



# St James's Church Piccadilly

## Lent Course 2023

*Fasting and Freedom:  
Exploring Scripture and  
Black Writers Together*



# Fasting and Freedom

**Sunday 26th February:  
For whom is God a liberator?**

## **Genesis 16**

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me."

"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

Then the angel of the Lord told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."

The angel of the Lord also said to her:

“You are now pregnant  
and you will give birth to a son.  
You shall name him Ishmael,  
for the Lord has heard of your misery.  
He will be a wild donkey of a man;  
his hand will be against everyone  
and everyone’s hand against him,  
and he will live in hostility  
toward all his brothers.”

She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

## **Lola Olufemi**

### ***(extract from Experiments in Imagining Otherwise)***

I hold, like those before me, that experiments can and do fail.

I am trying to make an argument for the otherwise.

Not otherwise as in>>>>>over here!!!!>>>>>come find me, or a small black dot that recedes as I approach. Not that thing that is obscured and needs to be unobscured. Not a smudge, or an absence, or an entity to be owned or conquered. The future is no one’s property; no need to shackle it. Not otherwise as in, the political horizon awaits; otherwise as in, a firm embrace of the unknowable; the unknowable as in, a well of infinity I want us to fall down together.

Otherwise: the future is now and all those political promises we make to one another, all the wishing and hoping in earnest (say it three times like a spell: wishing and hoping, wishing and hoping, wishing and hoping), all the leaps from the edges of bridges and mountaintops, all the reaching for and around, all the drug-taking and sex everywhere-we-should-not, all the serious study and strategy, theorising and making anew, all the breakages that slice historical space-time—all those movements that clear space and mark our struggle to live free, live better, love more, to knit abundance, all that is the work of another realm that is not-here.

I am trying to make an argument for unbounded affective technologies that go beyond the body, beyond the rights-bearing citizen, that precede revolutionary violence, subtend misery, technologies that eject us anywhere but the drawn-out present.

Now, the counterarguments. Against the idea that this is not 'real' politics, or that the material is stripped by every wish for the unknowable, I say... yes!

***I am trying to inflate the material.***

I am reaching for the creation of a general mood, for a stirring that awakens; I am trying to shake you so you wake up and wake up ready. You are going to have to give something up and it will not be easy. Some of us are not ready for narrative disruption. We will have to be pulled, kicking and screaming, from this world and its falsities.

Here is my method: above all, *feeling!* I aim, through experiments in feeling, to reveal and destroy what it is that keeps us here, what it is that stops us from deciding to leave even as the cinders mix with our hair, the smoke corrupts our lungs, the flames engulf the people we love. Only when we

know this can we activate the bond of the *otherwise* and turn back to meet it. Some call it the communist horizon (this implies some distance between us and the future), others call it prefiguration (the future in our actions), others ‘the worlds we seek to build’ (desire desire desire)—any name will do.

Don’t be afraid. I am aiming for an untethering, a *letting- it-go-to-the-sky*, a movement so incapable of restriction it seems impossible.



## Sunday 5th March: Fasting as yoke-breaking

### Isaiah 58:1-12

“Shout it aloud, do not hold back.  
Raise your voice like a trumpet.  
Declare to my people their rebellion  
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.  
For day after day they seek me out;  
they seem eager to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that does what is right  
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.  
They ask me for just decisions  
and seem eager for God to come near them.  
‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,  
‘and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?’  
“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.  
Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.  
You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.  
Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?  
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?  
Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?  
“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen your frame.

You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations;  
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

## **Audre Lorde – Sister Outsider**

We were born in a poor time  
never touching  
each other's hunger  
never  
sharing our crusts  
in fear  
the bread became enemy.

Now we raise our children  
to respect themselves  
as well as each other.

Now you have made loneliness  
holy and useful  
and no longer needed  
now  
your light shines very brightly  
but I want you  
to know  
your darkness also  
rich  
and beyond fear.





**Sunday 12th March:  
Nourishment for struggle. Struggle as nourishment.**

**John 6:35-40**

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

**bell hooks**

**(extract from *All About Love: New Visions*)**

The cultural emphasis on endless consumption deflects attention from spiritual hunger. We are endlessly bombarded by messages telling us that our every need can be satisfied by material increase. Artist Barbara Kruger created a work proclaiming "I shop therefore I am" to show the way consumerism has taken over mass consciousness, making people think they are what they possess. While the zeal to possess intensifies, so does the sense of spiritual emptiness. Because we are spiritually empty we try to fill up on consumerism. We may not have enough love but we can always shop...

Blatant misuses of spirituality and religious faith could lead us to despair about spiritual life if we were not simultaneously

witnessing a genuine concern for spiritual awakening expressed counterculturally. Whether it is the American Buddhists working in solidarity to free Tibet or the many Christian-based organizations that provide support in the way of food and shelter for the needy globally, these embodiments of loving practice renew our hope and restore the soul. All around the world liberation theology offers the exploited and oppressed a vision of spiritual freedom that is linked to struggles to end domination.

