

“Good News for Those with Their Backs Against the Wall”
Luke 4:14–30 | Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*

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Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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The First Sunday in Black History Month
Holy Communion
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Some of you may recall the reading of Howard Thurman’s important book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, sponsored by the Presbytery of the Western Reserve at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023.

This was an important and laudatory effort on the part of the presbytery to provide theological education for members of local churches and not just for Teaching Elders. Perhaps some of you participated.

My online group consisted of never more than six of us, including our facilitator. But numbers don’t tell the whole story, however, and I remain grateful to the presbytery leadership for providing us with the opportunity to read and discuss a profoundly significant work of theology for the church, Black and White, and for those engaged in the Civil Rights struggle that took its definitive shape just a few years after Thurman’s book was published in 1949.

I felt when we first read it and still feel today that Thurman’s book deserved a wider reading than it received a few years ago, especially in predominantly White congregations, and even though our small group discussions were very meaningful. And so I’d like to base my sermons during Black History Month on Scripture, as I always do, and informed by Thurman’s book, which is in turn deeply informed by those same Scriptures.

And so we begin with the scene preserved for us by the evangelist Luke of the start of Jesus’ public ministry, when he returns to his hometown of Nazareth and preaches **to** those and **for** those, in Thurman’s famous phrase, with their backs against the wall.

When Jesus walked into the synagogue, “as was his custom,” Luke tells us, hope walked into the room. Jesus was a Jew, and the Jews in Nazareth, as in all of Syria-Palestine at the time, were under Roman occupation. They were, in the context of the Roman empire, an oppressed minority. Jesus was a member of that oppressed minority

group, and relatively few Christians have taken note of this fact about the historical Jesus, including those Christians who profess to follow in Jesus' way. As Howard Thurman says on the opening page of his book:

Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak. This is a matter of tremendous significance, for it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples (pp. 1-2).

Not only was Jesus a member of the persecuted group of Jews in Syria-Palestine at the turn of the era, in point of fact, Jesus was a rising star in that oppressed group, as Luke tells us in the opening verses of today's reading: "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues and everyone praised him" (vv. 14-15).

Jesus was becoming a celebrity, a precursor to the TV evangelists we're all familiar with. And if you want to know why Presbyterian pastors are called Teaching Elders and why UCC pastors are installed as Pastor and Teacher of their congregation, there's your answer: before Jesus was anything else, he was a teacher. His Jewish faith, his religious tradition, had content that needed passing on, discussing, debating, interpreting, and even reinterpreting – which is what eventually got Jesus into a great deal of trouble.

And it didn't take long.

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Jesus and, according to Luke's retelling of the event, Jesus read from two places in Isaiah, from chapters 58 and 61. And then he sat down and everyone waited for what was coming next. "The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him," Luke says.

And why wouldn't they be? This was Joseph's son, after all, the carpenter's son, and not someone who would ordinarily know how to read, let alone interpret a religious text in public. So when Jesus began his sermon by saying, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," people were rightly amazed at those gracious words and whatever else Jesus put around them.

That's what Jesus' people wanted to hear, that God was going to free them from the yoke of Roman oppression, and perhaps this charismatic young man from their little

town of Nazareth was going to be the leader of the revolt. The congregation in the synagogue was all ears and all in.

Until they weren't.

Until Jesus went in a different direction – a very different direction. Instead of telling folks what they wanted to hear, he told them what they needed to hear, namely, that while they loved hearing a prophet go on and on about all the ways God was going to do great things for them by doing bad things to their enemies, they hated it when that same prophet turned the word of the Lord in their own direction and pointed out all the ways in which the oppressed acted like oppressors. Then the prophet was no longer welcome. When the prophet goes from preaching to meddling, as the saying goes, people get angry, and they want to shut that prophet up.

And that's exactly what happened next. Suddenly, when Jesus pointed out how stubbornly Israel had resisted its own prophets during the time of Elijah – so stubbornly that God allowed the prophet to work miracles only among foreigners – everybody in the synagogue became furious and they tried to shut prophet Jesus up by throwing him off a cliff. Jesus escaped – that time – but Luke has pulled back the curtain on Jesus' life and ministry and shown us a preview of things to come.

People do not want to hear that they have created a society which bakes oppression into daily life. They want prisoners to stay prisoners, they want those under the heel of their collective boot to stay down, and they don't want to spend their hard-earned tax dollars on programs for the poor, the other-abled, or the not respectable. They don't, in other words – in Howard Thurman's words – want to hear their sovereign savior tell them that he came for those with their backs against the wall.

