

Hard and Holy Work

*A Lenten Journey
through the Book of Exodus*

MARY ALICE BIRDWHISTELL
AND TYLER D. MAYFIELD

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“What better Lenten discipline and exercise than to ponder well, carefully, and daily our premier text on emancipation—the book of Exodus! Mary Alice Birdwhistell and Tyler D. Mayfield have written a study guide that is readily accessible for daily use. Surely Christians in Lent have no more important work to do than to engage the scriptural promises of and mandate to emancipation, especially in our world that is so bent on enslavement, the practice of cheap labor, and the systemic abuse of vulnerable lives. This book makes one wish that Lent were longer in order to do more of the Exodus. This is a most winsome invitation to fresh faith.”

—Walter Brueggemann, William Marcellus McPheeters Professor
Emeritus of Old Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary

“*Hard and Holy Work*, in its invitation to spiritual awakening and social action in the spirit of the liberator-prophet Moses, is pure gift in these days of global upheaval, inequity, and pain. The authors’ writing is as compelling and brave as their vision of the church.”

—Julie Pennington-Russell, Pastor, First Baptist Church
of the City of Washington, DC

“*Hard and Holy Work* is an inspired guide for brave and curious Lenten travelers yearning for liberation. Be careful, though: Birdwhistell and Mayfield’s intimate exploration of the Exodus saga refuses to skip past the perilous contradictions privileged readers are sure to encounter. Expect your journey inward with them to arrive at unexpected places.”

—Amos J. Disasa, Senior Pastor,
First Presbyterian Church of Dallas

“This inspiring guide illuminates the stories of Exodus alongside those of our time while inviting you to answer powerful questions and take bold, life-giving steps forward. It will encourage you to notice the holy ground you are living on and the holy experiences all around you while offering meaningful ways for you and your community to respond to injustice according to your context and situation. This is the guide for Lent that you have been waiting for.”

—Angela Williams Gorrell, author of *The Gravity of Joy: A Story of Being Lost and Found*

“This lovely study and devotional is written with a wise and compassionate voice, bringing timely reflections on timeless Scriptures and nudging us to consider the significance of movements, moments, and our own spiritual yearnings. It is an invitation to pay attention, as the authors say, to ‘the divine possibility of the present moment.’ In a season in which our hearts are broken anew each day, may this book give us what we need as people of faith to mend and heal and move.”

—Laura M. Cheifetz, coauthor of *Race in America: Christians Respond to the Crisis*

*To the good people of Highland Baptist Church, who continually inspire
and challenge us to join in the hard and holy work of God,
creating a world where justice and love are abundant*

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Beginning the Journey of Lent

Sacred Geography of Louisville, Kentucky

In 1958 the Trappist monk Thomas Merton was visiting downtown Louisville when he had an unexpected spiritual revelation. Later he published a recounting of the event:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.¹

It may seem odd for a monk, living a quiet and devoted life away from the hustle and bustle of the city, to come to a crowded street corner and have a spiritual awakening. However, Paul Pearson, director and archivist of Bellarmine University's Thomas Merton Center, notes that this pivotal moment "points to Merton's movement from being kind of an enclosed monk in the monastery, turning his back on the world, to beginning to turn toward the world." Pearson says, "[Merton] was cutting himself off from the world, but gradually he realizes you can't do that. That he's in the monastery for the world."² As he turned toward

the challenges of the world, Merton would go on to champion justice issues and engage interfaith matters.

Walnut Street was a particularly fitting place for Merton's vision, given its predominance in the business life of African American Louisvillians during that time. As journalist Michael Washburn notes, "In 1958, years before the passage of both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, and only four years after the divisive *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, Merton's feeling of human solidarity was experienced across race and economic lines in what was—and remains—a stubbornly stratified city."³ Merton's place of epiphany later became a physical landmark in Louisville. Today, a plaque from the Kentucky Historical Society stands at the site of Merton's life-changing moment, and tourists from around the world visit this ordinary and extraordinary site. The corner of Fourth and Walnut stands as an invitation to pay attention, to truly see others, and to recognize the interconnected reality of our relationships. (By the way, if you ever search for the site, the city changed the name of Walnut Street to Muhammad Ali Boulevard in 1978 to honor another Louisvillian.)

