October 2021

Dear Friends in the Journey,

As I prepare these guidelines, I am doing some research for an upcoming Bible study entitled, “Living on the Edges of Empire.” The idea was hatched, in fact, while listening to one of Rev. Celie’s homilies a few weeks back, and we talked afterwards about turning it into a bible study of some kind.

I am excited to be working with her on this and decided to use this month’s guidelines as a kind of preparation for the study – providing a bit of background and beginning to explore some of the themes. As a result, these guidelines might be a little longer than usual (and a bit more dense) so apologies up front for that!

To some, talking about empire may sound abstract and a bit boring. Yet to those of us who call ourselves “Christians” and further those who would identify as “Americans,” we ignore thinking about this at our own spiritual peril and the destruction of everything that is around us.

Richard Horsley, who has written extensively about Jesus and his relationship to Empire, says, “Americans have a special relationship with the Bible. They also have a special relationship with Empire…. Until recently, however, most of us may not have been aware of the second, and we had certainly not given it much critical thought (p. 1).” Horsley says this because if we live in the United States, then we live in an Empire (and if you live in New York, then you live in the self-proclaimed Empire State!).

And if you wonder if we are really an Empire, one need only think about the statistic that the United States had around 173,000 troops deployed in 159 countries as of 2020[[1]](#footnote-1) let alone reflect on the legacy of the holiday we “celebrate” in October (formerly called Columbus Day and now officially called Indigenous People’s Day by at least 13 states and many more groups and people). And while modern empires might look different than they did some time ago, there are some core characteristics which we will talk about that make a pretty convincing argument.

The great theologian, Howard Thurman, said that the “disinherited of every age” need to be aware of and figure out their relationship to the “rulers, the controllers of political, social and economic life.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Thurman – as a Black man living in pre civil-rights America - knew all too well that empire impacted every aspect of life and said that Jesus, too, understood this as a poor, marginalized minority living under Roman rule. Thus understanding where Jesus was in the mix of the empire that he was subject to might have a lot to say to us about where and how we might need to locate ourselves in our own context (or even think about *where* we are located in that context).

That’s what we will take up in these reflections and will build upon in the bible study later this month.

Blessings,

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**I. Fire-Starter Questions**

1. What do you think of when you hear the word empire? What associations do you have with that word?

2. What do you think of when you hear the words, “American Empire”? Is that a new concept for you? Would you agree or disagree with it and on what basis?

3. When you think of Jesus, do you think of him as a subjugated, impoverished person living in an occupied land? If you take that to be true, what groups (in our society and in the world) would most closely resemble his experience?

**II. Some Scripture Passages for Reflection**

**Genesis 11: 1 - 9**

*The whole world had the same language and the same words. When they were migrating from the east, they came to a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, “Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.” They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.”*

*The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built. Then the Lord said: If now, while they are one people and all have the same language, they have started to do this, nothing they presume to do will be out of their reach. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that no one will understand the speech of another. So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the speech of all the world. From there the Lord scattered them over all the earth.*

**Exodus 1: 11 – 14**

*So they [the Egyptians] organized them [the Israelites] into work-gangs and put them to hard labor under gang-foremen. They built the storage cities Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. But the harder the Egyptians worked them the more children the Israelites had—children everywhere! The Egyptians got so they couldn’t stand the Israelites and treated them worse than ever, crushing them with slave labor. They made them miserable with hard labor—making bricks and mortar and back-breaking work in the fields. They piled on the work, crushing them under the cruel workload.*

**Mark 5: 1 – 11**

*They came to the other side of the sea, to the territory of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, at once a man from the tombs who had an unclean spirit met him. The man had been dwelling among the tombs, and no one could restrain him any longer, even with a chain. In fact, he had frequently been bound with shackles and chains, but the chains had been pulled apart by him and the shackles smashed, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the hillsides he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones. Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and prostrated himself before him, crying out in a loud voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me!” (He had been saying to him, “Unclean spirit, come out of the man!”) He asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “Legion is my name. There are many of us.” And he pleaded earnestly with him not to drive them away from that territory.*

*Now a large herd of swine[e] was feeding there on the hillside. And they pleaded with him, “Send us into the swine. Let us enter them.” And he let them, and the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine. The herd of about two thousand rushed down a steep bank into the sea, where they were drowned.*

**III. Some Questions for Reflection**

1. How do you understand this reading from Genesis? Why do you suppose that God was not pleased with only one language, one culture and one people? What seemed to be God’s concern with the centralization of power?

2. If all you knew about “empire” came from this passage from Exodus, what would you say are some of the hallmarks of empire building?

3. If you substitute the word “Israel” for the man in the story, think about the “unclean spirit as an occupying force” and recall that the name of a Roman military unit was a “legion” how might we read this story differently?

**IV. Commentary**

For some of you, this topic might be a bit new and, perhaps, confusing or bewildering. Others might ask what took me so long to write about it. My hope is that these reflections strike a balance between the positions and offer some new territory for all of us to consider collectively.

