For God So Loved the World — But Which World Are We Living In?

Black Church • Prophetic Imagination

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

Naming Reality: The World That Loves Darkness

There is a world that has been named for us. Not by God — but by power. A world where the zip code you were born into determines the length of your life. A world where the melanin in your skin determines whether a police encounter ends in a conversation or a casket. A world that has swallowed more Black men in its prison system than slavery ever imagined, and had the audacity to call it justice. This is the dominant consciousness that Walter Brueggemann warned us about — the royal consciousness that numbs us, domesticates our imagination, and whispers 'this is simply the way things are' until we stop being able to feel the pain, stop being able to imagine anything different.

John 3:19 tells us plainly: 'And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.' The preacher must ask the hard question this morning: Who benefits from the darkness? Who profits from the darkness of mass incarceration? Who profits from the darkness of predatory lending in Black neighborhoods? Who profits from the darkness of underfunded schools where our children sit, their brilliance unrecognized, their futures quietly foreclosed before they ever had a chance to open?

The empire constructs its narrative in courthouses and boardrooms, in textbooks and zip codes, in mortgage applications and bail hearings. The story goes: some people are valued and some are not. Some lives are precious and some are expendable. The dominant culture produces numbness — people cannot feel their own pain or imagine a different world. You walk past the same corner where your cousin was shot, and after a while, you stop flinching. You hear the statistics — one in three Black men will be incarcerated — and after a while, the number stops landing. The numbness is not weakness. The numbness is survival. But the prophet must name it. Must wake us up. Must say: this is not normal. This is not God's world. This is darkness dressed up as daylight.

The text says light came into the world. But look at the neighborhoods. Look at the prisons. Look at the poverty. Something is blocking the light. And the prophetic word today is this: we must name the darkness with precision before we can ever walk in the light with power.

John 3:19-20, John 1:5, Isaiah 9:2

> **Illustration: The Numbness of Normal**
>
> In 1955, when Mamie Till opened that casket and demanded the world look at what had been done to her son Emmett, she was performing a prophetic act. She refused the numbness. She refused the closed lid. She said: look. Because the royal consciousness survives only when suffering stays invisible. The moment grief is named — the moment darkness is seen for what it is — the empire's power begins to crack. Mamie Till's open casket broke the numbness of a nation. The prophetic preacher does the same work from this pulpit every single Sunday.
>
> *Source: Historical account of Emmett Till's funeral, 1955, Chicago*

Prophetic Critique: Giving Voice to the Grief

The prophet does not scold. The prophet grieves. Jeremiah did not lecture Jerusalem — he wept for it. 'Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.' That is the sound of the prophetic tradition. Not a wagging finger. Not a policy lecture. A moan that rises from somewhere too deep for argument.

I need you to let the grief in today. Because the grief is real and it is ours and it must be spoken before God can heal it.

Our ancestors — the ancestors in faith who built this church family with their calloused hands and their fervent prayers and their nickels and their dimes — they were brought here in the belly of ships. Stripped of their names. Stripped of their languages. Stripped of their children who were sold away screaming. And then slaveholders holding Bibles told them that God had ordered this. That their suffering was holy. That their chains were the will of the Almighty. Beloved, that was not thus saith the Lord. That was darkness speaking in scripture's clothing. That was the royal consciousness at its most vicious — weaponizing the living Word to sanctify oppression.

Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas has taught us that what was done to the Black body in America has always been theological — an assault not merely on flesh but on the image of God itself. When a child is shot in the street at twelve years old, when a man dies gasping in police custody crying for his mother, when a woman is failed by every system that was supposed to protect her — that is not only a social crisis. That is a theological crisis. That is the darkness of John 3:19 made flesh, walking our streets, wearing a badge, signing a mortgage denial, sitting on a sentencing bench.

The struggle has been long. The losses have been real. The blood that has been spilled from the Middle Passage to Emmett Till to the mothers weeping in our own congregation right now — that blood cries out from the ground the way Abel's blood cried out from the ground in Genesis. And the prophet must give voice to that cry before this congregation can move into anything new.

Bishop William Barber II, standing in the tradition of the prophetic witness that runs through Amos and Isaiah and Harriet Tubman and Dr. King, reminds us that America has never truly grieved what it has done. And so the empire keeps building new prisons and calling it public safety. Keeps redlining new neighborhoods and calling it free market economics. Keeps defunding Black schools and calling it fiscal responsibility. Darkness has a thousand names and a thousand faces, but it is still darkness — and it is still condemnable in the eyes of a holy God.

Church family, this is a time for grief. For lament. For sitting with the pain and not rushing past it to a premature hallelujah. The prophet does not fast-forward through suffering — the prophet names it, holds it, weeps over it. Because God sees the tears. God hears the cry. The same God who heard the groaning of the children of Israel in Egypt, that God — beloved — is leaning in right now. Trouble don't last always. But first we must feel the trouble. First we must name the darkness for what it is. We do not help the wounded by pretending they are not bleeding.

