

**Break Every Yoke**  
Isaiah 58

*Trinity Sunday/ June 7, 2020*

I love this story. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) was one of the great minds of the church. He was a pastor first and then went into teaching. Professor of Reformed theology at the University of Bonn in the 1930s, author of the [Barmen Declaration](#) in 1934, the [Confessing Church](#)'s denunciation of Nazi idolatry. Barth was kicked out of Germany in 1935 for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler and lived out his days teaching and writing at the University of Basel.<sup>1</sup> He was a theological rock star in his day and remains so in the eyes of many today. Barth came to the United States for a lecture tour in 1962, his first visit at the age of 75. He spoke at several Presbyterian seminaries. At Princeton Seminary he had a brief meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968). After giving a lecture at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, a student, suspicious of Barth's theological orthodoxy, held up a Bible in his hand and demanded to know whether Barth believed the Bible to be the Word of God or not. Barth's reply was perfect: "It depends on whether you are holding the book or if it is holding you."

Anyone can hold up a Bible. Anyone can say the Bible is a very special book. Anyone can say the Bible is the Word of God. Anyone can say they believe in the Bible. Anyone can hide behind the Bible. It's been used to justify all kinds of monstrosities and sin, including the enslavement of Africans. I was once asked whether I believed in the Bible. (I really don't like this question, by the way.) I said, no, I don't believe in the Bible, because that would be idolatrous (see Exodus 20:3). I believe in the God revealed *in* and who speaks *through* the Bible. The words of the Bible become the divine, creative transforming *Word* of the Living God when the Holy Spirit speaks through them, offering a word that strikes the heart and convicts the soul and stirs our feet and transforms the world, a word that we cannot say to ourselves, a word that we would rather not hear, but need to hear, for the sake of our lives.

No, you don't hold on to the Word, the Word seizes you, grips you. You cannot hold onto God, you cannot use God, you cannot use the words of scripture for your own selfish desire or personal gain or questionable ends. God takes hold of *you*—and when that happens, stand back.

How will you know?

Oh, you'll know.

When Isaiah 58 was written, God's people, Israel, were back in the land after a long, painful exile in Babylon. They had to rebuild their towns and cities, rebuild their neighborhoods, rebuild a society that reflects the love and faithfulness of God to God's people. God's people need safe communities, free from fear, free from enemies, where they can dwell in peace, feel cared for, their needs tended to, where no one is left out or left behind or pressed down by inequity. It would be a community led by God. I will "satisfy your needs in parched places," God says, "and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins," destroyed by the Babylonians, "shall be

rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called repairers of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (Is. 58:11-12).

*Streets*—safe streets. Streets where you can live and dwell freely and relate to your neighbors. Streets that give life, foster life, places where you can live and play and thrive and grow up and grow old.

Today, our streets are full of protest and rage and looting and anguish and fear, fenced up, barricaded, militarized. Not every street, mind you. Most are safe with people dwelling peacefully with neighbor. Someone said recently, Sesame Street—where everyone gets along—Sesame Street is not every street. Not all our streets are safe. Safe for some, not for everyone. The streets weren’t safe for George Floyd, or Breonna Taylor (who would have been 27 on Friday), or Ahmaud Arbery who was brutally attacked and killed while jogging in the street.

The protests in the streets of America are calls for justice and fairness and equal rights and respect. They are the voices of people who want a future, that’s all they want, a future where people can dwell safely in the streets and live and thrive. They’re waiting for the dawn to break on that new day, a new tomorrow. They’re yearning for light.

And God wants to give them—give us—that future, but God wants to do it *with* us, not apart from us. And we have to do it on *God’s* terms.

In Isaiah 58, God judges the people and holds them accountable for the injustice in the land. God condemns the misuse of religion and worship and calls to true religion, true worship. God takes no delight in empty piety or our religiosity, our spirituality, our hollow rituals, traditions, and worship, going through the motions, going to church, and getting others to think that we’re always nice and kind.