American historian, William Appleman Williams, who extensively studied and wrote about the US empire said that, “we have only just begun our confrontation with our imperial history, our imperial ethic, and our imperial psychology…” He said that in the 1980’s and we’re probably still at the beginning of understanding it’s impacts let alone identifying how it’s operating.

If you are like me, you were not taught to think of the United States as an “empire.” We were told that it is a democracy where everyone has freedom and equal opportunity. And if you are like me, you were taught the story that served the empire (and was reinforced by my lived experience being well situated in the empire). Many historians would say that the modern empire building of the United States began in the 1940’s as we expanded our strategic, military and economic influence around the world. Others would say that its roots go back much further.

Furthermore, if you were raised Christian here in the United States, you likely never heard the word empire associated with the faith (even though Christianity became the *official religion of the Roman Empire* in the 4th century!). Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, a noted social justice activist and theologian, even goes so far to say that, “Christians living in the United States are children of an empire. This is not our calling but it is the starting point for our journey in faith. We have deeply internalized the values of empire.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

If you’re still with me here (and I hope you are), it may be important to pause and just breathe.

This is heavy stuff because, for the most part, we have been lied to about who we are and what is real. If we were beneficiaries of empire, then we were lied to about how things came to be, what our responsibility is and what our role is in it. If we are subjugated by empire, we’ve been lied to about who we are, what we’re worth and why we’re in the position we’re in. Empire relies on specific myths to function and obscures the violence that it uses to preserve whatever “peace and order” it provides to those who live in it.

So if we’re going to go deeper into this, we need to keep breathing, get into our bodies and press on.

A basic starting question, however, is, ”How would you know that you are living in an empire?” Well, empires have a lot in common. Some of their most obvious attributes would include:

* A strong military
* A well-developed bureaucracy
* A common currency and often an official language
* Control of large territory (conquered and/or assimilated)
* Legal codes
* Public works/projects
* Lots of public monuments (often to leaders of the empire)
* Systems of forced labor or slavery
* The control of the movement of people
* Control over resources
* Constant acquisition and storage/stockpiling of resources (which is tied to conquering, enslavement and economic exploitation)

As I read this list, I think about our reading from Exodus. In that reading, Egypt controls Israel, and you can probably notice some of the characteristics of empire listed above: conquering, forced labor, slavery, and the stockpiling of resources. This narrative of being subject to empire is deeply imprinted in the Hebrew psyche – so much so that it become, perhaps, the fundamental narrative that dominates a collective consciousness for a long time to come (a consciousness which, no doubt, shaped Jesus).

You might also notice that this list sounds a lot like how many modern countries work. Perhaps that’s one reason so few of us heard about “empire” growing up because it had become so normalized and reinforced. But as we know, not all countries are dominant, and so only a handful of nations might be designated as empires, per se. The United States is one of them, and from the beginning of this country, the founders of this nation (which, we must remember, was founded upon stolen land) sought to become the new Roman empire.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Most of us probably studied the Roman empire coming up through school in our world history classes. This unit came right after we studied the Greeks. We heard about famous writers and artists, aquaducts, roads, a well developed legal system, chariot races and the Colosseum. I almost always heard it in a positive light about all of the amazing contributions that the Romans made to the world.

What I rarely heard about was how brutal the Roman empire was to those who got in its way, opposed it or did not assimilate. In graduate school, I remember hearing about a story of what happened at a city called Sepphoris in 4BCE (four years before the birth of Jesus and located just about 4 miles from Nazareth where he grew up). There had been some local unrest in Sepphoris following the death of Herod. So Rome sent in the army and literally leveled the place. More than 2000 people were crucified. Rape was used as a tool of retribution and many people were taken as slaves.

So for the United States to aspire to become the new Roman Empire was a dangerous course indeed.

Richard Horsley, whom I mentioned earlier, has written some compelling texts which make explicit the connections between Jesus and Empire (in this case the Roman Empire). He also comments about the implications for those of us living in the American context. “Given the United States’ behavior in the world, it would be difficult for Americans to claim that they are still a biblical people who hold liberation and covenantal justice as core values and commitments. Indeed, many Americans cannot avoid the awkward feeling that they are now more analogous to imperial Rome than they are to the ancient Middle Eastern people who celebrated their origins in God’s liberation from harsh service to a foreign rule and lived according to the covenantal principles of socio-economic justice (p.5).”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Ouch.

If we’re serious about digging deeper into the mechanisms of empire, we don’t have to look too far. We do need to read our scriptural tradition differently though.

For example, the story of the Tower of Babel. I never understood this story growing up. Why would God get upset that people were speaking one language and building a big tower? God in actually concerned about the creation of a monoculture – the hallmark of empire – which then gets enforced by the mechanisms of empire. The problem isn’t so much that there is a shared currency, language and culture so much as it becomes *the* culture, currency and language sanctioned by the empire.