Decades later, another site was created one block north and two blocks west of Merton's mystical experience. It became a memorial site for Breonna Taylor, the young Black medical worker who was shot and killed by Louisville police officers during a severely mishandled raid on her apartment in March 2020. Her murder, a significant event in our city and our country, contributed to the ever-growing national movement against police brutality and for racial justice. That summer, local protesters began gathering at Jefferson Square Park, a one-acre downtown park, and transformed it into what later became known as Injustice Square. They continued to gather here for the remainder of the year, building a community of resistance and accountability.

"They chose that park because, guess what, it's right in the middle of everything," Taylor's aunt Bianca Austin shared with the *Louisville Courier Journal*. "Injustice square is a statement for Breonna. That statement is that the injustice that y'all done to this woman, here it is, every day when you come to work, you need to be reminded of Breonna."⁴ Today, Injustice Square Park remains the gathering

space for local justice movements, protests, and gatherings. A new historical marker now stands alongside the park, at the corner of Sixth Street and Jefferson, calling us to take action against hatred, systemic evil, and forces of oppression.

These two sacred spaces—Fourth and Walnut and Injustice Square—encapsulate the two themes of this Lenten study: awakening and action. During this season of Lent, we invite you to consider these essential practices of spiritual life. There’s something about Merton’s invitation to pay attention at Fourth and Walnut that calls our feet to march toward the work of liberation at Injustice Square. And there’s something about the work of justice and liberation that calls us toward a greater awakening to the world around us and to where God is within it. These two points on the city map are not in tension with one another but instead seem to be drawn toward one another. The pull between these two points in the sacred geography of Louisville reminds us that we cannot fully or faithfully live as the people God is calling and creating us to be without awakening *and* action.

Lent summons us in these exact directions. Traditionally Lent has been a season of pausing and self-reflection—an inward posture, but also, as part of that introspection, a time to engage in almsgiving—an outward posture. Paying attention and working for justice, then, deepen our Lenten practices and transform our understanding of them.

We (Tyler and Mary Alice) live and work in Louisville, and this place we call home significantly shapes our perspectives. Our church, Highland Baptist Church, is in the historic Highlands neighborhood of Louisville, just a couple miles from Merton’s historical marker and Injustice Square. Highland is no stranger to this space between the contemplation of Merton’s marker and the social action that arises from Injustice Square. In fact, the sacred space within Highland’s stone walls has sparked a passion for various kinds of justice work in our community. The church has long championed the calling of women to ministry despite formerly being part of the Southern Baptist Convention, whose policy is that only men may serve as pastors. Highland has also become a space of radical welcome and affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community and has recently begun more intentional anti-racism and reparations work.

However, in the midst of this deep passion for justice within our church, Highland is also a predominantly white congregation with many resources in an affluent area of town. As a result, we often feel stuck, overwhelmed, or at a loss for how to best initiate and effect change in our city. We don't often know how to move from Merton's marker to Injustice Square, from awakening to action. And sometimes, in an effort not to go the *wrong* way, we end up not going any way at all.

As the writers of this study, we want to name from the beginning and seek vigilant awareness of the privilege and power we hold. We are both white, cisgender, heterosexual, well-educated professionals with stable jobs, and those identities come with advantages in our society. We are on a journey ourselves, and this book is an invitation: join us as we learn together about the work of justice. We do not pretend to have all the answers, and this study is not our attempt to fix all the complicated systems of injustice. Instead, it is our humble effort to take a faithful next step in the right direction. So we invite you to join us. We are traveling toward greater awareness of our world, with all its beauty and challenges, as the Spirit calls us toward justice and love.

