

Face to the Rising Sun

**Reflections on
Spirituals and Justice**

Mark Francisco Bozzuti-Jones

**FORWARD MOVEMENT
Cincinnati, Ohio**

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Psalm passages are from the Psalter in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

© 2021 Forward Movement

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-88028-499-8

Printed in USA



**Forward
Movement**

inspire disciples. empower evangelists.

*Dedicated to Mark Anthony Francisco
and the Rev. Dr. Kathy Bozzuti-Jones*

*And to my mother,
Muriel Jestina Townsend,
who sang all these Spirituals to me*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 9 |
| <i>Those Knees</i> | 15 |
| DAY 1 —Nobody Knows the Troubles I've Seen | 17 |
| DAY 2 —Go Down, Moses | 23 |
| DAY 3 —Were You There When They Crucified My Lord? | 27 |
| DAY 4 —Let Us Break Bread Together | 31 |
| DAY 5 —Ride On, King Jesus | 35 |
| DAY 6 —Hold On | 39 |
| DAY 7 —Do Lord, Remember Me | 43 |
| <i>Knees On Our Lives</i> | 47 |
| DAY 8 —O Mary, Don't You Weep | 49 |
| DAY 9 —Come by Here, My Lord | 53 |
| DAY 10 —Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child | 57 |
| DAY 11 —Babylon, You Gone Down..... | 63 |
| DAY 12 —We Shall Overcome..... | 67 |
| DAY 13 —Steal Away..... | 73 |
| DAY 14 —This Little Light of Mine | 77 |
| <i>Just Because</i> | 81 |
| DAY 15 —Daniel Saw the Stone..... | 83 |
| DAY 16 —Swing Low, Sweet Chariot..... | 87 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| DAY 17—My Lord, What a Morning | 91 |
| DAY 18—Is There Anybody Here Who Loves My Jesus? | 95 |
| DAY 19—Every Time, I Feel the Spirit | 99 |
| DAY 20—Deep River | 103 |
| DAY 21—Surely He Died on Calvary | 107 |
| <i>Faith Sees</i> | 111 |
| DAY 22—Give Me Jesus | 113 |
| DAY 23—Down by the Riverside | 117 |
| DAY 24—It’s Me, O Lord | 121 |
| <i>This Feeling</i> | 125 |
| DAY 25—I Want to Be Ready | 127 |
| DAY 26—O, Freedom! | 131 |
| DAY 27—Ready | 137 |
| <i>Monument</i> | 141 |
| DAY 28—Key Man Lock the Door and Gone | 143 |
| DAY 29—O Bye and Bye, Bye and Bye | 147 |
| DAY 30—Never Get Weary Yet | 153 |
| DAY 31—I Want Jesus to Walk with Me | 157 |
| <i>Endure</i> | 162 |
| Acknowledgments | 163 |
| About the Author | 165 |
| About Forward Movement | 167 |

INTRODUCTION

In the sacrament of Holy Eucharist as we share in the Body and Blood of Christ, we always say words akin to these: “do this in memory of me.” To sing Spirituals is to sing in memory of the Slaves and their faith, to recall these songs sung for centuries and handed down to us today as part of the legacy of the African American culture.

In the Christian tradition, prayer and remembering is always a call to action, always a call to repentance, and always a call to redemptive living. When we sing the Spirituals today, we commit to living a life of prayer that ensures justice for all, a life that calls us to make amends for the evil of slavery, and a life that calls us to work against the forces of racism and discrimination still present in our societies today.

The words of these Spirituals resound through the centuries. Like the crucified Jesus on the cross, one can hear the Slaves crying out through the centuries the very words of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We hear Slaves demonstrate the cost of discipleship and a commitment to their faith in God “when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you” (Matthew 5:12).

These Spirituals offer a more revolutionary, prophetic, and radical view of Slaves’ faith than is often acknowledged. In truth, the Spirituals are credal statements uttered in the crucible of fire. Like the crucified Jesus on the cross, the Slaves through these Spirituals revealed the cruelty, horror, and sin of those who enslaved and crucified them. Slavery represents the crucifixion of the Slaves from Africa and their unwavering faith in God who did not abandon them. Tradition has it that Jesus uttered seven “words” on the cross; in the Spirituals we see the “seven words” of all the Slaves.