Jeremiah 9:1, Genesis 4:10, Lamentations 1:12, Luke 4:18

> **Illustration: The Prophet Who Wept**
>
> Dr. King's final speech the night before he was assassinated — 'I've Been to the Mountaintop' — was not a triumphant declaration. It was a lament wrapped in hope. He spoke of longevity and of not knowing if he would get there with us. He had been threatened. He was tired. He grieved. And in his grieving he was most prophetic. Cornel West has written that the blues tradition — that art form born in Black suffering — is itself a form of prophetic critique: it names the darkness without flinching, and in the

naming, refuses to be destroyed by it. The prophet who cannot weep cannot truly preach.

Source: Martin Luther King Jr., 'I've Been to the Mountaintop,' April 3, 1968; Cornel West, 'Democracy Matters'

Imaginative Alternative: The World God Has Already Loved Into Being

Now. Now I need you to hear something else.

After the grief. After the lament. After we have named the darkness with courage and holy precision — now the prophet speaks a different word. Because the text does not end at verse 19. Go back. Go all the way back to where this passage begins. Verse 16. 'For God so loved the world.'

Not 'For God tolerated the world.' Not 'For God was disappointed in the world.' Not 'For God reluctantly maintained the world.' For God SO loved. That 'so' is doing immeasurable work in this sentence. The Greek word is 'houtos' — in this manner, to this extravagant degree, in this way that surpasses every human category of love. The extent of the love required the giving of the Son. God did not send a memo. God did not send a policy paper. God put skin in the game. God came down. God joined the struggle. God made a way.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a beloved community — not as utopian fantasy disconnected from earth, but as theological vision rooted in the nature of God. He was not describing what might emerge if conditions were favorable. He was describing what God had already declared: that every human being carries the image of God, that I am somebody because God made me somebody, that the beloved community is not a product of human goodwill but a foretaste of the kingdom of God breaking into history right now, in our time, in this place.

Let me paint you a picture. Imagine it with me.

Imagine a world where the same anointing that falls in this sanctuary on Sunday morning goes to work on Monday morning — in the courtroom, in the school board meeting, in the corporate boardroom. Imagine the Spirit of the living God moving not only in these pews but in the policies. Where the fire of the Holy Spirit burns away the injustice in the law. Where the blood of Jesus — which speaks not only of atonement but of covenant, of belonging, of a God who will not let go — means that no child is throwaway, no family is beyond redemption, no neighborhood is beyond renewal.

Imagine a world where the church family extends its table so wide that it stretches past these walls and into the streets. Where the beloved community that Dr. King preached becomes so real and so tangible that you can touch it on a Tuesday. Where Black children and brown children grow up hearing not the television's verdict on their worth, but this church's declaration, this community's proclamation, this congregation's anointed voice saying every single day: I am somebody. I am created in the image of the living God. I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

This is not naivete. This is not wishful thinking. This is eschatology — the resurrection hope of the risen Lord breaking into the present. The resurrection of Jesus did not promise that we would merely escape this world. It promised that this world — this cracked, bleeding, darkness-loving world — would be transformed by the light that darkness cannot overcome. A new heaven and a new earth — not somewhere else entirely, but here, transfigured, renewed, made right by the love of the God who so loved it.

God made a way before. God made a way through the Red Sea when Pharaoh had the army

behind and the water ahead. God made a way through the Middle Passage when our people should not have survived. God made a way through Jim Crow, through the terror, through the burning crosses and the fire hoses. And God — somebody needs to know this today — God is making a way right now. The light is breaking through. And the darkness — hear me — the darkness has not overcome it. Cannot overcome it. Will not overcome it.

John 3:16, John 1:5, Isaiah 65:17-25, Revelation 21:4-5

Illustration: The Freedom Songs Were Eschatology

When the civil rights workers sat at lunch counters and were doused with ketchup and cigarette ash, they sang. They sang 'We Shall Overcome' not because the situation looked promising, but because they had a theological conviction that the future of God was more real than the hatred of the present moment. That song is not sentiment — it is eschatology in the vernacular. 'We shall overcome someday' is a declaration that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice because the God who governs history is the God of John 3:16. The freedom songs were prophetic imagination made musical. They sang the world they could not yet see into the world they were standing in.

Source: Civil rights movement historical record; Dr. King on the moral arc of the universe, quoting Theodore Parker

Call to Faithful Action: Living Into the Love

So what do we do? We are not spectators. We are participants in God's work of liberation and deliverance. The prophetic word always — always — ends with a call. Not merely to feel something, but to do something. Not just to shout, but to show up.

In the tradition of our ancestors in faith — who turned churches just like this one into freedom schools and voter registration headquarters, who organized the March on Washington and the Montgomery Bus Boycott from Sunday school rooms and deacon meetings — we are called to specific, embodied, communal action.