Throughout this book, we will often write directly to others who occupy various spaces of privilege, but we hope that those who do not hold one or another form of privilege will also feel seen and cared for along the way. Privilege is not a yes-or-no proposition, a switch we flip one way or the other; we are all a combination of identities related to our gender, sexuality, economic level, educational background, race, ethnicity, and much more, and some of these identities provide us certain advantages. It's not about being right or wrong. As author Ijeoma Oluo notes, "Being privileged doesn't mean that you are always wrong and people without privilege are always right—it means that there is a good chance you are missing a few very important pieces of the puzzle."⁵ This study asks us all to think deeply about those identities and how our society grants power and advantages to certain people simply because they belong to particular groups. The work of justice is to notice these systems and to work to correct them. This, too, is a part of the journey—and it will look different for each of us depending on how privilege intersects with our identities.

The idea for this book emerged from a sermon series based on the book of Exodus, which Mary Alice preached at Highland in the fall

of 2020. Each week, as we reflected on the liberation of God's people in Exodus, the protests for justice for Breonna Taylor continued down the road from our church. Moved by the call to action that we were experiencing together, our pastors and congregation members joined in many of those protests, witnessing firsthand a long-overdue racial reckoning in our city and country. In those moments, we felt the synergy of reading the ancient wisdom of Exodus and responding to contemporary societal needs.

In addition, the protests and study of Exodus were taking place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the extreme inequities among communities in resources, health care, education, access to medical supplies, technology, child care, and so much more. The pandemic brought the world as we had previously known it to a screeching halt and gave many of us an opportunity to reflect on our typical routines. Suddenly, we were paying attention in ways we never had before and asking ourselves, Where do we go from here? And how do we take brave steps forward in the ways that God is calling us?

These profound contexts—Merton's corner, Injustice Square, and our own privilege—shape our Lenten reflections as we focus on these two interconnected practices of spiritual life: awakening to the world around us and acting for liberation. Each of these dimensions enriches our lives of faith, and together they prepare us to be Easter people, people called to resurrection and new life. We welcome you to join us in this hard and holy work.

The Book of Exodus

During this Lenten season, we will explore selections from the biblical book of Exodus as one way to engage deeply in a life of reflection and action. Exodus is a book about an ancient people on a dramatic journey from enslavement in Egypt toward liberation. It concerns a liberating God who sees the oppression of God's people and acts to free them from bondage. Exodus tells the story of newly released Israelites. In addition, it serves as a model for people who find themselves searching for freedom in God's world. It speaks into Merton's life of contemplation and Injustice Square's demand for justice. Yet Exodus also tells of a people who wander in the wilderness with little idea of

a next step. The book demonstrates the honest truth that the end of bondage does not always equate to immediate freedom. Thus, Exodus provides a paradigm for a contemporary, liberating spirituality.

Between the sacred geography of the world of the ancient Israelites and our contemporary world, Exodus has offered a way of liberation for Christian and Jewish communities through the ages. Many faithful people through the years have found their stories in these ancient stories. Exodus is a powerful story of faith and a popular resource for our theological imaginations.

In fact, the book's liberating message was perhaps feared as too inspiring by particular oppressors, such as enslavers, who attempted to quell the reading of these stories among their enslaved people. The "Slave Bible," as it was called, was created and published in 1807 by British missionaries specifically for use among enslaved Africans. The Slave Bible omitted various parts of Scripture, including, for example, Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer slave or free . . . for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," and the entire book of Revelation, which might offer too much hope about a new heaven and earth. The Slave Bible also left out Exodus 1–18, going straight from Genesis 45 (just before Jacob and his family go into Egypt to see Joseph) to Exodus 19 (when the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai), omitting the entire story of the Israelites' escape from slavery under Pharaoh in the land of Egypt.⁶ It is a significant reminder of how powerful these stories were (and still are) that they were considered too dangerous for enslaved people to access them. Even those who sought to oppose its message recognized the undeniable power of Exodus.

