awaiting execution for a crime they did not commit. After spending an evening with them, where they "talked and sung and prayed about dying," she said to the men, "But why don't you pray to live and ask to be freed? The God you serve is the God of Paul and Silas who opened their prison gates, and if you have all the faith you say you have, you ought to believe that he will open your prison doors too."⁴⁹

48. Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 222.

49. *Ibid.*, 402-403.

As clear as Wells was about the meaning of black faith for black people, she was equally clear about what believing in a Christian God should mean for white people, and especially for a country that was presumed to be Christian. In a speech before an audience in Liverpool, she said lynching was "inconsistent with Christian character, and even incompatible with civilization."⁵⁰ Wells was confident in the stand-your-ground war that was hers to fight; the God of freedom would surely not be on the side of the lynchers, or even of those who remained silent in the face of it.

In terms of the Manifest Destiny war that is stand-your-ground culture, the meaning of black faith is also clear. This too is "inconsistent with Christianity." Moreover, as Wells suggests, it is inconsistent with the claims of exceptionalism. A nation that sustains a war in which children become its target is not exceptional in Anglo-Saxon "virtue or justice" at all. Indeed, such a war reveals a "depraved indifference," which racial chauvinism breeds, to the life of the "other." Without a doubt, such indifference is inconsistent with the freedom of God that fosters life. As for the black faithful, the best response is indeed a response of faith, which means being relentless in the fight to dismantle this culture of death. It cannot be said enough, the Manifest Destiny vision and its attendant narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism are as sinful as the stand-your-ground culture that they have spawned.

If black people are to respond to stand-your-ground culture with the strength of black faith then we must work to put an end to the laws of a stand-your-ground culture that rob black bodies of freedom and life. Like the Black Codes of the postemancipation era, laws such as Stop and Frisk, mandatory drug sentencing, Conceal and Carry, and the Stand Your Ground law itself must be brought to an end. They are a violation of the sacredness of all of God's creation, most notably black creation. For the black faith community to settle for anything less than an end to these laws is a capitulation to sin. In the end, the meaning of black faith is found in the very affirmation of the freedom of God. For a black person to know that he or she is created in the image of a free God is to be empowered to carry on the fight for free-

50. *Ibid.*, 141.

dom in a world that tries at every turn to deny black bodies a space to be free.

There is a biblical story that perhaps makes even clearer God's presence in a stand-your-ground war that targets our children. It is a story about a father and his son, the story of the "Binding of Isaac."

In this story, Abraham responds to what he believes to be God's call for him to go to the land of Moriah and offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering. Following the command, Abraham leaves the home he shares with Isaac's mother, Sarah, without her knowledge, and heads off to sacrifice the life of his son. Just as "Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son," an angel of the Lord called out and said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him" (Genesis 22:1-14). With this, God provides Abraham a ram to sacrifice at the altar.

This story has been controversial in Jewish, Islamic, and Christian traditions. It has been interpreted as a test of Abraham's faith as well as an example of how easy it is to confuse God's voice with other voices. Within the black faith tradition, this story is usually told to indicate that no matter how impossible a situation may seem, there is a ram in the bush—God will provide. Whatever the various renderings of this story may be, one thing is abundantly clear: God stopped the sacrifice. God did not desire that Abraham's son be put to death. This same God of black faith is one that does not require the sacrifice of our sons and daughters. Just as the God of Abraham demanded that Isaac be released from the bindings that were meant to take his life, God demands the same of our children. They are to be released from the bindings that are a stand-your-ground culture.

An Unshattered Faith

The Sunday After

The verdict in the case of Trayvon's killer was announced shortly after 10:00 P.M. on a Saturday night. That next morning I went to church. That Sunday was like no other that I had experienced at my church. It was crowded more than usual for a Sunday in the middle of July. People came in quietly, as if something was weighing very heavily upon their hearts and trying their souls. No words had to be