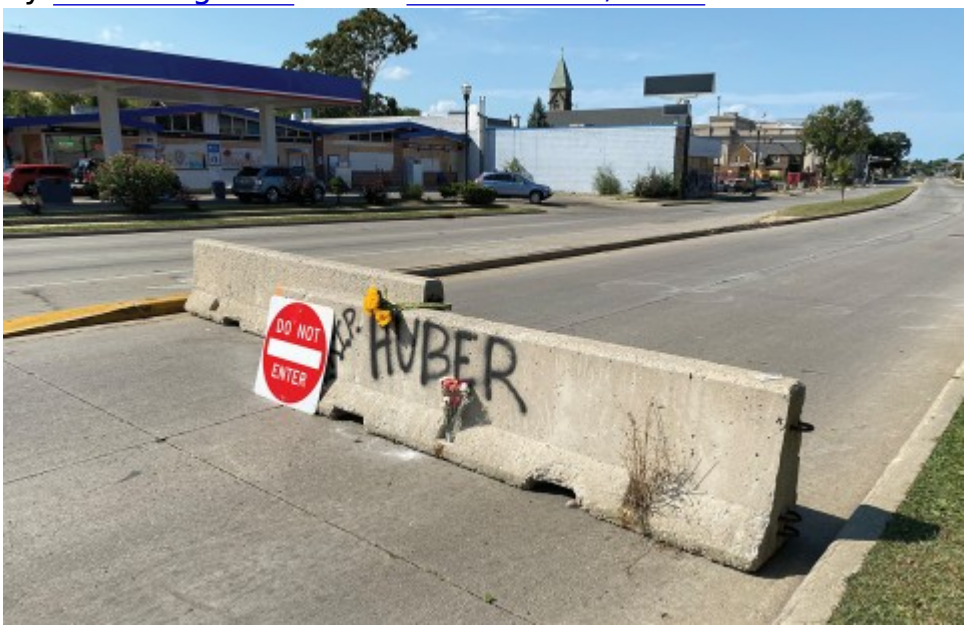
I was afraid to protest in Kenosha, but my parishioner needed me

# The city felt like it had been sucker punched.

by Matt Fitzgerald in the November 4, 2020 issue




A makeshift memorial to Anthony Huber in Kenosha, Wisconsin (Photo by lightburst via Creative Commons license)

The day before the president's visit to Kenosha, Wisconsin, I got a call from a church member named Philip. He said, "I'm going to protest. Do you want to come with me?"

I took a breath and paused to think it over. Then I lied and said yes.

I didn't want to go because two people were shot and killed in Kenosha a few days earlier. I didn't want to go because our country is hellbent on violence, and for a few weeks Kenosha was the epicenter of that desire. I didn't want to go because I was afraid.

Anthony Huber and JoJo Rosenbaum lived in Kenosha. They were on the street to protest after a police officer shot Jacob Blake in the back seven times. Kyle Rittenhouse drove to Kenosha with a gun because he thought violent protesters were determined to torch the city; the prospect of violence attracted him. He shot

Huber and Rosenbaum. The president went to Kenosha to secure votes inspired by the violence he decried during his visit, even as that visit threatened to inspire more violence.

Philip said, “I wanted to go and pray at the places men died. One day my son is going to ask me what I did when all of this happened. I can’t be staring at my belly button for an answer.”

I am an inexpert ally and far too compromised to call myself an accomplice. When I asked Philip, “Why me?” he said, “Safety. Your beard makes you look like an angry biker. You’re a preacher, so you can talk to calm folks down. And you’re White.” One of those things is definitely true. But I’ve been a Christian long enough to know I should try to say yes when another Christian needs me. Philip needed me. He told me so.

He also asked me to bring a few bottles of water.

“Sure thing. La Croix?”

“No, the kind we can pour in our eyes after getting teargassed.”

When we got to Kenosha the streets were empty. We’re both parents, and we got a late start. The president left a few hours before we arrived.

We brought our bicycles. Philip flew a Black Lives Matter flag off the back of his. He played gospel music from a Bluetooth speaker strapped to his chest. I rode behind him.

When I worked in restaurants, we’d blaze the bar lights at 2 a.m. to drive the diehards out. After they left, the bar itself felt drunk, the room befuddled. Kenosha felt like that. Like it had been sucker punched. The action was over, but the blow still stung. Violence lingers. Athanasius said our experience of God is the experience of walking into a room that God just left. The air is enlivened. We catch an impression. Kenosha felt like this, but the opposite.