Yet the Exodus story still made its way into the hearts and souls of enslaved people, and over time it became compelling in more modern fights for freedom and justice as well. In a 2019 lecture titled "The Hope of Exodus in Black Theology," Andrew Prevot, a theology professor at Boston College, said that there came to be

a tradition inaugurated by Black Christian slaves, who despite being subjected to coercive practices of non-education and mis-education, managed to discover another meaning of Christianity buried deep in the stories, images, and songs of their living faith. These resilient, material symbols of theological wisdom could

not be made to communicate merely the politically crafted message of obedience to masters preached by apologists of American slavocracy. Something more was here: a mystery and a promise deeper than words: Christianity harbored a hope of Exodus. It whispered the dream of a divinely orchestrated escape from the death-dealing circumstances of the present order of things. It inspired a communal prayer for healing and freedom.⁷

In agreement with Prevot, we try to be intentional in the following pages by paying attention to marginalized voices in our modern world that bring new understanding and perspectives to the book of Exodus, perspectives perhaps never considered before. These voices lead us to assess our inherited interpretations, ponder more liberating readings, and experience anew the power of these stories for the work of liberation. Listening to the voices of marginalized communities becomes, then, a spiritual practice of awakening and ultimately action.

Today we read the biblical stories of the exodus in light of our own stories. The stories in the Bible should challenge, inspire, and beckon us to pay attention to what is happening in the world around us. How do these stories remind us of who we are as the people of God wandering through the wilderness of this moment, seeking to find our way to liberation and freedom? How do these stories speak to people of privilege, calling us to see injustice and to act against it? These are just a few questions to consider as we engage the hard and holy work of this season.

How to Use This Book during Lent

Lent provides us with a focused opportunity to explore the much-needed connection between spiritual awakening and social action. Each chapter of this book coincides with a week of the Lenten journey and with a story from the book of Exodus. You are invited to read the chapter at any point during the week. You might read the chapters in anticipation of meeting with a group to discuss it, or you may use this book as an individual study. We are mindful that this faithful work is difficult, and we aren't meant to do it alone. If feasible and suitable, find a way to take this journey with others.

At the conclusion of each chapter, we invite you to reflect, engage, and respond to what you have read. Each week, there are activities you can do individually or with a group that invite you to develop a more profound sense of awareness and then to find ways to respond to that awareness in the world around you. All three sections—Paying Attention, Sharing Together, and Taking Action—are crucial to this Lenten study; they are not afterthoughts. Not all the suggested questions and activities may suit your context and lived reality. We have attempted to provide a plethora of options for a variety of situations. If you find that a question or activity does not speak to you, we hope you will skip it without worry or guilt. Move freely and use options from different categories throughout the week, practicing attention and exploring ways to take action each day.

These chapter conclusions are not quizzes with right and wrong answers; they are invitations to continue to ponder how this Lenten season and the book of Exodus speak into your life today. These activities may not be ones you have engaged in before. We hope they will be transformative in ways that extend beyond the Lenten season.

Paying Attention will ask you to be present to God, to Scripture, to the world around you, and to yourself. We invite you to be still, get curious, ask questions, and allow yourself to be uncomfortable in these moments of wondering, curiosity, and contemplation. These practices will be offered as daily exercises for mostly individual use.

Sharing Together will provide questions for you to engage in this week's reading with a small group, colleague, or friend. Free videos for each session of the study are also available at <https://tinyurl.com/WJKYouTube>. These short videos of us introducing each chapter can help provide you with a starting point to engage with and discuss the book each week. You can use them to begin group sessions or as an introduction for each participant to watch beforehand.

Taking Action will give concrete opportunities for you to engage in your community in hands-on ways. This work is not merely intellectual or spiritually inward; we hope this

Lenten season engages you in the outward work of justice and liberation.

The Cry of Ash Wednesday

It may feel peculiar to start the spiritual journey of Lent with a day dedicated to dust. It is sobering to sit in pews in the middle of a week and hear the words, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.” It may be uncomfortable to feel the grit and grime of ashes on our forehead and to reflect on our mortality. As pastors, it feels gut-wrenching to look into the eyes of loved ones while reminding them of this harsh reality. Ash Wednesday takes our breath away and invites us to lean into the vulnerability of these uncomfortable moments. I (Tyler) will never forget the Ash Wednesday service when I sat in the pews and watched my wife, a minister, impose ashes first on an elderly gentleman dying of cancer and then on the forehead of our eight-year-old son. What a poignant reminder of our finitude.