It makes us respectable religious folk furious to think that Jesus didn't come exclusively or even primarily for us. But as Jesus himself said, we already have our reward. We already have the good things of this life. Jesus came to point out to us all the ways in which, through our embeddedness in and complicity with systems of injustice, we deny those good things to others.

Those good things of God's creation belong to everyone – that's the message of the story of Eden – but we have ordered our lives together in such a way that those who can take more than they need or can ever use do so, leaving others with less than they need and less than they deserve. In other words, by our inborn self-centeredness – remember, there is no such thing as an altruistic baby – by our self-centeredness, we disinherit others. They are the disinherited in the title of Thurman's book, and, Thurman and many others have said, Jesus came for them.

So where does that leave us, we who have inherited our reward?

It leaves us with a choice, the choice of following Jesus or following the world. And, after two thousand years, Christianity has become so co-opted by the ways of the world that many people draw a clear distinction between Jesus and Christianity, as Thurman does in his book. Indeed, it was the stark contrast between the lifestyle and teachings of Jesus, on the one hand, and the practices of professing Christians, on the other, that planted the seed in Thurman's mind to write *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

It's no news to anyone in this service that many people have left organized religion, Christianity specifically, over the past seventy or so years, and I think we all know why. It's the problem Thurman identified: Christians binding themselves so closely to an established social, political, and economic empire that it is impossible to tell a Christian from anyone else. This was the problem Jesus saw among his own religious people in their accommodation to the ways of the Roman empire: too many of the oppressed were looking and sounding like their Roman oppressors. The Jewish people at the time of Jesus weren't bad people; they were good people accommodating themselves to a bad regime in order to survive.

How closely, do you think, that sounds like us? How much of what we're seeing in the brutalizing of powerless people is our own panicked reaction to the waning of the American century?

Yes, there's a great deal else involved in our current ugly moment – racism, classism, patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, and a slew of other deplorables – but at the foundation of the ghastly treatment of a powerless minority by our government is the fear that the established order is at risk: that the haves may not keep their power to enrich themselves at the expense of the have-nots. And a majority of American Christians – 56% of those who voted – voted to put the current regime in place, knowing full well that the ramifications of doing so would be to tilt the playing field of wealth and power even further in the direction of the haves. Project 2025 was no secret.

We observe Black History Month in this church not simply to hold up Black leaders like Howard Thurman and Maya Angelou, from whom we'll hear after worship, but also to hear what those Black voices are telling all of us about the ways some of us are treating others of us. We look to these thinkers and leaders – theologians, philosophers, mystics, poets, novelists, essayists, playwrights, painters, sculptors, activists, clergy, teachers, and so many others – to help us orient ourselves as Jesus would have us order our lives – caring for the vulnerable, welcoming the stranger and outcast, and transgressing artificial and hurtful boundaries. Howard Thurman stands in

that prophetic tradition of which Jesus was a part, of looking at our faith and our lives from the perspective of the underside of history, listening for and to those marginalized voices of anguish and outrage amidst the centralized, monetized, commercialized soothing murmurs of “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

Forest Hill Church is a Matthew 25 Congregation, dedicated to revitalizing its life by working to dismantle structural racism and eradicate systemic poverty. Those are lofty goals and big-ticket items and they are both dedicated to restoring the inheritance of God’s abundant creation to those disinherited by the way we have chosen to accept our customs, write our laws, and normalize injustice.

That sounds like bad news; here’s the good news, the good news of the gospel: having chosen the way of the world, we always have the option of choosing a different way, a better way, the way of Jesus. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free,” Paul wrote to the Galatians, and that freedom is our supreme gift as Christians. Jesus showed us, at the cost of his life, that all of us have the power to choose to side with the disinherited, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, even the disappeared. How many members of Haitian families in Springfield, Ohio, my hometown, will disappear as ICE launches its next assault against immigrant communities? This coming Tuesday, there will be an online meeting at 8:30 p.m. to discuss ways to support the people of Springfield, and Racial Equity Buddies will be participating in that meeting; for more information, contact Quentin Smith.

Jesus showed us that that selfishness does not have to determine our choices. It will doubtless, from time to time, corrupt our decision-making, but it does not have to determine the arc of our lives.