Things picked up as we got closer to the courthouse. Late-model pickups circled the downtown streets. The American flags in their cargo beds reminded me of shark fins. The drivers were White.

I first read about the social construction of Whiteness 25 years ago. David Roediger's slogan shot off the page like a firework: "Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity." In the months since George Floyd was killed, I've poured over recent writing on White privilege. I've tried to take the effort outside the library, listening carefully to Black pastors and the Black members of the church I serve. I spend almost every weekend as one of the few White parents at youth basketball gyms on the South Side of Chicago. I have learned how viciously our culture lies about Black fatherhood. I am learning how to be a better dad by witnessing the devotion of the Black fathers in these gyms. I have realized that Whiteness isn't just sinful but that it mimics sin's hold over us. The privileges of White life strengthen the systemic inequalities Whiteness inflicts.

None of this means much.  Or at least, none of it hit me like the blood pressure spike I felt while pedaling between Philip's flag and the MAGA pickups idling angrily behind us. It is one thing to wrap your mind around an abstraction like the social construction of Whiteness. It is something else to have your body menaced because Black lives matter. "All values are bodily values," said Norman O. Brown. Before that, they're just ideas.

This is the truth of the incarnation, the tragedy of the crucifixion, and the hope of resurrection. I felt a measure of each as my ability to understand without feeling took a body blow. No wonder Black people are six times more likely to suffer high blood pressure than White people. People's bodies know the truth.

One of the trucks rolled up beside us. The driver rolled down his window and welcomed us to Kenosha. "Hey, I got something for you guys." We reared back, alarmed. "Don't worry, I'm on your side." He was a bearded White man. His beard was remarkably clean. His truck was spotless, except for "We are Jacob Blake" written in window chalk on his rear windshield, as if he'd just driven off an enlightened used car lot. "You guys gonna be here after dark? I've got protest materials for you to use. I've got *protest materials* for you to use after dark."

Picture a ticket scalper pushing Molotov cocktails. We rode away quickly. I asked, "Was that an undercover cop? Was that guy trying to entrap us?"

Philip is less conspiracy minded than I am. "No," he said. "He was just trying to start a riot."

At the courthouse, there were more reporters and T-shirt vendors than protesters. The news cameras made Kenosha look like Beirut. In person, it looked like it had suffered a small riot and a gigantic incursion of television reporters. The small cluster of protesters was monitored by more than 100 National Guardsmen in riot gear.

We rode around the courthouse square five or six times. Each time we passed the soldiers, Philip sped up. His flag came alive as he pedaled. *Black Lives Matter.* I could feel the soldiers sneer at the sentiment, or at the two of us, or at Philip. I tried to pray while I pedaled. *Bless your enemies.*

Is the National Guard my enemy? I wouldn't have thought so before visiting Kenosha. But even holstered pistols break the peace. "There is a feeling of power in reserve, a power that drives right through the bone, like the shiver you sense in the shaft of an ax when you take it in your hand," Hilary Mantel writes in *Wolf Hall*. "You can strike, or you can not strike, and if you choose to hold back the blow, you can still feel inside you the resonance of the omitted thing." I could see this in the soldiers' glower. I felt hostile in response. The assumption of enmity creates enemies.

As we rode around the courthouse, Philip played the Tramaine Hawkins gospel classic "Goin' Up Yonder." Hawkins's soaring vocal decries the grave's power to destroy, even as her faith defangs death. She hits the paradox hard enough to throw sparks:

> I'm goin' up yonder
> To be with my Lord. . . .
> As God gives me grace,
> I'll run this race
> Until I see my Savior
> Face to face.
> I'm goin' up yonder
> To be with my Lord.

Another woman's voice drowned Tramaine Hawkins out. A White woman's voice. "Hey, brilliant protester with the speaker! Hey you!" We stopped. Three young people approached us. "We're from Portland. You gotta hear this song. You gotta play this song—it's the anthem of the Portland protest: 'Guillotine,' by the Coup."

Their criticism was implicit. You could hear it behind their enthusiasm. But Philip was gracious. Barely.

“OK.” He took out his phone and called the song up.

