

Christmas hope beyond our fears

I suspect the police officer who shot Walter Scott, and the jurors at his trial, were shaped similarly to how I was as a child in North Carolina.

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Several times in the last week, I've found myself wide awake in the middle of the night, struggling to make sense of the hung jury in the trial of the former police officer who shot an unarmed Walter Scott. There is video showing Scott being shot in the back as he runs away. If that is not enough to convict, what is?

If you did not pay attention to the trial, one key moment was when the former police officer took the stand and said that Scott's actions left him so fearful that he had no choice but to shoot. And some jurors accepted that argument.

Fear of black men has deep roots in American culture, especially in the South. In colonial South Carolina, there was reason to fear slave revolts. When you oppress someone, they may well try to undo that oppression. They may even simply want to make you pay for it.

When slavery finally ended, oppression did not. Former slaves and their descendants were "kept in their place" by all manner of laws and customs, and so fear was still warranted. To make matters worse, all this was wedded to the Christianity practiced by whites, particularly white southerners.

This fear of blacks did not simply go away as legal discrimination came to an end. I was an eighth grader in Charlotte, North Carolina, when the courts ordered a bussing plan to end segregation in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Many white students left for private schools, an option I never heard discussed in my home. That may have been because my parents were fairly progressive on racial issues. It may

also have been because my family didn't have the means to put four children in private school.

Regardless, I clearly recall events early in the start of my ninth grade year when the school lines had again been redrawn to comply with the court, necessitating my attending a third junior high school in as many years. That this school was a formerly black school in a black neighborhood did not seem to bother my parents. My mother had volunteered in the Head Start program at the next door elementary school, after all. But then something happened that was too much for my mother.

The bus that picked me and my brother up as the new school year began was nearly full when it came by my home out in the sparsely populated "country." And almost every other child on the bus was black. It made me nervous, and it must have terrified my mother. She got onto the bus and had words with the driver. She and a few other white parents were soon on the phone to school officials and soon the bus route was changed. There were still black students on my bus, but they were a minority, allaying my and my mother's fears.

I don't know, but I suspect the police officer who shot Walter Scott was shaped by the same fears I learned as a child. No doubt some of the jurors at his trial were as well. It would be nice to think that the fear I experienced in junior high was a thing of the past, but events keep reminding us that is not so.

As I think about all this, I am troubled by how seldom I have heard the church I grew up in address fear and race and privilege. The churches of my youth, much like my parents, were not racist in any overt way. Some reached out to develop relationships with black congregations. Still, I don't recall ever hearing a sermon addressing the evils of racism, much less one taking on the white privilege that so advantaged me and my fellow congregants. I can't recall a critique of a culture that defined itself by white standards, a culture that was unnerved by too much blackness in much the same way I was unnerved as a 14 year old getting on a school bus.

And now, as we move deeper into Advent and closer to Christmas, many would like to forget about the bitterness of the recent election. Many would like to focus on joy and peace and goodwill. But if we are listening at all to the prophets who herald a Messiah, we realize that their promises are connected to scathing critique of oppressive systems in their day. If we pay attention to the stories connected to Jesus' birth, we will see the powerful lashing out in fear and killing the innocent.

If there is real and meaningful hope to be found at Christmas, it is not located in the warmth of nostalgia or gathered families, as wonderful as those things may be. It is to be found in the assurance that God enters into human history on the side of the poor and the weak and the oppressed. And even if the church too often forgets that, too often aligns itself with the powerful and with fear, God does not. Not if the Christmas story is true. God, I hope it is true.

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