Lent as a white Christian during Black History Month

By Robert L. Foster
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Lent is early this year, so it coincides with Black History Month for a full 18 days.

This overlap of sacred and secular calendars proves doubly sacred for Christians in the U.S. The sacred journey of Lent leads us to the cross—at the end of Jesus' life of healing ministry and preaching good news to the poor. The sacred journey of Black History Month leads us to the lynching tree—as well as to African American innovators such as the man who developed modern blood storage and transfusion.

Filmmaker Christine Herbes-Sommers notes that people resist conversations about race because "white people don't want to feel more guilty and black people don't want to feel more angry." For white Christians on the Lenten journey, however, Black History Month might nudge us to reflect on these feelings of guilt and to see where they lead.

The imposition of ashes at Lent's beginning asks us for a radical realism about ourselves. Susan R. Andrews describes ancient Eastern monasteries that collected the skulls of dead monks in a room where the monks and visitors could see them. They seemed to feel that a clear sense of impending death would aid their spiritual journey. We too need to bring our skeletons into the open, to reflect soberly on our lives and the need for transformation.

This might include reading the report of the U.N. Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its visit to the U.S. in January. The group's recommendations include the "profound need to acknowledge that the transatlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity and among the major sources and manifestations of racism." We might also read Ta-Nehesi Coates's *Between the World and Me*—or *Brown Girl Dreaming,* Jacqueline Woodson's poetic memoir of growing up in South Carolina during the Civil Rights era. I myself am experiencing an important sobriety about my own United Methodist denomination by reading about

the history of a powerful evangelical rhetoric that ran alongside the preaching of the Curse of Ham story in Genesis as a justification of slavery.

These skeletons serve as sobering reminders. Mothers weeping for their dead children today echo the mothers weeping for their four girls in 1963, whose tears flow into the river of mourning of so many black mothers of murdered children. Here's Woodson's remembrance of her grandfather's thoughts on the marches in South Carolina and elsewhere:

> First they brought us here.
> Then we worked for free. Then it was 1963,
> And we were supposed to be free but we weren't.

It reminds me that black people exploited for cheap labor today carry the same burden as those who Marched on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, whose wearied bodies fall exhausted alongside hundreds of thousands of exploited slaves.

It makes sense that we white people don't want to feel more guilty. But the facts tell us that more unarmed black youths die at the end of guns shot by white police officers, that white students of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity chanted racist slurs. And too often white pundits explain to their audiences that racism does not exist anymore, that people play the race card to create a deeper divide in our society.

Lent, however, calls for sober reflection on reality—for dealing with this guilt head-on in a season of repentance that leads to resurrection. Repentance means soberly considering our past and present, and turning toward resurrection life with the power of God to participate in the transformation of the world.

It seems to me that when white guilt proves problematic it's because we don't move from guilt toward an end that looks like resurrection life. What if we looked at the unequal experience of poverty in black communities and then moved to tutor a student? What if we witnessed the deaths of our black brothers and sisters and then partnered with black communities to reform the criminal justice system? What if we soberly viewed the legacy of slavery and then took steps to motivate more people to work for liberty and justice for all?

Such acts are not about assuaging guilt. Rather, they represent steps passing through death to resurrection life. We end the Lenten season at Easter, where we remember our baptism. We remember the sacrament by which we die to ourselves to walk in newness of life, no longer slaves to sin but alive to God and God’s just purposes (Romans 6).

The Lenten journey lies ahead. I hope it can be a journey of sober reflection on the skeletons of our past—and movement toward resurrection life, working for racial justice by the same power that God used to raise Jesus Christ from the dead.