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Church of St. Benedict
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First Sunday of Lent, Black History Month
Genesis 2:15-16, 3:1-7; James Cone

When I was in eighth grade, during a lesson on slavery in American history, I was thinking about how many slaves there were on the large plantations, and how hard they worked, and how strong they must have been, and I raised my hand and asked my history teacher, Ms. Edwards, why all the slaves never revolted or fought back.

She was a short, stout black woman, with a cloud of hair around her face, large glasses, and a gruff face. But she loved her students, and she always took us seriously and gave us her best.

And because of that she looked at me, and she looked at the class, which at the school I went to was about 95% black, and she said, "Well, Heidi, but they DID fight back. They DID."

I was a middle school kid at the time, and I was so very embarrassed, like I shouldn't even have asked the question. That's part of why I still remember that moment.

I've since learned about slave uprisings, like ones led by Nat Turner and John Brown, and hundreds of smaller revolts from New York City to the Caribbean to Mexico. Of course they fought back, but that wasn't something mentioned much in the descriptions of slavery I'd ever had before.

But asking that question was very important, for me, as a white child, and for my whole class.

It hurt so much to get the answer that I still feel my cheeks turn pink when I remember it.

And it took away some of my childhood innocence to hear the answer.

I was a white child who didn't know much about race, although I'd gone to an almost all black school since I was in first grade.

I could feel that Ms. Edwards had gotten because of the question I'd asked, and part of me felt that this was unfair, but part of me also felt like there was more that I needed to know.

And that day, I think I began to really understand that there were things I didn't understand about what it meant to be black.

But I was too embarrassed to ask more questions then.

And I think of Adam and Eve in the Garden,
and the questions they must have wanted to ask God.

And when they decided to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil,
I'm not sure it's that they messed everything up for the rest of us,
so much as they behaved in a very human way.

Becoming a mature adult, a mature Christian, or a mature American citizen,
is about learning more.

And learning is usually painful in some way, especially learning about things
that really matter the things that will make us better people,

better Americans, and better followers of Jesus.

Adam and Eve didn't want to remain babes in the woods.

They wanted to be more like God – they wanted to know about Good and Evil; they wanted to see more of the world than just Paradise.

And although their choice led to many painful things, including life lived at a greater distance from God,

perhaps they learned more about who God is than they would've if they'd remained ignorant and blissful in the Garden.

God is God of the whole world, God is a God who knows Good and Evil.

If we want to know God,

I wonder if we need to try to know more about what God knows.

This year, this is my understanding of what Lent means.

We are asked to take special time to pray, to give up alcohol, sugar, coffee, or meat, or to deny ourselves in some way.

Not to punish ourselves or think about how bad we are,

but because struggle helps us understand who God is.

James Cone, in the reading from his book we heard today,

tells us that struggle and suffering have defined the black religious tradition in America.

If we think about spirituals, the blues, and the prayers and sermons of many black preachers...

they all express a relationship with God that comes out of deep struggle and emotion.

The Black American religious experience is a painful, grievous and yet precious gift to all of us.

And Black History is American History.

And the black American religious experience is a strong and influential part of American religious experience as a whole.

Black people have been in America since the very beginnings of this country, and they were a vital part of the founding of our economy, our Constitution, and our culture.

And although it may be painful to learn more about what that means sometimes – because of racism, because of the history of slavery, because there are more young black men in prison or dead than there are alive and working out in the world – it's worth it, because understanding Black History in America teaches us more about who we are, no matter who we are, and more about who God is.

And I think of James Cone's words from the reading today,

“suffering that arises in the context of struggle for freedom is liberating because it is a sign of Jesus' presence in our midst.”

Adam and Eve in the Garden experienced that,

Jesus out in the desert, talking with the Devil, experienced it,
Black Americans, as they have struggled to be considered equal as persons and
as a culture.

James Cone tells us that suffering that arises in the struggle for freedom is
liberating, that it brings us closer to Christ.

In Lent, we are not invited to suffer for the sake of suffering.

We are not invited into discomfort or self-control or self-denial to punish
ourselves.

We are being invited to learn something new about who Jesus is
and who God is.

“Suffering that arises in the context of struggle for freedom is liberating because it
is a sign of Jesus’ presence in our midst.”

This Lent, I invite you into some struggle. I invite you to ask God questions about
yourself that might make you uncomfortable.

This Lent, I invite you to ask questions about the history of black people in
America, even though it may make you uncomfortable.

This Lent, I invite you to ask questions about the suffering of people in other
parts of the world, and to consider how you might make a difference in their lives.

God invites us to deeper knowledge of ourselves, of Good and Evil,
about who God is and of the way we should live.

And deeper knowledge doesn't come without cost or discomfort.

Like me and Ms. Edwards. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden.

Like Jesus, who heard the Devil talking to him, and faced him down.

This Lent, seek to leave your innocence behind.

Seek to become mature in your relationship with God.

Seek to know more about what God knows.

Don't avoid people who are in pain.

Walk in the way of the cross.

because **suffering that arises in the context of struggle for freedom is liberating...**

and know that Jesus will be in our midst.

Amen.