

A Lament of American Slavery

Daniel 9

Sermon by Amos Humphries
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Those of you who are visiting with us, one thing that makes me unique is that I was born in Detroit, Michigan, I'm a Yankee, I've heard that my whole life. When we moved here I told my son Clay, listen when we get there and go to school people are going to start making fun of you, they're going to make fun of your accent and they're going to call you a Yankee. I believe it was the first time he had heard that term, and he looked at me puzzled and said, "I don't get it, we're Tigers fans?" But when I grew up I got it, the North fought the South in the Civil War and we were Yankees. Another thing that you may not know about me is that I'm actually only two generations removed from the Civil War, my father was 52 years old when I was born, his father was 57 when he was born, my grandfather Henry Clay Humphries was born on a plantation that his father, Amos Thomas Humphries II, owned. My great grandfather fought in the Battle of Vicksburg after his plantation was burned to the ground he joined the Mississippi State Militia and fought in the Battle of Vicksburg. My mother's side of the family is old too, and my grandfather, one of them, fought in the same battle at Vicksburg, we lost. My father migrated up north to Detroit and that's how I was born a Yankee, even though I have strong Southern ties. My family has been here since 1635 on my father's side, I can go all the back to Ralph Humphries in Wales and how he lost siding with Charles II against Oliver Cromwell, he was banished to Ireland, and his son Evan was sent to the Virginia colony as an indentured servant. And so I have deep roots here in America, my family has been here for 11 generations. Being in Detroit, growing up in the Downriver suburbs of Detroit, the reason why I make that distinction between Detroit and Downriver Detroit because there was a clear demarcation point between Detroit and Lincoln Park, the suburb I grew up in, it was Outer Drive, three miles from my house. In the city of Detroit, on that side of Outer Drive, you

were black, on my side of Outer Drive, you were white, and both sides knew you never crossed the road. And I grew up with that. I'll never forget when I was 7 years old, a black woman walked down my street. My parents immediately got worried, got on the phone and called the neighbors, they called a realtor to sell our house, and then they found out the lady was doing some home repairs for someone and was only going to be there for a couple of days, and they calmed down. As I got older I began to process the fact this episode was racist, I grew up in that racism, I grew up in a home that was prejudice, and I began to struggle with that. And then Black History Month would come around every Feb, I wasn't even conscious of Black History because I was white, and Black History wasn't my history. Like many of you I heard and said "Why do we have to celebrate Black History?" "There's not a White History Month!" But I hate to break it to you, the other 11 months of the year are White History Month because that's all we study, because that's what's important, because we're white. Again, this journey I've been on, to recognize the racism I was brought up in, the prejudice I bought into, working that out, reprocessing that, looking at life, looking at our culture through the eyes of people of color, I struggled again with Black History Month, what do we do? How do I, in my position as a pastor, address that? I'll be honest with you, I've struggled with this for years now, we've tried small little things, we've sung Spiritual Songs during this time, we've tried doing special songs through the music ministry, it's generally a month I've ignored, we celebrate Valentines' Day during this month, so I've done a shallow series on Love or Relationships during Feb so I can get to Lent and talk about Christology leading up to Easter so I can avoid Black History month, because to be honest with you as a white person its awkward for me, it's painful for me, but ignoring it, dancing around it, I've recognized in my life, in our churches life, in your life it's perpetuating the problem, we haven't developed the tools that we need to progress forward, we, Park Lake Drive Baptist Church, as we progress forward as a multi ethnic congregation, have we developed the right tools necessary to deal with Black History? A heavy thing for white people, a heavy thing for our country right now.

We can't talk about Black History without talking about Slavery in the United States. 2019 we are celebrating 400 years since Africans were brought to the colonies in Jamestown and sold as slaves. 1619, the very beginning of our journey as a country, and we brought Africans here to be enslaved. That's painful, and I know if you're in the room, and I know you're abhorred by that. When I look in these pictures (pictures of slaves in PowerPoint) I see in these faces the faces of friends. I see Omar Collins, (7:41) Omar sat next to me in a Psychology class in High School, he was the first black person I had known in my life, I was scared to death of him, not because he grew up in Detroit, ironically not because he was a drug dealer at the time, that didn't scare me at all, I was scared because he was black, because I was taught to fear him. He ended up being one of the kindest, most generous, nicest guys I've known. I can see his face reflected in this old picture, they were human beings. American Slavery from the beginning was uniquely different than slavery we see in scripture and slavery we see throughout history. American slavery quickly turned into Chattel Slavery, slavery we see in scripture had to do with conquered people. When there was a war or a battle, whoever lost and survived the conflict were brought into the victorious culture as slaves and would often have the opportunity to work themselves out of slavery. Even Humphries was in this position. His father Ralph fought for King Charles II and lost, he was banished to Ireland, and Evan was sent to Virginia as an indentured servant, he had seven years to serve a family before he got his freedom. For African slaves they were slaves for life, and then we didn't consider them human, we considered them property. It was an economic thing, we used them for economic prosperity. This is what hurts as a white person. My family for a period of 150 years owned slaves, they used them for economic reasons, much like owning a tractor. In the Constitution they were considered $\frac{3}{4}$ of a human being, our forefathers didn't see the image of God in them, it's painful. Then, when you see the churches response to Chattel Slavery, it defended the institution. Rev. John Henry Hopkins – Episcopal Bishop of Vermont – he was very influential, he published a book that is mockingly called the Bible of Slavery, in which he wrote “Slavery was not a sin since it was instituted in the Old