At the same time, the Spirituals express a deep and abiding faith, an understanding by Slaves that they were beloved children of

God, made in God's image. Unwilling to accept the limitations set by the slave masters, Slaves used song to express the love of God and God's desire for their freedom. Spirituals became code for sharing hope and the promise of a better future.

We hear this longing in the words of the Spiritual, "Let Us Break Bread Together." The Spiritual offers an image of equality as we come to the Lord's Table together, as one body, with our "face to the rising sun."

The Spirituals sung by Slaves have much to teach us today as we seek justice and a society of equality, freedom, and respect. The Spirituals arose in a time when Black lives did not matter, and their words echo on in the chants and protests today through the Black Lives Matter movement.

This movement calls our attention to the repeated killing of African Americans by police throughout the United States. Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd are just some of the names of those killed by police, oftentimes with no accountability. The Black Lives Matter movement insists we must work together, with urgency, for justice and equality, on our streets and in our schools, in our communities and our churches, and throughout our public lives.

These daily devotions, steeped in scripture and covered by prayer, ask us to examine the Spirituals as a way for us to learn and grow together. In pastoral letters, the Episcopal Church has called racism a "pervasive sin" and firmly and decidedly expressed its condemnation of slavery, racism, and all the effects that flow from these two realities. As a nation, as churches, and as people of faith, we are tasked with the necessary task of repentance in the area of racism.

Together we must face the sin and harm done to the Slaves and the hurt and pain that continue to impact the lives of African Americans because of systemic racism. The Episcopal Church,

the Roman Catholic Church, and many Christian and non-Christian religious groups have pledged to shed light on racism, name it, confront it, challenge it, and make amends for all the harm that slavery has caused, and racism continues to do.

As Christians, we seek forgiveness, make amends, and commit to social justice, change, and peace through and in our prayers. *Face to the Rising Sun* encourages the reader to put faith into action. For too long, many have believed that prayer is a passive activity. Now more than ever, we recognize the importance of practicing what we preach as we try to live in such a way to respect the dignity of every human being.

These Spirituals can serve as part of a covenant that we enter into with one another to stand up for justice and peace, eradicate racism, seek justice and peace, practice reconciliation, and give voice to words that further announce the reign of God's love. In truth, we are called to live and sing these Spirituals and our own Spirituals for today.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

These thirty-one meditations can be used daily throughout a month or over a longer period of time. One may use the book privately, with a spiritual director, or in a small group for prayerful conversation.

Read and/or Sing the Spiritual

Each day's meditation has a Spiritual. Read or sing the Spiritual. If you're unfamiliar with the tune or melody, search for it online. You can also visit forwardmovement.org/risingsun, which includes a playlist with the Spirituals. I chose the most common lyrics for the Spirituals, but as with songs handed down over the centuries, the words may be different in your memory. Sing them as you learned them, for they are prayers of the heart.

Each day, spend some time with the Spiritual. See how the Spiritual might be calling you to deepen your love of God and your commitment to respect the dignity of every human being.

There are three questions you could ask yourself independently of the questions provided:

- What does the Spiritual say about the experience of the Slaves?
- How might the Spiritual be calling you to learn something new about slavery and racism in America?
- How is the Spiritual inviting you to put your faith in action?

Read the Scriptures

How we read and interpret the Bible matters. We call the Bible the Word of God; however, it is how we live these words that demonstrate if they are the Word of God. For the Bible to truly be the word of God, there is a mandatory requirement of love. We must love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Slavery demonstrated a misreading of the Bible and a deliberate denial of biblical truths. Slavery stands as a reminder that the Christian community can remain deaf to the call of God, obstinate to the call of love, and contrary to the desires of God even while reading the Bible and claiming it as the Word of God.

Today, as we read the scriptures, we hope that our thoughts, words, and actions are more aligned with the Way of Love, God's call for us to love and respect each other. Reading the scriptures today invites us to a self-examination of our present reality and history. To read the scriptures today is to think about what our spiritual ancestors and spiritual contemporaries got wrong and continue to get wrong. How is it that we read the scriptures and fail to go in peace, to love and serve the Lord, and to be examples of God's love? Today when we read the Bible, we always have to ask ourselves if we are reading it with the heart and eyes of God.