A little more than ten years after Fromm first published *The Art of Loving*, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s collection of sermons *Strength to Love* was published. The major focus of these talks was the celebration of love as a spiritual force that unites and binds all life. Like Fromm's earlier work, these essays championed spiritual life, critiquing capitalism, materialism, and the violence used to enforce exploitation and dehumanization. In a 1967 lecture opposing war King declared: "When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: 'Let us love one another, for love is God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.'" Throughout his life King was a prophet of love. In the late seventies, when it was no longer cool to talk about spirituality, I found myself turning again and again to his work and to the work of Thomas Merton. As religious seekers and thinkers, both men focused attention on the practice of love as a means of spiritual fulfillment.

Extolling the transformative power of love in his essay "Love and Need," Merton writes: "Love is, in fact an intensification of life, a completeness, a fullness, a wholeness of life..."

Life curves upward to a peak of intensity, a high point of value and meaning, at which all its latent creative possibility go into action and the person transcends himself or herself in encounter, response, and communion with another. It is for this that we came into the world—this communion and self-transcendence. We do not become fully human until we give ourselves to each other in love.” The teachings about love offered by Fromm, King, and Merton differ from much of today’s writing. There is always an emphasis in their work on love as an active force that should lead us into greater communion with the world. In their work, loving practice is not aimed at simply giving an individual greater life satisfaction; it is extolled as the primary way we end domination and oppression. This important politicization of love is often absent from today’s writing.



## **Sunday 19th March: Freedom and resistance**

### **Matthew 27:1-23**

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."

"What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money."

So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear

the testimony they are bringing against you?" But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

## James Cone

### (extract from *A Black Theology of Liberation*)

If the content of the gospel is liberation, human existence must be explained as “being in freedom,” which means rebellion against every form of slavery, the suppression of everything creative. “A slave,” writes LeRoi Jones, “cannot be a man.” To be human is to be free, and to be free is to be human. The liberated, the free, are the ones who define the meaning of their being in terms of the oppressed of the land by participating in their liberation, fighting against everything that opposes integral humanity. Only the oppressed are truly free!

This is the paradox of human existence. *Freedom is the opposite of oppression, but only the oppressed are truly free.* How can this be? On the one hand, the concreteness of human existence reveals that human beings are not (fully) human when their creativity is enslaved by alien powers. To be (fully) human is to be separated from everything that is evil, everything that is against the “extension of the limits of humanity.” But on the other hand, human existence also discloses that the reality of evil is an every-present possibility in our finite world, and to be (fully) human means to be identified with those who are enslaved as they fight against human evil. Being human means being against evil by joining sides with those who are the victims of evil. Quite literally, it means becoming oppressed with the oppressed, making their cause one’s own cause by involving oneself in the liberation struggle. *No one is free until all are free.*

Paul Tillich expresses this paradox in his analysis of the relationship between being and nonbeing. On the one hand, being is the opposite of nonbeing. To *be* is to participate in Being, which is the source of everything that is. To exist is to exist in freedom – that is, stand out from nonbeing and *be*. But, on the other hand, finite being “does not stand completely out of

non-being.” Always present is the threat of nothingness, the possibility of ceasing to be.

The human person, therefore, is a creature who seeks to be in spite of nonbeing. The power to be in spite of nonbeing is what Tillich calls courage:

The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with essential self-affirmation.

Inherent in freedom is the recognition that there is something wrong with society, and those who are free will not be content until all members of society are treated as persons. There comes a time in life when persons realize that the world is not as they dreamt, and they have to make a choice: submit or risk all. Being free means that the only real choice is risking all. Those who are prepared to risk all when they perceive the true nature of society and what it means to the oppressed are the only ones who are truly free. Those who come to this recognition also realize, as does Ignazio Silone’s Pietro Spina in *Bread and Wine*, that freedom must be *taken*:

Freedom is not something you get as a present... You can live in a dictatorship and be free – on one condition: that you fight the dictatorship. The man who thinks with his own mind and keeps it uncorrupted is free. The man who fights for what he thinks is right is free. But you can live in the most democratic country on earth, and if you’re lazy, obtuse or servile within yourself, you’re not free. Even without any violent coercion, you’re a slave. You can’t beg your freedom from someone. You have to seize it – everyone as much as he can.

It is not difficult for the oppressed to understand the meaning of freedom. They are forced by the very nature of their condition

to interpret their existence in the world contrary to the value-structures of an oppressive society. For the oppressed, to be is to be in revolt against the forces that impede the creation of the new person.

This is what Karl Marx had in mind in his definition of the human being as praxis, which means “directed activity”. Praxis expresses human freedom. “Freedom”, writes Marx, “is the essence of man”. It “*is not something outside one who freely is, it is the specific mode or structure of being*”, and inherent in it is action. Marx says: “The coincidence of the changing circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice [praxis]”. He elaborates on the inseparable relationship of freedom and liberative activity. To be (fully) human is to be involved, participating in societal structures for human liberation.





## **Sunday 26th March: The other side of heaven**

### **Revelation 21:1-8**

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

## **Pauli Murray**

### ***Ruth***

Brown girl chanting Te Deums on Sunday  
Rust-colored peasant with strength of granite,  
Bronze girl welding ship hulls on Monday,  
Let nothing smirch you, let no one crush you.

Queen of ghetto, sturdy hill-climber,  
Walk with the lilt of ballet dancer,  
Walk like a strong down-East wind blowing,  
Walk with the majesty of the First Woman.

Gallant challenger, millioned-hope bearer,  
The stars are your beacons, earth your inheritance,  
Meet blaze and cannon with your own heart's passion,  
Surrender to none the fire of your soul.







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