

SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

SESSION FOUR STUDY GUIDE



SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

SESSION 4: TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE AND SLAVERY: EXPLORING BLACK HISTORY

To watch beforehand or in the session

- PBS series: *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Episode I: “The Black Atlantic: 1500-1800” (56 min.)
- *Truth and Reconciliation Pilgrimage to Ghana*, three short videos featuring Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, the Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers, and Bishop Andrew Waldo (23 min. total, or as many as you have time for)

To read beforehand

- Article: “New England’s Hidden History” by Francie Latour in *The Boston Globe*
- Essay: “White Man’s Guilt” by James Baldwin in *Ebony* magazine
- Core book: *Jesus and the Disinherited* – first part of Chapter I (up to paragraph that starts “In the face of these alternatives...,” on p. 17 of 1996 paperback edition)
- Core book: *Waking Up White* – Chapter II

Session themes and overview from the author

The episode “The Black Atlantic” from Henry Louis Gates’ series *The African Americans* portrays many fundamentals of the history of the enslavement of Africans. He explains the calculated shift in the English colonies from Africans’ working as indentured servants alongside European indentured servants to a newly constructed idea of lifelong and hereditary status as enslaved, and attaching that to notions of a black race (which we know from Session 2 is a fiction). He also discusses the loaded subject of African complicity in enslavement, sharing important research and perspectives.

Francie Latour’s article reveals the many ways in which the North was complicit in slavery. Additionally, even the Midwest was implicated, as it served as the breadbasket of the South, feeding the free and enslaved populations, since Southern land was focused on cash crops like cotton. In remarks at a conference on slavery, Ta-Nehisi Coates observed, “Slavery wasn’t just a bump in the road; it *was* the road.” It was foundational to the birth and prosperity of this nation.

Slavery depended not just on the people (like my ancestors) who were willing to conduct the most evil aspects of the system, such as slave trading, but also on “good people” who participated in more mundane ways, such as through indirect occupations (rope makers, barrel makers, small scale farmers, etc.) or as consumers. The web of economic complicity involved pretty much everyone. Please let this raise questions for you about the ways in which most of us participate in harmful systems in the present day.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, “Ultimately evil is done not so much by evil people, but by good people who do not know themselves and who do not probe deeply.” His well-known book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* examines this idea.

This session focuses not just on what the facts of slavery were and how it was made possible, but also on what it means to try to come to terms with such a massive atrocity – one that, like Native American genocide, defies our ability to comprehend. The short videos from an Episcopal Church pilgrimage to Ghana offer the heartfelt responses of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, the Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers, and Bishop Andrew Waldo to visiting the historic slave forts there. If some of you in the dialogue circle are of African descent, your personal testimonies and family stories during this session will be central to the walking of this sacred ground.

In Session 9, there will be readings from Dr. Joy DeGruy and the Rev. David Pettee/ Susan Hutchison as well as a film that will help you further explore the multigenerational psychological legacies of slavery, and of racism more broadly. And in Session 10, there will be a short film that portrays some of the process The Episcopal Church has gone through (and is still going through) to reckon with its complicity in slavery.

James Baldwin’s essay, “White Man’s Guilt,” speaks to European Americans’ tendency to distance ourselves from blame. See how you respond to his image of the pinned butterfly, or the mirror. There is a sardonic expression: “The Germans will never forgive the Jews for the Holocaust.” Edward Ball (*Slaves in the Family*) adapted that to say, “White Americans will never forgive black Americans for slavery.” Black presence is a perpetual reminder of white guilt. I remember when I first noticed the feelings that arise in me when a black stranger enters a room. Before he or she has even uttered a word, I’m having feelings of wanting to be liked and to be forgiven. For others, it may be defensiveness, self-consciousness, nervousness, etc. It is as if the history hovers perpetually between white and black Americans, whether we are fully conscious of it or not.

What might it mean for European Americans to come from a place of grief and not guilt or defensiveness? Harking back to Tad Hargrave’s piece on the five stages of grief, what would healthy grief look like? Our society does not create many spaces for public grief. What forms might you create? What is the role of the church family? Of ritual? Please consider reading (ahead of time, or during this session as a handout) the writing on lament by Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill in the “Religious Resources” section (or save it for one of the next two sessions). The Episcopal Diocese of New York intentionally designated 2018 as a Year of Lamentations “to learn about, reflect on, and mourn the diocese’s involvement and complicity in the institution of slavery.”