How does our reading of the scriptures today lead us to justice, reconciliation, and truth?

The scriptures in this devotional book are chosen to help us think about our reaction to slavery and how we are called to love our neighbor and respect the dignity of every human being today. Indeed, the hope is that when we read the scriptures, we read them with a repentant heart and renewed commitment to God's light, love, and truth.

Ask yourself:

- How do these Bible passages call you to pay attention to justice and peace for all?
- What do these passages have to teach you about how to be God's presence in the world today?
- How do these passages call you to repentance and commitment to respect the dignity of every human being?

Read the Poems

Throughout the book, I included a number of poems I wrote that treat present-day issues of social injustice and the experience of racism in America today. I invite you to read them a few times, at any one sitting, and enter into dialogue with them, in a prayerful spirit. Notice how God speaks to you through them. Notice what emotions they invoke in you. They offer an opportunity for journaling, art response, and conversation. Here are some ways to engage with the poems prayerfully:

- Where do you find the voice of God in these poems?
- How do they relate to a question or struggle in your spiritual life?
- Is there an affirmation or insight among them that moves you to take action?

Spiritual Reflection and Commitment

The life of prayer is all about reflection and commitment. We pray daily in order to surrender ourselves to God's will and to commit to being messengers of good news in the world. As we respond to the ills of systemic racism, our prayers must lead to reflection, repentance, and commitment to living the good news.

For this section of the daily meditation, the invitation is to open one's mind, heart, and soul to what is being shared. See how the reflection calls you to a deeper understanding of the Spirituals, the experience of slavery, and a commitment to live a life that acknowledges the painful reality of slavery, ongoing racism, and a call to walk in the way of love.

* * *

The devotions are designed to provide a month of daily readings and reflection at any time of year. But my prayer is that this is not a book read once and discarded or put on a shelf to gather dust. I invite you to read and reread it, just as we do with scripture, making it a spiritual companion, finding new messages and deeper meaning with each reading. Moreover, this book can be a spirit-filled guide for a group study and prayer companion during the various liturgical seasons.

Let us not just sing the Spirituals but live the Spirituals.

May God bless and keep you always. May every day with the Spirituals be sweeter than the day before.

Those Knees

You have your knees on our lives
knees on our head
knees on our neck
knees on our chest
knees on our belly
knees on our groin
knees on our, those, private parts
knees on our backside
knees on our legs
knees on our feet
knees on our hands
knees on our flesh
knees on our bone
We can't breathe
We can't breathe (Lord, have mercy)
We can't breathe (Mama)
We can't breathe (Help)
We can't breathe (God, help me)
We can't breathe (Please)
We can't breathe (Stop)
We can't breathe—gasp, gasp, gasp, gasp
We won't take it anymore
We want to live
Even with our dying breath, we know,
you cannot kneel on our soul
We will live. Remove your knees.

Nobody Knows the Troubles I've Seen

*Nobody knows the troubles I've seen.
Nobody knows but Jesus.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
Glory, Alleluia.*

*Sometimes, I'm up.
Sometimes, I'm down (oh, yes, Lord).
Sometimes, I'm almost
To the ground (oh, yes, Lord).*

*Nobody knows the troubles I've seen.
Nobody knows but Jesus.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
Glory, Alleluia.*

*If you get there before I do (oh, yes, Lord),
Tell all my friends, I'm coming too (oh, yes, Lord).
Nobody knows the troubles I've seen.
Nobody knows but Jesus.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
Glory, Alleluia.*

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 37:12-28

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Psalm 1:1-3

Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful! Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and they meditate on his law day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

“Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve Seen” is one of the most haunting of Spirituals. *Nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen.* As a child, I thought the line went like this: “Nobody knows the troubles I feel.” Seen or felt, there are many troubles for African Americans in the United States. From the time most of their ancestors arrived as Slaves over four hundred years ago to the present, African Americans have felt and seen too many troubles.