First: we organize. The church is not only a sanctuary — it is a sending place. We register voters. We show up at city council meetings and know our elected officials by name. We participate in what Brother Cornel West calls the prophetic witness — the holy refusal to be silent in the face of injustice. Every vote is a declaration: I believe the future can be different. I am somebody and my voice counts.

Second: we mentor. We go to the schools and the juvenile facilities. We find the young person who has been told they are nothing, and we say: I see the image of God in you. I am somebody — and so are you. Mentoring is a prophetic act. It is naming God's image in someone the world has tried to erase.

Third: we commune. We come to this table — the blood and the body of our Lord — and we remember that the ground at the foot of the cross is level. Nobody arrives there with privilege. We all come as recipients of grace. And we take that table into the neighborhood. We feed. We host. We welcome. We refuse to let this beloved community become a club for the comfortable.

Fourth: we celebrate. Church family — we do not organize only from grief. We also celebrate from hope. We lift every voice. We shout. We dance before the Lord with all our might. We give God glory for the deliverance that has already come and for the deliverance that is surely on the way. The anointing in this room is real. The Spirit moves in this place. And trouble don't last always — the ancestors knew it, the Spirit confirms it, and the risen Christ has guaranteed it with an empty tomb.

Go love the world God so loved. With your vote. With your mentorship. With your organizing. With your joy. With your prophetic witness. With every breath of deliverance and freedom in your body.

God so loved the world. That love is our assignment. Now go.

John 3:16-17, Micah 6:8, Luke 4:18, Acts 2:44-45

Illustration: The Church That Organized a Movement

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama was not remarkable by the world's standards — a modest congregation in the capital of Jim Crow Alabama. But from that pulpit and those pews, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was organized and sustained for 381 days. The church was not merely a place of spiritual retreat — it was the operational headquarters of freedom. That is the ecclesiology of the Black Church tradition: sanctuary and sending place together, worship and witness inseparable, praise and protest flowing from the same Holy Spirit. When Bishop Barber leads the Poor People's Campaign today, he stands in that same tradition: the church that lifts every voice and then goes out to make sure every voice is heard.

Source: Taylor Branch, 'Parting the Waters: America in the King Years'; William J. Barber II, 'We Are Called to Be a Movement'

Applications

• Name your numbness: This week, identify one injustice you have become desensitized to — mass incarceration statistics, housing inequity, school funding gaps. Bring it to God in prayer and ask for the grief and holy anger that fuels prophetic action.
• Register and bring three: If you are not registered to vote, register this week. Then identify three people in your church family or neighborhood who are not registered and bring them with you. Voting is an act of prophetic witness.
• Mentor one young person: Commit to speaking into the life of one young person this month — in your family, your neighborhood, or a local school. Say explicitly to them: 'You are made in the image of God. I am somebody — and so are you.'
• Attend one community meeting: Show up at a city council meeting, school board session, or neighborhood association gathering as a representative of the beloved community. The church's prophetic witness must be heard in places of civic power.
• Extend the table: Organize or participate in one act of radical hospitality this month — a community meal, a food pantry shift, a visit to someone who is incarcerated or homebound. Let the Lord's Supper theology spill into the neighborhood.
• Study the tradition: Read one work by a Black theologian this month — Kelly Brown Douglas's 'Stand Your Ground,' Cornel West's 'Prophesy Deliverance,' or William Barber's 'We Are Called to Be a Movement.' Deepen the theological roots of your prophetic witness.

Prayer Suggestions

• Lord, deliver us from the numbness that prevents us from feeling the pain in our community. Break through the royal consciousness that has told us this is simply the way things are. Give us the grief of the prophets and the courage to name what we see.
• God, we cry out for the families who have lost loved ones to violence, incarceration, and the slow violence of systemic injustice. Cover them with the blood of Jesus. Let them know that their grief is seen, their pain is real, and their loved ones were image-bearers of the living God.
• Holy Spirit, pour out your anointing on this church family. Make us a prophetic witness in this city. Where there is darkness, send us as bearers of the light that darkness cannot overcome. Let the fire of the Holy Spirit burn in us and through us.
• Father, we pray for the beloved community — not as dream but as concrete reality. Show us what you are building in this neighborhood. Show us our part in the work of liberation and deliverance. Make us instruments of the freedom that you declared in John 3:16.

• Lord, we pray for our young people — especially those who have been told they are nobody, that they are already condemned, that the darkness is all there is for them. Interrupt that lie with your love. Let them hear from this church: I am somebody. I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

• God of our ancestors in faith, we give you thanks for those who kept the faith through the Middle Passage, through slavery, through Jim Crow, through every season when trouble seemed like it would last forever. They held on because they believed trouble don't last always. We stand on their shoulders. Give us their resilience, their joy, and their unshakeable hope in the resurrection. Amen.