Dr. King, echoing the 19th-century abolitionist Theodore Parker, said that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice, and the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ show that each and every one of us is free to align the arc of our own lives with that universal, moral arc. Yes, we are sinners, one and all and we always will be, but we are sinners who have been redeemed, and aligning our lives with the heart of love that beats at the center of the universe – aligning our lives with God, in other words – is what our redemption is for, in this world and in any world to come.

That is the good news that Jesus came preaching – for us, for everyone, and especially for those with their backs against the wall.

Tab 2

Below is a **cohesive four-week February sermon series** for **Black History Month**, designed for **Luke 4:14–30** as the anchoring text and **Howard Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited*** as the theological lens. The series moves deliberately from **naming the condition of disinheritance**, to **Jesus’ liberating mission**, to **the backlash against that mission**, and finally to **the spiritual discipline required to endure and resist**.

Each sermon is calibrated for **~12 minutes**, with clear internal logic and thematic progression so the congregation experiences the month as a single theological argument rather than four stand-alone talks.

February Series Title

“With Their Backs Against the Wall”

Jesus, Black History, and the Gospel of Survival

Week One: “A Gospel Born Under Pressure”

Text: Luke 4:14–21

Thurman focus: *The Disinherited and the Meaning of Religion*

Central Claim

The gospel of Jesus is not neutral truth spoken from comfort; it is survival truth spoken under pressure.

Movement Outline

1. **Nazareth as a Colonized Town**
 - Rome in the background; scarcity in daily life.
 - Jesus speaks as one shaped by domination.
2. **Jesus Chooses Isaiah—Not Abstraction, but Address**
 - Poor, captive, blind, oppressed.
 - Religion as lifeline, not ornament.
3. **Black History Parallel**
 - Enslaved Africans reading Scripture through bondage.
 - Faith forged where survival was at stake.
4. **Thurman’s Insight**
 - Religion matters most to those denied safety, dignity, and power.

Closing Move

Name Black faith as a tradition that recognized Jesus before Jesus was respectable.

Week Two: “Good News Has a Location”

Text: Luke 4:21–23

Thurman focus: *Jesus as a Member of an Oppressed Minority*

Central Claim

Good news is never abstract; it always lands somewhere—and it usually lands first among the disinherited.

Movement Outline

1. **“Today This Scripture Is Fulfilled”**
 - Liberation is present tense, not deferred.
2. **The Crowd’s Demand for Proof**
 - “Do here what we heard you did elsewhere.”
 - Desire for benefits without transformation.
3. **Historical Parallel**
 - America’s selective embrace of Black leadership.
 - Celebration without surrender.
4. **Thurman’s Warning**
 - Power resists a gospel that reorders worth.

Closing Move

Ask: When the gospel names a location, do we rejoice—or recoil?

Week Three: “When Liberation Offends”

Text: Luke 4:24–28

Thurman focus: *Fear, Deception, and Hatred*

Central Claim

The gospel turns dangerous when it exposes entitlement and crosses forbidden boundaries.

Movement Outline

1. **Elijah and Elisha Crossing Lines**
 - God's mercy bypasses insiders.
2. **Why Nazareth Explodes**
 - Chosenness reframed as responsibility.
3. **Black History Echo**
 - The backlash against Reconstruction, Civil Rights, and Black freedom movements.
 - Justice framed as threat.
4. **Thurman's Analysis**
 - Hatred as the last refuge of threatened power.

Closing Move

Name backlash not as failure, but as confirmation that liberation is real.

Week Four: “The Freedom They Cannot Kill”

Text: Luke 4:29–30

Thurman focus: *Love and the Discipline of the Spirit*

Central Claim

Oppression cannot destroy a people who refuse to internalize fear, hatred, or despair.

Movement Outline

1. **From Sermon to Lynching Attempt**
 - Violence as response to truth.
2. **Jesus Passing Through the Crowd**
 - Not domination, not surrender—freedom.
3. **Black Spiritual Resilience**
 - Spirituals, prayer, organizing, endurance.
 - Survival without soul-death.
4. **Thurman's Final Word**
 - Love as resistance, not sentiment.

Series Conclusion

Good news for those with their backs against the wall does not promise safety—but it creates people who cannot be erased.

Optional Enhancements (if helpful)

- Communion each week framed as **shared survival**
- Testimonies or brief historical readings before sermons
- Visual timeline connecting Luke 4 to Black history moments

If you'd like, I can next:

- Write **full manuscripts for all four weeks**
- Align the series with the **Revised Common Lectionary**
- Add **litanies or calls to worship** that reinforce each theme