Testament by Noah's curse of Canaan. Furthermore it was not mentioned at all by Jesus although slavery was quite prevalent in His time.” He’s making a defense of Chattel Slavery, he even brings Jesus into it. Since Jesus didn’t condemn slavery it must be OK, it would be like us saying “since Jesus didn’t speak against pornography it must be OK!” Another person who comes into play is Albert Taylor Bledsoe – Professor of Mathematics at UVA, he was also ordained Episcopal priest and eventually an ordained Methodist minister, he is best remembered for his treatise *An Essay on Liberty and Slavery*, which presented an extended proslavery argument. The next person in the line is the Rev Thornton Stringfellow who wrote *Statistical Views in favor of Slavery*, a biblical defense of it. I can go on and on and on with Christian scholars and pastors who defended the institution of Chattel Slavery. As a white person I like to look back at the Abolitionist Movement, and point out the fact that there were white people who were against slavery, but men like the Rev. Stringfellow, made such a good case for slavery, that he influenced hundreds maybe thousands of ministers, who preached in hundreds and thousands of churches, that influenced millions of people, that slavery was not spoken against in scripture, but it was endorsed by scripture. Here we are over 150 years later and we still deal with the ramifications of what these men did. We still deal with the ramifications of their promotion of slavery. We have people of color who deal with crime and violence today because of racism, we have Alt-Right movements and White Supremist who suddenly feel empowered because conservatives have won the White House for whatever reason, and we see these roots of racism come up. It’s painful. It makes me feel powerless, what can we do with this? What’s been done is done, I can’t change the fact that my ancestors were slaveowners, I can’t change that fact. I know you’re pained too. You wouldn’t come to a multi-ethnic church if you weren’t against racism. But what can we do about this horrible past? How can we process the past. I believe scripture shows us the way.

In scripture we a thing called Lament. It’s a tool that scripture gives us to deal with the past. It’s interesting when you look at the Psalms, over 60% of the Psalms are laments. Lament is a grievance, it’s

a grieving, it's a confession. David laments Jonathan's death, the prophet Jeremiah laments the fall of Judah and laments their sins. One of the most powerful laments for me is Daniel 9. Daniel is filled with stories while the Jewish people are in exile in Babylon. He's a conquered person, he's a slave in Babylon. It's important for this passage to understand that Daniel is never spoken negatively about. He survives three empire changes, reaches the pinnacle of power for a conquered person, and yet he is upright and righteous. In Chapter 9 he's reading scripture and he recognizes that the people are going to have the opportunity to go back to the land. So we read in Daniel 9

Daniel 9

³ So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and fasting. I also wore rough burlap and sprinkled myself with ashes.

⁴ I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed:

"O Lord, you are a great and awesome God! You always fulfill your covenant and keep your promises of unfailing love to those who love you and obey your commands. ⁵ But we have sinned and done wrong. We have rebelled against you and scorned your commands and regulations. ⁶ We have refused to listen to your servants the prophets, who spoke on your authority to our kings and princes and ancestors and to all the people of the land.

⁷ "Lord, you are in the right; but as you see, our faces are covered with shame. This is true of all of us, including the people of Judah and Jerusalem and all Israel, scattered near and far, wherever you have driven us because of our disloyalty to you. ⁸ O LORD, we and our kings, princes, and ancestors are covered with shame because we have sinned against you. ⁹ But the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him. ¹⁰ We have not obeyed the LORD our God, for we have not followed the instructions he gave us through his servants the prophets. ¹¹ All Israel has disobeyed your instruction and turned away, refusing to listen to your voice.

Daniel didn't do anything wrong, he was blameless, but he mourns the past, he confesses the sins of people he's not responsible to, but he confesses anyways. He laments. I think when we look at ourselves, we ask what can we do? I can't change the past, but I can lament the past. I don't have to defend what my forefathers did, but I can lament what they did. I can confess their sins, and ask God to heal our land.

I'd like ask everyone to bow your heads and close your eyes. I want to guide us through this process, because we need to, because we all need to, because we can do something. I want to encourage you at this point to look back at your life and in areas in which you were guilty of racism and prejudice, I want you to confess those moments as sin. You maybe a person of color in the room and you were on the other side of that, I want you to acknowledge those moments as sin, sin against God, sin against his holiness. You may have been present when someone else did those things and you stood silently by, confess those moments as well as sin.

Prayer: "Holy Spirit, as we feel your presence in this room, we confess the sins of our fathers, we confess their ignorance, their inability to see your beautiful image in people you died for. We confess the violence and years of indignity that our brothers and sisters had to endure during slavery, we mourn that. We're sorry for what they did, we're pained that they caused ramifications that we have to live with today, We pray that you forgive us, as a nation, as a church, as people who are called by your name. We love you, we want to do what is right, we want to love right to bring glory to your name. We recognize the only way to do that is to plead for your forgiveness, for your blood on the cross to wipe us clean to allow us to live as new people to live in your image, we are grateful for who you are. Amen."