

1999 introduced us to a film that changed the action-movie landscape forever. *The Matrix* essentially made animae special effects possible in live-action movies with their new bullet-time technology. Soon, every movie was using bullet-time.

But the other reason *The Matrix* was so popular was because of the layers of philosophy and religion the Wachowski siblings put into the script. In a world where machines have taken over the world and enslaved humanity, the main character, Neo, turns out to be a prophesied Messiah, who will go on to die and rise from the dead to inherit his impossible power. Neo is a thinly-veiled Christ-figure, with some Buddhism sprinkled in for good measure.

The film ends with Neo warning he's going to tear down the machines, and then he flies off while *Rage Against the Machine* plays. It's epic!

There were two more movies that were much less-well received, but they do reveal the Wachowskis' larger intentions with the first film. In the sequels, we learn that Neo is a false messiah - that in fact he was the latest in a long line of false saviors. The machines allow these false saviors to exist because it makes the humans easier to control. This "religion" Neo represents is all part of the plan.

This is a fascinating critique of religion, one that most of us are familiar with. Karl Marx, an avowed atheist, famously called religion the "opiate of the masses". He meant by that critique that religion is a tool the powerful use to keep the oppressed under their control.

This is something we know happens. From the slavemasters who quoted scripture about slaves submitting to masters and being good to get to Heaven to pastors today who tell abused spouses it's their Christian duty to submit to their abusive partners, we see the Good News of Jesus turned into weapons of injustice.

We're going to talk about that today. We're going to read one of those texts used to support oppression and see how texts like these were calls to liberation. (Which means we'll also see why they're so easy to

misuse). Today is all about how we join God in working for justice and freedom, whether we're in places of power or places of oppression.

As we sing together,

### **Message**

This is Eastertide, the season of the Church year where we explore the implications of Jesus' resurrection. This year, our series is called *Strangers in a Strange Land*. We're exploring the vision of humanity we find in various classic sci-fi stories and comparing them to the book of 1 Peter. Peter shows us that the hope of the world is not humanity or our progress (as is so often the case in sci-fi). Rather, the hope of the world is the new work God is doing through the Church!

[**Scripture Slide**] Turn with me to 1 Peter 2 in your Bibles. We claim the resurrection is good news for us all, but throughout the history of the Church, the Scriptures have been used as tools of oppression. Like *The Matrix* suggests, religion can be a powerful tool of control and oppression. So today, I want to look at one of those infamous texts of terror. This scripture is one that American slaveowners used to tell slaves that the institution of slavery was from God, and that obedience to their slavemasters was God's will.

But (to spoil where we're going), we'll see that Peter's intention for those early Christians (and for us!) is never oppression, but hope. Peter calls us to justice and peace - the way modeled by Jesus himself.

Let's read together:

You who are slaves must submit to your masters with all respect. Do what they tell you—not only if they are kind and reasonable, but even if they are cruel. For God is pleased when, conscious of his will, you patiently endure unjust treatment. Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you.

For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. -- 1 Peter 2:18-21

Easy to see why this is a text of terror, why a slaveowner looking to justify himself would turn to this text. But there are a couple of odd features of this text that give us pause. First, it's unusual that Peter doesn't address the masters. This is a "household code", which was a common genre in the ancient Roman Empire. Peter actually goes on to address husbands and wives, which is normal too. What's *not* normal is Peter only addressing slaves (not both masters and slaves).

It's possible Peter is a slavemaster, that he isn't interested in just masters, but obedient slaves. But we know Peter's original context - we're not totally sure who the author is, but it's clear throughout the book that he is not wealthy. The vast majority of the first Christians were poor. Very poor. They were much more likely to *be* slaves than to own slaves.

[**Illustrate this next section?**] So this is one person at the bottom of the social pyramid writing to others at the bottom. He's not writing to masters because the masters aren't Christians and don't particularly care what Peter has to say.

Let's pause here because this matters. Texts written BY oppressed people to other oppressed people can say these sorts of things. But when someone in power, someone at the top of the social pyramid takes these texts, they become tools of oppression.

[**Picture of Thurman**] Civil Rights leader (and mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr) Howard Thurman wrote in his autobiography about having to teach his daughters the ugly truth of segregation.

He wrote:

[SLIDES PERSON: I need this text behind the picture of Thurman] *We sauntered down the long street from the church to the riverfront. This had been the path of the procession to the baptismal ceremony in the Halifax River.... At length we passed the playground of one of the white public schools. As soon as*

*Olive and Anne saw the swings, they jumped for joy. “Look, Daddy, let’s go over and swing!” This was the inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face soon or late. What do you say to your child at the critical moment of primary encounter? “You can’t swing in those swings.” “Why, Daddy?” “When we get home and have some cold lemonade I will tell you.” When we had had our lemonade, Anne pressed for the answer, “We’re home now, Daddy. Tell us.” I said, “It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. Only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida—it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how much power people are willing to use to keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls.”*

This is a beautiful moment in an ugly world. But it is beautiful precisely because Thurman is oppressed like his daughters. This story would be very different if a white man had pulled those little girls off the swings and said the exact same thing to them.

If one oppressed person says to another, "Keep your chin up. You matter," they are affirming each other's basic humanity. If a person in power says to someone they're oppressing, "Keep your chin up. You matter," it's a self-serving lie. Because the very system the person at the top benefits from denies the humanity of the oppressed. The person in power is giving lip service to freedom and equality but denying the humanity of the oppressed by how they live.