The “Guillotine” beat is insistent. It slams. It’s fantastic. The lyrics begin in a chant:

> Hey you!
> We got your war.
> We’re at the gates.
> We’re at your door.
> We got the guillotine—you better run.
> We got the guillotine.

My own enthusiasm for Black music has made me misstep more than once, but she took the cake. Approaching a Black man you don’t know in order to teach him about your favorite rap track and then demand that he turn off his music to play yours must be the most obnoxious White privilege flex imaginable. And it is definitely rude.

Which isn’t to say the track lacked energy. Or logic: the French Revolution was fought for good reasons. The guillotine beheaded oppressive power. *We got the guillotine, you better run.* And then, the final verse:

> Let’s keep it banging like a shotgun.
> We in a war before we fought one.

Jacob Blake didn’t start a riot. The police seem determined to kill in order to protect oppressive power. Why not get revenge, or at least sing about it?

While I was still bobbing my head to the Coup, Philip put Tramaine Hawkins back on:

> I can take the pain,
> The heartaches they bring,
> The comfort in knowing
> I’ll soon be gone. . . .
> I’m goin’ up yonder
> To be with my Lord.

Jesus carries a cross, not a guillotine. “Goin’ Up Yonder” wants to proclaim the truth, not change the world. Later, Philip said to me, “Every person I encountered in Kenosha thought I was there to be violent.”

We rode to the spot where JoJo Rosenbaum died. It felt small: a smashed-up used car lot. There were yellow evidence circles marking the spots where spent shells hit the ground. There was an empty Jägermeister bottle placed in the spot where JoJo died. An empty liquor bottle’s inadequacy as a memorial made it the perfect monument. Philip knelt before the bottle and prayed. I watched him.

Afterward, we rode past an evangelical church. The building’s windows were boarded up preemptively. The plywood was decorated with painted butterflies and passages from scripture. “Perfect love drives out fear.” There is nothing like the corny authenticity of a church sign. I felt at home when I read them. I stopped to take a few pictures. Before I could put my phone away, there was a man in my frame, marching toward us aggressively. He had an air of authority that he didn’t carry well. He wore a polo shirt tucked into the same mid-price khakis I wear. I knew he was a preacher before I heard his pushy, controlling voice.

“May I ask why you’re taking photographs of my church?” He gave Philip a hard look. I almost laughed. He thought we were antifa madmen plotting to burn his parsonage down. Philip answered him, “We’re here because we’re Christians.”

He asked more questions, trying to confirm that we weren’t his kind of Christian. I jumped in, “You’re the pastor?” He nodded. “What’s it like, being a minister in Kenosha right now?”

He told us about the Trump supporters and “the handful of African American brothers and sisters” in his church. He waved his right arm, encircling the next block’s burned building, the National Guard, and Philip and me. “All of this just divides us.” He ached for the days when his people could simply talk about Jesus.

As he spoke, one of the pickup trucks pulled up beside us and jammed on its breaks. The driver leaned out his window and pointed at Philip. He shouted one word. It cracked like a gunshot: “Terrorist!”

*Terrorist.* Philip’s politics are more reasonable than mine. He works in quality control for a defense contractor. He’s married to a pediatrician. They named their children after characters on *The West Wing*. None of this mattered. Nothing mattered but his

Black skin.

The word hung in the air. The pastor and I both flinched. The truck roared off. Philip was silent. Later, on the ride home, he told me, “The worst things I’ve ever heard have been shouted at me out of pickup trucks right before they drive away.”

I looked at the pastor’s boarded-up church and waited for him to pray. He didn’t. He didn’t say anything. I was reminded of the unspoken helplessness that settles over some bad hospital visits. So I did what I do: “We should pray.”

I shut my eyes and kept them closed. I am petty. In large part, my prayer was directed at the annoying pastor standing next to me. I wanted to surprise him with my piety. Or maybe I longed for some kind of unity. In either case, I prayed with the cadence and the language of an evangelical. I asked Jesus to watch over Philip and every Black life. I asked him to protect the pastor and his congregation. I prayed for peace in Kenosha and for the violence to end. Basically, I prayed for a return to the safety of the status quo.

As we rode off, Philip said, “You just prayed a ventriloquist prayer.”

“What does that mean?”

“You prayed like a professional. Beneath that, you wanted to pray for something else.”