Ash Wednesday also cries out for us to pay attention! This day reminds us that, despite believing and even living as if we are immortal, we are, in fact, human, each one of us. Ash Wednesday smacks us in the middle of the forehead with the realization that the life entrusted to us is precious and fragile. For some of us, it wakes us from the privilege and comfort of our day-to-day lives. For others, it reminds us, all too well, of the ever-present brokenness of the world and the frailty of life that we experience every day. For all of us, Ash Wednesday challenges us to sit in the discomfort of these hard and holy truths and pushes us into the wilderness of Lent.

Author Anne Lamott reminds us, “Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”⁸ And so, this Lent, we invite you to join us in what may be an unsettling spiritual journey. After all, if we continually linger in spaces of comfort, familiarity, and certainty, do we ever really change? Do we ever really grow? So much of our lives is about seeking comfort and convenience. Yet perhaps the journey of faith, if it is going to stretch us or move us beyond our expectations and imaginations, is going to be a difficult one that causes us to be unsettled.

What a hard and holy invitation! But it is also an invitation we hope will lead to transformation within us and our world.

As we begin the Lenten journey together, may we remember to be present to the sacred geography of this moment. May we turn aside and pay attention to the burning bushes in our wilderness, in unexpected people and unlikely places. As Cole Arthur Riley notes, “Contemplative spirituality is a fidelity to beholding the divine in all things. In the field, on the walk home, sitting under the oak tree that hugs my house. A sacred attention.”⁹ May we listen to the voices and circumstances calling us to join in this hard and holy work.

Lenten Practices

Paying Attention *(Self-Reflection)*

Wednesday

As we begin the Lenten journey today, take a moment to welcome your experiences throughout this journey—thoughts, feelings, situations, or emotions that may make you joyful or uncomfortable. Offer a prayer of openness to this season and God’s presence with you during this time of reflection and action.

Thursday

Have you ever experienced a moment of epiphany or spiritual realization in which you discovered or sensed a new direction or insight? It does not need to be as dramatic as Merton’s to be meaningful. Perhaps you saw with fresh perception something you had seen many times before. Or maybe you saw something for the first time. How did that epiphany moment change you?

Friday

What has been your previous experience of noticing injustice as a vital part of your spiritual practice? Are you accustomed to discerning justice as a part of the life of faith? Have you considered working against injustice as a spiritual discipline?

Saturday

Consider the sacred geography of your life that calls you to pay attention and act for justice. What is your corner of Walnut and Fourth? What is your Injustice Square? Maybe you can think of smaller places and moments where injustices occur that aren't marked in such public ways.

Sharing Together
(Group Discussion Questions)

1. What are some of the points of the sacred geography of your own life that have shaped who you are today? What markers in your life journey and identity affect what you bring to this space together?
2. What knowledge of the book of Exodus do you bring to this study? Do you remember particular stories about Moses or the Israelites?
3. How does the existence of the Slave Bible make you feel? What might be so powerful about some of these biblical stories that led enslavers to censor them?
4. How do you understand the book's title phrase, "hard and holy work"? Can you think of an example from your own spiritual life that has been both hard and holy?

Taking Action
(Next Steps)

1. Make a concrete plan for ways that you will carve out space to engage this study and respond. For example, you may need a daily or weekly schedule to complete the readings. Perhaps you need to invite a friend or group to join you. How will you observe a holy Lent in our rushed and busy world?
2. Take time to notice injustices in the news, on social media, in the world around you. Instead of walking away from the discomfort, lean into it. Pray for those experiencing such injustice. What does this stir in you?

3. Research the sacred geography of your own community. What points have been the spaces for spiritual awakening or social action? Is there any connection between them? Visit these spaces, or learn what you can about them online.
4. Share with friends—in person or on social media—your broad hopes for this Lenten journey.

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