African American history has been marked by troubles from slavery, through periods of segregation, the fight for civil rights, and present-day racism and discrimination. We have seen troubles—the unimaginable and painful troubles of slavery’s legacy. The Slaves sang of their troubles—the dehumanizing treatments meted out to them. They had to fight for their freedom and struggle to assert their humanity.

That the cries of the Slaves have been called Spirituals is a lesson in itself. There is no denying that the Slaves from Africa came with their own spiritual lives. African history, anthropology, and religious studies point to a deep commitment and awareness of the “spirit.” Slaves were spiritual beings and spiritually aware.

Our gospel reading reminds us to notice the behavior of the good Samaritan. Note how the Samaritan responds to the suffering of the person who was robbed and nearly beaten to death, while the legal and religious experts of the day ignored his suffering. Now more than ever, the church, the country, and all spiritual people are called to attend to those who have been robbed and wounded along the paths of life. African Americans and all who support justice and equality urge us to respond to those most in need of mercy in our society.

It is no small wonder that the Slaves identified easily with the suffering of Jesus. They saw in his agony, sorrow, and suffering something akin to what they were going through. What they heard

about Jesus and what they learned about his suffering and the cross convinced them that Jesus understood the unjust suffering they endured. Nobody knows but Jesus.

SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT

- Reread the Spiritual. How might God be calling you to know more about the past and present troubles of African Americans?
- Spend some time reading Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" or the book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*.
- The psalm appointed for today speaks about crying out from the depths. Hear yourself read it aloud. Pray for the grace to listen more deeply to the African American experience.
- How is God calling you to be a good Samaritan?
- What do these scriptures have to teach us about a Christian response to the reality of African Americans?

Go Down, Moses

*When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go*

Refrain:

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land.
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.*

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 3:1-12

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account

of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

Psalm 5:1-3

Give ear to my words, O Lord; consider my meditation. Hearken to my cry for help, my King and my God, for I make my prayer to you. In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; early in the morning I make my appeal and watch for you.

Luke 10:25-28

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

“Go Down, Moses” is one of the best-known Spirituals. It has tremendous relevance for our country today, because we need a new Moses. Truth be told, we need a band of prophets like Moses. African Americans live in a society where their rights are ignored and where systemic racism prevents them from having access to health care, meaningful work, safe housing, and proper educational opportunities. The story of Moses delivering the people of Israel out of Egypt and freeing them from slavery assured the Slaves that God would also deliver them.

How do we live the call to love God and neighbor in response to these injustices? Jesus has commanded it. The call to love is required of us and is as urgent today as ever. To love our neighbors is to love God; love of God is expressed in justice, not in racism or discrimination. The God we meet in Jesus Christ is a God who reminds us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Love is expressed in liberating justice. African Americans seek to be liberated from the effects of racism that cause them to die before their time, often dying at the hands of the very police who should protect them.

Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter. If we know anything about God, it is that those who are most in need and most oppressed matter to God. In the United States of America today, our Black and Brown brothers and sisters are murdered at a higher rate and in more brutal ways by the police than any other group.

The Black Lives Matter movement began in response to continued killing of Black men and women by the police. Oftentimes, these police officers have been acquitted, leaving the Black families and the wider population to wonder: Where is the justice for the Black population in the United States? On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed, as an arresting police officer knelt on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Floyd cried out for his mother

and screamed that he could not breathe. This did not move the policeman or prompt four of his colleagues to come to Floyd's aid. Instead, Floyd died with a knee on his neck. The whole incident was captured on video. His death reminded America of a similar cry from Eric Garner, who died on July 17, 2014, on Staten Island, who screamed the same words before he died from a policeman's chokehold, "I can't breathe."

Our Christian call is one in which we must participate in the liberation of all peoples; we must ensure that all of us can breathe. The words from the Spiritual, "oppressed so hard they could not stand. Let my people go," remind us of the call to be agents of liberation.

SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT

- Reread the Spiritual. How might God be sending you out to be part of the liberation of African Americans?
- What do the words, "I can't breathe" stir up in your soul?
- What do you believe the deaths of Eric Garner and George Floyd have to teach us about being a just society?
- What do these scriptures have to teach us about a Christian response to Black Lives Matter?
- How do you think God might be calling you to "Let my people go?"