Every clergyperson receives blame they don’t deserve. Most of the time we get too much credit. There wasn’t anything beneath my prayer but the desire to get out of Kenosha.

Of course Philip’s generous assumption makes me think there should have been. What should I pray for when the police shoot a Black man in the back? How should White Christians pray after realizing that America is still killing Black people out of desire for the slaveholder’s control?

In Lucille Clifton’s poem “Slaveships,” the speaker is an incredulous African, locked in the belly of a slave ship:

> loaded like spoons
> into the belly of Jesus . . .

Jesus
why do you not protect us
chained to the heart of the Angel

The poem asks why the Middle Passage was permitted. The poem cries, and that cry sounds like a prayer.

The Christian nouns in the poem are capitalized because they are the names of slave ships. White Christians mastered doublespeak long before George Orwell drew a line from debased language to oppressive ideologies. *Jesus. Angel.* Imagine if those boats had truthful names. *Anti-Christ. Genocide.* Christians hid the truth in demonic irony because the truth was impossible to reconcile with Jesus.

"Grace Of God / can this sin live?" writes Clifton. No. The sin of slavery is dying. But it is dying before our eyes, thrashing as it spits poison from gun barrels and the president's Twitter account. A snake in the throes of death remains dangerous, but this fact will not keep it alive. This is good news, realized late.

The sin of slavery is *still* dying. If it were not still alive, the net worth of a typical White American family would not be ten times greater than that of a Black family. If slavery were not still alive, Black activists would not have had to coin a phrase that sets the bar so low. *Black Lives Matter.* To object to that sentiment is to be confronted with your own inhumanity. It is to discover that your inhumanity has an undead, demonic quality, the values of a 500-year-old slaver alive in a 21st-century mind.

If slavery were not *still* dying, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daniel Prude, Atatiana Jefferson, Aura Rosser, Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Michelle Cusseaux, Freddie Gray, Janisha Fonville, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Gabriella Nevarez, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, and Laquan McDonald would not be dead. If slavery were not dying, I would not know each one of them was killed.

White Christians can forget we ever learned these names. Doing so places slavery's murderous legacy on life support. So do prayers that ask God for painless peace or a return to the status quo. There are degrees of difference between asking Christ to protect Whiteness in 2020 and naming a slave ship *Jesus* 300 years ago, but both debase his name. We should consider the possibility that naming slave ships *Jesus, Angel, Grace Of God* rendered White Christian God-talk meaningless. Empty, useless

Christianity could be the cost of five centuries worth of cheap grace. Bonhoeffer's words drip with sarcasm: "Grace alone does everything and so everything can remain as it was before."

If God is willing to hear White prayers despite their incoherence, maybe we should ask him to ignore us. We should fall silent and attune ourselves to the sound of Black prayer. And then we should ready ourselves for God's response.

Some call this a form of masochism. In a recent essay in *Tablet*, Blake Smith borrows from Franz Fanon to argue that after centuries of projecting their own criminality and unbridled sexuality onto Blackness, "White people crave the [sexual] pleasure of being punished." Or at least the pleasure of talking about punishment. Most people who run in progressive circles know at least one White man who appears to really enjoy talking about why he shouldn't speak. The lens of faith is helpful here. Freudian doctrine sees White liberals craving the "pleasure" of punishment, but Christianity sees sinners falling silent, "ashamed at what we've failed to do, appalled at what we've done." There is a difference between craving a ball gag and being silenced by the gospel.

In June, the rapper Jay Electronica released a short song titled "Fruits of the Spirit." The song, which draws from a gorgeous soul sample, is a 90-second burst of religion:

> Rise, young gods, all paths lead to Lazarus.
> The dry bones they're lifted up from the valley dust.
> The prayers of the slaves are the wings that carry us.

What happens to White Christians when God answers the prayers of the people Whiteness enslaved? I expect God's response will be fearful before it can be wonderful. For Whiteness is also being carried, but not in the manner God is carrying the descendants of the enslaved. Not as a mother carries her weary child or as wings carry a soaring eagle. More like a cow ripped aloft by a twister or a farmhouse torn from its foundation, lifted by an awful wind.

If White Christians are being carried, it is by the power of a storm. May it drop us into reality. May our blood pressure spike when we hit the ground. May our bodies feel the truth our minds protect us from. Come Lord Jesus, wreck us with your grace.

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