So to be clear: Peter is speaking from the bottom, to other people living under oppression. And Peter has a powerful message for them. He says, You don't live in a binary world. Your two options are not passive submission OR violent revolution.

That's how we see the world. Fight or Flight. Violence or passivity.

But throughout the letter, Peter has been writing to people who follow Jesus in a world that doesn't. Strangers in a strange land. And now he's pointing out that the slaves are in the same situation. The

experience of these Roman slaves *is* the experience of those first Christians. They are all-too-often at the mercy of forces much more powerful than they are, forces that care nothing for justice, freedom and equality.

Peter tells slaves to "submit to their masters" - the English word there sure sounds like passivity. But the Greek word is more nuanced. It carries a sense of being fully who you are. Inhabiting your role. Beyonce might say, "Feeling yourself."

Peter declares they are *already free* because they are free in Jesus. He reminds them that their identity, their behavior, isn't under the control of their masters. Rather, they can choose to live as God's children no matter their circumstance.

They can choose to follow Jesus no matter what - and they know from personal experience how transformative Jesus is.

Peter is blowing up the binary - it's not us vs them, slave vs master, passivity vs violence.

Again, if Peter were a master, this would be an oppressive text - and that's how it's been used by slavemasters and abusers throughout history. But to use this text to reinforce violence, injustice and oppression is to misuse the text.

We still might wish for more. We wish Peter had taken a stronger stand against slavery. But let's not miss what this text *is* doing. We love the big picture texts like Revelation, like some of Jesus' parables, that call out injustice and promise God is going to put it all right. These are prophetic texts. They invite us to step back from the real world and see what's going on behind the scenes, so to speak. When Dr. King said the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice, this is a prophetic word. The prophets give us the big picture so we can hang in there.

But we have to live in the real world. The world of systemic evil, of institutionalized racism, of violence, fear and abuse, of slavery (still today, there are more people in slavery than at any point in history).

While we need those prophetic words that promise these things won't last forever, we also need a pastoral word.

We need to know *how to live* while we wait for the end. 1 Peter is a pastoral letter. He is concerned to help these struggling Christians live day to day. To live with the reality of oppression and evil that they are helpless to change.

Peter's advice to them is: in all things, imitate Jesus. The suffering you face for following God is to be expected. Stay faithful. Keep your chin up. God has declared you a person, a child of heaven, a person of infinite worth. No one can call you otherwise.

So how do we heed Peter's pastoral advice today? Well that depends on where you are on the power map. If you're in a position of little power, then Peter's words to you are to be you. Don't apologize for who you are. Don't hide who you are. God has called you a child of Heaven. God has called you to be part of the Church, to play a vital role in the rescue of the world. God is raising you up.

If, like me, you're pretty high up on the map, then we need to hear Peter's words carefully. (I'm a pastor, I'm a white, straight male, I'm relatively young, I'm an American, I'm educated - all of these are sources of power.) But here too, Jesus is our model. When Jesus had ultimate power - as the second person of the Trinity, sitting on the throne of Heaven - he didn't hoard it. He didn't abuse. Rather, he shared. He gave up his power to become human, to become powerless. And he followed God's call all the way to the cross.

Those of us in power should be looking for how we can step down from power, how we can lift up other people. We must be sure we are not like those slavemasters using Peter's words to oppress.

Friends, we don't live in a binary world, where our only options are passivity or violence. We don't have to live in a world of us vs them, of powerful and oppressed. Jesus came to explode our categories, and it is by following his example that we all find life. Peter goes on to say of Jesus:

He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed. Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls. -- 1 Peter 2:21-25

Both the powerful and the oppressed are transformed at the foot of the cross. We are all made whole, freed from definitions imposed on us by the evil systems in which we live. And God calls us back into those systems, to be fully ourselves, the persons God created us to be and calls us into, that by following in Jesus' footsteps, we might transform them.

*The Matrix* is wrong. We don't live in a world of 1s and 0s. We're not binary people. And God has not come to prop up the powerful, to give us a pipe dream, pie in the sky to keep us happy while we are exploited.

Rather, God intends to free both the slave and the master. The oppressed and the oppressor. That begins for us here at the communion table.

All of us have some areas of our life where we are in positions of power (maybe in your home, in a relationship, at work). And we all have areas where we are in positions of weakness. We're never always a victim or always an oppressor.

If you think you're always a victim (say you are in a position of weakness at work - you have a bad boss), it's likely the case that in those places where you have power (say, at home), you will treat your family the way your boss treats you. Which isn't good.

On the other hand, if you never stop to acknowledge your weakness - say you put all your stock in being the head of your house, then it's easy to overlook people who are genuinely suffering, people God might be calling you to serve - a friend who is in pain or a coworker who needs some extra attention.

Like Jesus, we need to leave our cases in God's hands, to ask what is right for me to do, how I can follow Jesus in places of weakness *and* strength.

### **Communion**

[Communion Slide] God calls us all to the Communion table. The powerless find a powerless man faithfully following God's call, refusing to be silenced or shamed. The powerful find a God who gave up his position in heaven for the sake of those who had infinitely less...

### **Examen:**

1. Where in the last week have I lived into the person God is calling me to be?
2. Where in the last week have I been too passive? Where have I been too harsh?
3. Where in the next week might I be tempted to be too passive? Where might I be too harsh?
4. How can I act for justice this week the way Jesus acts for justice?

### **Assignment/Blessing**

Map your power, have a conversation about it.

We can be a different kind of religion, one that is good news for the powerful and the oppressed. We say no to abusers, enslavers and exploiters even as we call them to the life we've found in God.