

The letter of James, in the Newer Testament, has a reference to the Exodus story that is often missed by Gentile, that is to say, non-Jewish ears. It goes like this: *But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.*

We forget this was written by a Jewish writer to Jewish exiles of the time, scattered around the Roman Empire—who claimed Jesus as their rabbi. A strong tradition says James was the sibling or cousin of Jesus. So when James refers to the ***“the perfect law”*** his Jewish readers would have known that refers to Torah, the Law of Moses given on Mt. Sinai in the book of Exodus—the Law interpreted by their rabbi, Jesus. This second phrase, ***“law of liberty”*** is another reference to the Exodus story, the oldest story of liberation from oppression that we have. This only sounds new, if it does, because Gentile Christians suffering from “Gentile Supremacy” have a long history of downplaying the importance of Exodus. The Hebrew Torah, means instruction, teaching, or law—and it’s a much broader term than the 10 Commandments, or the other laws given to Moses. Torah is very much imbedded in stories—so Genesis, loaded with stories and very few laws, is considered Torah. And the movement that freed the Hebrews from slavery is Torah.

So James is doing **Midrash** (interpretation-commentary) on Exodus and he’s saying the law of liberty [Exodus] is a mirror we look into—to find ourselves there. And for the mirror to work we have to persevere in looking to find God speaking to us so we can do something about it.

And it’s the sort of story we are urged to look into long and hard, and in particular not to turn away too soon, forgetting what we see of ourselves there. It’s that kind of a mirror. James is warning us: Exodus is the kind of mirror we might enjoy for a quick look, but it might also reveal things, we’d rather turn away from, forgetting what we see.

We’d rather have mirrors that make us feel better about what we see. The mirror stores about race that win Best Picture at the Oscars tend to be about a white person and a black person who improbably transcend race to end up as chums, like *Driving Miss Daisy*. Sometimes the white person starts out racist and is won over by the warmth and humanity of the black person, like *Green Book*. Telling that both those movies won Best Picture in years the Spike Lee films, with more honest depictions of race in America were stiffed (*Do the Right Thing* in 1998, and *Klansman* in 2018.) This is to say nothing about a whole spate of stories that good white people who are kind to minorities contrasted with the bad white people who are racists. We all want to be the good white people like Anne with E, in the Netflix series. Fair enough.

Exodus tells a more brutal truth about oppression and what makes it possible. We're trying to spend some time looking in this mirror.

Last Sunday we saw how a group of Hebrew refugees in Egypt, shown hospitality by their Egyptian neighbors for many generations, are forced into slavery in one generation—at the instigation of Pharaoh, but with the full cooperation of the Egyptian people. Without the Egyptian people, no slavery. Once that first generation of Egyptians establishes a new status quo, oppression, that status quo perpetuates itself, if unopposed vigorously. Which it isn't.

If we're looking into this mirror=story, and we are Americans designated as white, where do we find ourselves in the mirror? The Egyptians, of subsequent generations, with a status quo that support gross injustices and inequities.

If read Exodus, asking, **where are the Egyptians who oppose the status quo**, working to **dismantle the oppression?** Missing. Pharaoh's daughter finds a Hebrew baby in the Nile. She is moved to pity and raises the child as her own, names him Moses. But she doesn't use her influence as Pharaoh's daughter to advocate for Hebrews She's nice to one baby.

Moses [raised in Egypt by Egyptians, his name is Egyptian] eventually becomes an advocate for the Hebrews, but of course, he was born a Hebrew. Complex identity: A Hebrew raised Egyptian who marries a Zipporah, a Midianite, a later enemy of the Israelites. Steeped in the culture of Egypt [probably served by Hebrew slaves growing up] but he's also willing to renounce all that privilege to side with the Hebrews. And it's a rocky road throughout—his relationship with his fellow Hebrews. Moses first efforts are ham-handed. He kills an Egyptian who is abusing a Hebrew. This may have put every Hebrew at risk! And when he comes back and tries to split up a fight between two Hebrews, they don't take to it kindly. Moses, who is a founder of Israelite identity, isn't allowed into the Promised Land. More on that another time.

All to say: if Exodus is a mirror, and we look into it with honesty, persevering in our looking, not forgetting what we see of ourselves and our national sins, the "good Egyptians" we can identify with, as if to say, "I'm one of those good Egyptians who is so much better than those racist Egyptians." That's not what we see in the mirror, the law of liberty.

The only thing that really makes any difference, even with Moses, born a Hebrew, is to meet the God of the Hebrews in the wilderness who talks to him like this: **"I indeed have seen the abuse of My people that is in Egypt and its outcry because of its taskmasters. I have heard, for I know its pain. And I have down to rescue it form the hand of Egypt [not Pharaoh, Egypt] and to up from the land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...And now look, the outcry of the Israelites has now come to Me and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians [again, the people, not Pharaoh per se, getting the people off the hook]. And now, get up that I may send**

you to Pharaoh! God gives Moses an assignment to do something about it. [Moses resists: Who am I? Who are you? P. adopted grandson! Disney is planning a movie about you and they are calling it The Prince of Egypt!]

Let's stop telling ourselves the Anne with an "e" story about Good White People/ Bad White People.

The gospel of Luke has very interesting encounter between a wealthy ruler, an Israelite, who approaches Jesus saying "Good teacher! What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds oddly, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

Now that's not the only truth about human goodness. Israel's origin shows the creation unfolding and God says, "It's good." Including a "very good" when the creation creates us. But the rich ruler was wanting something else—he wanted to feel good about himself and keep his privilege. And Jesus gave him this other truth about human goodness: no one is good but God alone—and he included himself as a human being in that truth. Why do you call me good?

Those of us with privilege need to hear this.

It's not until Moses meets the God of the Hebrews out in desert that he becomes of any real use to his own people. For Moses, it's not about being good or bad. It's about meeting God, receiving God's heart for oppressed people and having God tell him to do something about it—resisting at first, but eventually doing.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Let me close by suggesting that this is a particularly good time for many of us to let go of this burden of trying to be good. When we look back on this time, we will see it, as a hinge of history. One of those times when all particulars of our lives intensified but were overridden by two additional impositions of history: getting through a global pandemic and confronting White Supremacy. In both cases, the attempt to feel we're good at this are completely an utterly futile.

Let's take handling this pandemic. Are there any parents of school age kids who are feeling like, "Hey I'm doing a really good job?" We're connected to people who have different approaches to quarantine—which risky thing should I do? We're having to become our own Public Health on the fly experts and we really aren't equipped for that are we? We're winging it which is not a recipe for feeling like we've got this.

When there's a voice in our heads saying, "Good Pandemic Coper" we got our answer, "Why do you call me good—no one is good but God alone"

When there's a voice in our heads saying, "Good parent!" we've got our answer, "Why do you call me good—no one is good but God alone."

And believe, if there is a voice trying to call you "Good White Person?" well sit that voice down, look it in the eye, and say "Why do you call me good? No is good but God alone."