Hebrew scripture scholar, Norman Gottwald, says that “early Israel was born as an anti-imperial resistance movement that broke away from the Egyptian and Canaanite domination and took the shape of a self-ruled community of free peasants. This often overlooked, revolutionary origin of Israel is a story that can be told by spelling out the sharp contrast between the vaunted empires of antiquity and the sovereign tribal life of early Israel, characterized by its unrelenting determination to provide dignity and livelihood for all members of the community (p.5).”[[6]](#footnote-6)

So for the descendants of Israel to abandon their tribal life and distinct cultures for an imperial monoculture concerns God very much and should concern in in an age of globalization where everything starts to look the same. (Ched Myers says that we see the antidote to monoculture show up again in the Pentecost moment when everyone hears God speak in their own language and not necessarily the language of the empire.)

Then take the reading from Mark. Anti-imperial themes could not be clearer. In fact, words like “legion” are explicitly used. As they read this gospel passage, some scripture scholars invite us to substitute the word “Israel” for the man who is possessed by an unclean spirit (imperialism). Notice how the passage says that the man cannot, ultimately, be subdued or chained. But under the imperial domination, he takes to self-harm.

If we think about the collective impacts of subjugation, this makes a lot of sense. We know that systems of oppression operate in both external and internal ways. A good deal of the effects of domination are hard to see because they operate at a psychic and spiritual level. Jesus’ liberating work, however, is directed towards not just the cure of disease but the healing of social wounds. In this passage, he sends the demonic (imperial) spirit into a herd of swine (the dirtiest of animals to the Jews) and they are drowned in the sea (you may recall that another imperial army was drowned in the sea in Israel’s history…).

Are you starting to see the pattern?

What makes it hard for us to see the pattern, however, is that we have been steeping in empire. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer says it like this, “Christians living in the United States have so thoroughly embraced imperial myths. We have accepted almost without question that capitalism is good, socialism is evil, flags belong in churches, the U.S. press is free and objective, widespread discrepancies between rich and poor are inevitable and somehow compatible with Christian faith, our nation’s foreign policy is well intentioned, the underdevelopment of third-world peoples is unrelated to our own development, and democracy in the United States is exemplary, safe, and secure.”[[7]](#footnote-7) At least those for whom the system works…

So what can we do about all this?

Well a first step is always consciousness. Begin to look for empire and work to understand how it works.

And how do we do that?

Look to the voices of those for whom the empire is not working. Listen to the experience of the ones who are subject to empire. We could generate a whole list of people/groups who would fall into that category.

For example, if you haven’t already, spend some time with Martin Luther King Jr.’s Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break the Silence speech.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is, perhaps, one of the most profound critiques of the American empire available and it offers people a way out. In the speech, King says, “I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin...we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

In the speech he is also clear that we must “assume the task of opposing [our] government's policy,…move against apathy of conformist thought….[and not let ourselves get] mesmerized by uncertainty” because the issues are so complex.

So in our own lives, we might begin to more carefully explore and assess the impacts of racism, materialism and militarism. What in our lives is built upon those? How might we be beholden to profit motives and property rights over human rights (locally and globally)? How do we move against our own apathy (reinforced by empire with ‘bread and circus’) or refrain from forms of action or civil disobedience because the “issues are so complex”?

These are all serious questions, indeed, and are not meant to be taken up alone. We must take these up together as a community of faith and there will not likely be one response for everyone.

And if we are going to stand on the edges of empire, we must also learn to feel again. A good deal of the mechanisms of empire work to numb us or convince us that inequity and violence are ‘normal’.

The great scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann says that one of the ways that we resist empire is to “grieve” because that is the “most visceral announcement that things are not right. Only in the empire are we pressed and urged and invited to pretend that things are all right. . . . And as long as the empire can keep the pretense alive that things are all right, there will be no real grieving and no serious criticism."[[9]](#footnote-9)

One of my new favorite poets is Drew Jackson who just wrote his first book of poems called *God Speaks Through Wombs* (Kathy Welch introduced me to him!). In the opening poem called Theophilus (Lover of God) he writes:

*History.*

*Told by those lovers of Adonai*

*From the underside.*

*This story*

*From the mouths of the disempowered and marginalized*

*This account*

*Transmitted by handpicked eyewitnesses*

*These bodies*

*Tramped to the ground*

*By imperial power.*

*Have confidence in what you hear from them.*

I am not sure that there is a better summary of the scriptural tradition or of the life and teaching of Jesus. Our task is to align ourselves with those already on the edges and find our home there.

**V. Action Step**

One action I will take after reading these reflections is…

1. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jesus and the Disinherited, p.23 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-5-faith-and-empire/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Just one example is found at https://medium.com/s/story/romes-heroes-and-america-s-founding-fathers-6dada32a8885 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jesus and Empire (Fortress Press, 2003) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Liberating Bible Study by Laurel Dykstra and Ched Myers (eds.), Cascade Books, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. From https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-5-faith-and-empire/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Delivered April 4, 1967. https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Quoted in From https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-5-faith-and-empire/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)