In the text, God lodges a complaint against them. They act “as if they were a nation that practices righteousness” (Is. 58:2). They pray to God, asking for this and that, they want to be “blessed.” The people complain, “Look God, why do we fast,” why do we follow all these rules, if “you don’t notice us,” why are we religious if you’re going to pay attention to us, won’t hear us, won’t answer our prayers, won’t give us what we want (Is. 58:3)

God’s answer is clear: because you serve your own interests (Is. 58:3). *You fast and then you quarrel and fight. You pretend to be holy, but in your heart you’re corrupt. You say one thing, use my name, pay lip service to me, and do the opposite. So, no, you don’t have my attention. You go about in sackcloth and ashes pretending to humble yourself. But it’s a show. A stunt.*

I’ll tell you, God says, this is “the fast that I choose,” the kind of faith and religious devotion I have in mind, “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break the yoke” (Is. 58:6). Stop being so selfish. Share your bread with the hungry—and don’t judge them for being hungry. Bring the homeless poor into your house—provide shelter, safety, housing. Cover the naked—cover the people’s shame, remove the shame. And don’t isolate yourself from your own people, your neighbors, your kin.

When you, when we, live this way then “light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly” (Is. 58:8). The Lord will be with you. Then when you call, when you try to get my attention, God says, I will answer. “You shall cry for help, and God will say, “Here I am”” (Is. 58:9).

And if there’s any ambiguity, the prophet says again, “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday” (Is. 58:9-10).

*If you remove the yoke...*

You have to remove the yoke.

You have to loosen the bonds of injustice, you have undo the thick leather straps of injustice that harness the yoke to the animal forced to carry a heavy load, that harness a human body under the heavy yoke of oppression and slavery and torture and abuse and poverty, a heavy yoke that presses us to the ground and tethers the human spirit. God wants us to remove the yoke. Yes, the church is called to engage in the heavy and difficult work of removing the yoke of injustice. It’s not an option, for God’s judgment is upon the church and everyone and every nation that works against this and insists on placing heavy yokes upon God’s people.

And we can’t stop there. We have to remove the yoke of oppression and then we have to *break it* so that it can never again be used to enslave God’s people. Removing the yoke is difficult work. But if we only try to liberate people from oppression without addressing the root cause of oppression, the systemic roots of it, we’re just dealing with surface issues. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) said, “[Christians] are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spike into the wheel itself.” The church loves to dress the wounds of the afflicted and then we feel good about ourselves. But we’re usually reluctant to do anything about the shooting that caused the wound. Dr. King wrote from the [Birmingham jail](#)—writing to *white clergy!*—“I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities.”<sup>2</sup> We can’t remain indifferent, especially white churches. We have to act. We have to step out. We have to step in. With fierce love and grace and grit and determination and strength we have to engage in the holy work to break every yoke.

The first enslaved Africans arrived on these shores in 1619. 244 years later, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, following the Union victory in Antietam (65 miles west from here). 244 years later. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment abolished slavery in 1865. The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave the vote to black men in 1870, black women received the right to vote in 1920, but not really. The Civil Rights Act in 1962 ended segregation. Slowly removing injustice. We’ve made great gains since then. We elected the first African American president. Yet we know this isn’t the full story.

We've yet to break the yoke and the yoke that continues to oppress black and brown and white bodies is the *sin of racism*—and unless we confess the sin of racism deep within us *and* in the church *and* on the streets of our communities *and* in this nation, it will be a long time before God's light shines on us.

But maybe, just maybe, something is beginning to shift. Perhaps what we're experiencing in our streets, throughout the country and around the world this weekend, especially in and among youth and young adults, is the gradual dawning of a new day. Maybe, just maybe, something new is trying to be born. Thanks to D.C. Mayor [Muriel Bowser](#), BLACK LIVES MATTER is now emblazoned in yellow paint on 16<sup>th</sup> Street. Big, bold, yellow letters painted on the streets of the nation's capital, leading to the newly named BLACK LIVES MATTER Plaza, steps away from [Lafayette Square](#) where enslaved Africans were once bought and sold at the auction block, steps away from the White House that was built by enslaved black folk.

Yellow paint is not going to change everything. But do not underestimate the power of this symbol.

Maybe, just maybe, here and around the world God is taking hold of us and helping us to finally, honestly confront and name the yoke of racism, to see it for what it is—demonic and evil through and through—and saying to us, God's living Word is saying to us:

Go ahead.

You can do it.

You know you want to

Go ahead.

Do it.

*Break it!*



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<sup>1</sup> The Barmen Declaration is one of the confessional statements of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The history behind the confession and the text itself may be found here:

<http://www.westpresa2.org/docs/adulted/Barmen.pdf>. For more on the Confessing Church see Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>.

Cover photo taken by the Rev. Jimmie R. Hawkins, director of the Office of Public Witness, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), taken at the protests on June 3, 2020, 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC.