
Our Lives Matter

Chanta' Barrett, M.Div.

Lincoln University

Matthew 2:19-23 (New King James Version): *Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."*

Our lives matter, even though we are in "the hood." Matt 2:19–23 has illuminated for me that no truer statement has ever been made concerning residents of socially, politically, and economically challenged areas.

Growing up in the seventies I am a part of the first generation of Americans who have always known what it was like to have colored television in their homes. When I was young, television programming consisted of scripted shows, and the only reality TV that existed was the news. The one thing that was a constant within the programming, be it scripted or the news, was the message of *Good Guys* and *Bad Guys*. The *Good Guys* lived in two-parent households located in beautiful neighborhoods with white picket fences. They attended nice, well-equipped schools and stayed out of trouble. On the flip side of that coin were the *Bad Guys*. They lived in single-parent households, in neighborhoods that were ugly, drug-infested, dirty, and crime-ridden, with dangerous, underfunded schools.

Sometimes, through the television programming, I would see images of *Good Guys* in the *Bad Guy* spaces: *Bad Guy* neighborhoods, schools, households, etc. Then the messaging presented would be that of escape. The *Good Guys*, and everyone attached to or affiliated with them, would be working feverishly against all odds to help them escape the *Bad Guy* spaces. Escape was crucial, not only for the survival of the *Good Guys*; it was also necessary if there was to be any hope for them to thrive and be accepted into the greater whole of society.

As I grew up in Philadelphia, the reinforced messaging of the images of *Good Guys* and *Bad Guys*, provided by the steady diet of television programming, had me clear on two things. First, I didn't fit in with the *Good Guy* narrative based on the visual messages I had seen over and over again. I didn't live in the suburbs; a lot

Television programming consisted of scripted shows, and the only reality TV that existed was the news. The one thing that was a constant within the programming, be it scripted or the news, was the message of *Good Guys* and *Bad Guys*.

of the time my mother was a single parent; we didn't have much money. Second, most of the people who looked like me and lived in the areas where some of my family members lived were *Bad Guys*. Now let us be clear, they weren't *Bad Guys* because they had done anything wrong. They were *Bad Guys* because the messages that had been embedded into my thinking throughout my formative years via the television programming—in both scripted and news formats—told me people who looked like them and lived where they lived were indeed *Bad Guys*. I would love to say that I was an anomaly in the way that I thought and perceived the *Good Guys* and *Bad Guys*, but, unfortunately, I cannot. Over the past thirty plus years there have been stories written, studies taken, and testimonies given that speak to the subject of negative messaging within the media and how it influences the way people see others as well as themselves.

In an article published in the *Howard Journal of Communications*, titled, "The Perceived Realism of African American Portrayal on Television," by Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter of the Department of Communication Studies, Texas Tech University, the author discusses the fact that research findings using college students' perceptions have consistently shown that negative exposure to African American portrayals in the media significantly influences the evaluations of African Americans in general (Ford, 1997; Mastro & Tropp, 2004; Power, Murphy & Coover, 1996). Other research has shown that black depictions on television have an effect on viewers of all ages and of all races (Bryant & Zillmann,

1994; Dates, 1980).¹ This article was a very interesting read which corroborated what I thought to be true about the ethnic/racial group to which I belong.

My mind had been conditioned to think negatively about the group of people I was born into and of which I was a cultural member. This negative mindset about my group also translated into negative feelings about myself. I grew up completely conflicted and always questioning why I, and people who looked like me and lived where I lived, were considered *Bad Guys*. After all, I felt like a *Good Guy*. I agreed with the messages of the *Good Guys*. I wanted to be a policewoman like Angie Dickerson, and I wanted to work with someone cool like Telly Savalas, “Who loves you, baby.” Yes, in my heart I was a *Good Guy*.

When I was in the second grade, just after our Easter break, we were introduced to the different countries and continents of the world. We had a giant globe in the classroom that always sat by the teacher’s desk that she was using to show us the various areas. This was a very significant time in learning for me, not to mention the fact that Ms. Rump, my favorite teacher, was giving the lesson. She was a slenderly built, red-head, soft-spoken, white woman who was nice to everyone, even the rambunctious boys. This particular day we all gathered around the globe and pointed to different areas on it and she told us what country or continent it was. I kept staring at the country of Egypt because I couldn’t help but notice it was in Africa. So, with great surprise and excitement, I said, “Egypt is in Africa!” Ms. Rump answered, “Yes, Chanta’. Egypt is in Africa.” It seemed like she was proud that I had made this connection so quickly. What she didn’t know was that this was significant for me because, having just returned from Easter break, my family, like nearly every other family in America, had watched *The Ten Commandments*. To add to my ever-expanding repertoire of newly found knowledge, I had also watched *Roots* that year and I was clear that people who looked like me came from Africa. However, because of the appearance of the cast in *The Ten Commandments*, I was a little confused. The simplicity of my 8-year-old mind deduced that since Egypt was in Africa that meant that Egyptians were Africans, so that’s what I said. Ms. Rump, with her sweet voice and gentle way, corrected me and said, “No, they’re Egyptians.” I said, “But if Egypt is in Africa, then the Egyptians have to be Africans.” At that moment all of my classmates became quiet and were waiting for her answer; she responded by telling us all to take our seats. She seemed a little flustered and never answered me.

As life continued, I stopped asking questions and started to accept that this is how life was for me and those who looked like me. The echoes from the past of songs that told me as a very young child to say it loud, that I was black and I was proud, were just that: echoes from the past. The older I got, the more visual messages I

The echoes from the past of songs that told me as a very young child to say it loud, that I was black and I was proud, were just that: echoes from the past. The older I got, the more visual messages I received through television programming convinced me that black was not really beautiful.

received through television programming convinced me that black was not really beautiful. Since I wasn’t an athlete and couldn’t sing, there was no hope for me to ever escape the *Bad Guy* spaces I found myself in. Like many others who had fallen victim to the bombardment of dissenting imagery, I gave up on ever achieving a better life. By the time I was 18 years old I felt utterly rejected by society and the rest of the world. My feelings of despair only deepened as I saw people whom I knew and had grown up with become dealers of illegal substances, people who succumbed to the disease of addiction, or young adults who became a national statistic by adding to the staggering homicide rate or the prison industrial complex.

My world had become so filled with darkness that I no longer wanted to exist in it. I had devised a plan on how I was going to leave the planet. However, before I could fulfill that mission, I was presented with one last alternative, which was to try Jesus. Jesus was not a complete stranger to me as, like most people my age, I had been introduced to Him through attending church services with my grandparents. But, up to that point in life, I had not accepted Him as Savior. So, I did just that. I opened my heart and asked Christ to save my soul. This began my journey as a Bible-believing Christian.

This belief has allowed me to “walk in the light,” if you will. I began to live with possibility. Good things were actually possible for my life. I was no longer hopeless, and while the *Good Guy*, *Bad Guy* narrative was still implanted in my thinking, I now had a way of escape. I was no longer limited to the *Bad Guy* spaces; I was now in a position to cross over into the *Good Guy* spaces.

As I transitioned into the *Good Guy* spaces, everything was not roses. As black preachers like to say, there were both peaks and valleys. What I can honestly say is that I never felt the same sense of hopelessness that I was plagued with prior to accepting Christ.

As my journey continued, I was compelled to go deeper, eventually answering my call to be a minister. In my home congregation, we have a process known as Exploring Your Call (EYC). During the orientation we were told that there were three tracts: *Counseling*, *Teaching*, and *Preaching*; if your call was to preach

1. Punyanunt-Carter, N. (2019). [online] Library.uoregon.edu. Available at: https://library.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/data/guides/english/howard_journal_communications.pdf [Accessed June 21, 2019].

then you did all three. This made perfect sense to me because, as I looked back over my life, I found that I naturally, though informally, taught and counseled. The facilitator, then went on to tell us that our senior pastor expected all of the ministers and teachers to get a Master of Divinity degree. She let us know there were no time constraints on when this needed to be achieved, however, we should always be working toward this goal. This was the beginning of my education journey.

During the next twelve years of my life, seminary education was a consistent part of my daily routine. My oldest daughter traveled through her various levels of elementary, middle, and high school education witnessing her mother doing the same thing. I haven't truly explored what that has meant to her yet, nevertheless, I used her firsthand account of my journey many times to help her push through her assignments and school challenges. Once I hit the Master's level, the old observances of geology came flooding back, while opening my mind in new ways simultaneously.

Classes such as *Church Mission Through History*, *Christian World Mission*, and *Theology and Ethics of MLK Jr.* helped me see the movements of God and the church in a historical context. While God remained the enormous Master of the Universe, God also became a very present help, that I could point to historically. I was no longer limited to discussing God only in the spiritual context. I was now able to take the abstract and see it at work in the practical. I was engaging in course work that provided confirmation of the biblical narrative. Even with this new-found knowledge, I was still living with the residue of the *Good Guys, Bad Guys* messaging that had been implanted so long ago. It wasn't until I got into *Systematic Theology I*, and was introduced to Dr. James Cone through his writing *A Black Theology of Liberation*, and *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* by Gustavo Gutierrez, that the messaging residue got cleansed. I underwent a negative narrative imagery detox. After encountering these two theologians, I began to truly see and understand that this God that I served wasn't just with us in Spirit, and didn't just understand through a general human experience, He could relate because He lived His physical life in an oppressive context. He was part of the minority class by choice. He even went so far as to predestine His upbringing to be done in a town such as Nazareth, a place with social issues that could mirror any pre-gentrified urban space in my city, throughout this country, or even the world.

A few years ago, in a *Systematic Theology II* class, I had to write a paper that answered the question, "Can urban youth relate to a Jesus who is fully human and fully divine, and if so how?" My answer was, "Yes, because Jesus was an urban youth." (Now, many people reading this may be wondering where I am going. As I have heard a Baptist preacher say, "Just ride with me a little longer and I will show you.")

The scripture that I'm sharing, Matt 2:19-23, is one that is very familiar to the religious community and yet I haven't had the opportunity to hear anyone lift it out of the greater contextual story that it focuses on. This is something I truly understand because the information that is given to us by Matthew is given on the

After encountering these two theologians [James Cone and Gustavo Gutierrez], I began to truly see and understand that this God that I served wasn't just with us in Spirit, and didn't just understand through a general human experience, He could relate because he lived his physical life in an oppressive context.

heels of the greatest and most miraculous spiritual events that have ever taken place in the physical world. Christ, the Miracle Child, conceived in the womb of a teenage virgin by the Holy Spirit, had just been born (Luke 2:6-7). The Magi (The Three Kings or Wise Men) had just followed a star with a whole caravan transporting gifts looking for Him (Matt 2:1-2). And unfortunately, one of the most evil, terrifyingly gruesome acts of an insecure man in power had just taken place. The state-sanctioned, legal, yet morally and emotionally sickening massacre of innocent male children throughout the region ages two and under (Matt 2:16-17) had happened for the second time in Hebrew (Jewish) history. Any one of these moments in time overshadows the fact that Joseph decided to move his young family into Nazareth. However, being one of many who have been raised in a modern-day Nazareth of sorts, it is quite significant to me, that this happened. Scripture says that with the counsel of God through a dream, Joseph decided the safest place to raise his young family was in "the hood." (Pardon the street vernacular, this is the best way for me to describe what Nazareth was like socially.)

Harold W. Attridge, Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School, says this about Nazareth in a blurb on the PBS website, FrontLine: "We see Jesus growing up, not in the bucolic backwater, not...in the rural outback, but rather, on the fringes of a vibrant urban life."² Ask any person living in the un-gentrified areas of North, South, West, and Germantown Philadelphia, if they feel like they are on the fringes of the vibrant, urban life of center city and post-gentrified Philadelphia and you would hear a resounding "yes." I've had the privilege to sit among a very diverse group of people, of various generations and from multiple sections of the city. Nearly all of them have had the same sentiment about the progress being made in our city: they don't

2. Attridge, H. (2019). [online] Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/socialclass.htm> [Accessed July 1, 2019].

feel included in this new transition of Philadelphia. They feel a part of a subculture of sorts, excluded from the revitalization that's taking place. Their schools haven't gotten any better; their income isn't rising; their neighborhoods are still dirty. Yet Philadelphia is a world-class city much like the bustling ports in the biblical world of Galilee.

Because I believe that all things in the Bible are significant and there isn't one story or aspect of a story within it that does not possess some form of relevance, Joseph choosing to raise his family in the town of Nazareth is not a mere cosmic coincidence. On the contrary, it is something of great importance to him, his family, and to people like me who have been raised in places like Nazareth.

In order to gain an understanding of why Jesus being raised in a place like Nazareth holds such significance, we must first understand what Nazareth was like. In order to do that we'll start with a description of the town.

According to biblical scholars, Nazareth was considered dirty, obscure, wicked, and forgotten. Biblical historians note that it had a population between 200 and 400 people and was located fifteen miles west of the Sea of Galilee and twenty miles east of the Mediterranean Sea. This small town sat outside of the very prosperous merchant hub of Galilee, not to mention that during the time of Jesus, the Mediterranean and all its coastal ports were under the complete rule of Rome.³ Whether it was the coastal towns of the Mediterranean or the city of Galilee, the wealth that was generated within this region managed to not find its way to Nazareth.

Paul Anderson, Professor of Biblical and Quaker Studies at George Fox University, and contributor to *HuffPost*, noted that, "Following the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, the Roman army in Sepphoris (four miles from Nazareth) was robbed, and the Romans retaliated by crucifying 2,000 Jews as a disincentive to such revolts. Sepphoris was burned to the ground, and its inhabitants were sold into slavery. Maybe that's where Joseph and Jesus did some of their construction work. Less than a decade later, when Jesus was just a boy, Judas the Galilean instituted a tax revolt, evoking another crackdown by the Romans in which many were also crucified."⁴ These events that took place in and close to Nazareth would have had a profoundly traumatizing effect on its inhabitants, much like the brutalization of Philadelphia citizens during the tenure of Frank Rizzo as police commissioner, then as mayor, as well as the MOVE Bombing that decimated an entire city block through fire during Mayor Wilson Goode's administration.

3. Rose, P. (2008) "What Was Nazareth like in the First Century?" *Jesus Christ*. [Accessed July 5, 2019]. <https://jesus.christ.org/biblical-historians/what-was-nazareth-like-in-the-first-century>.

4. Anderson, P. (2017). *HuffPost is now a part of Oath*. [online] Huffpost.com. Available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/can-any-good-thing-come-from-nazareth-the-hometown_b_58d1f758e4b062043ad4ae1a [Accessed July 5, 2019].

For Nazareth to be described as "dirty" would have to mean the description does not refer to the ground it stood on and more than likely refers to its overall condition.

In the description of Nazareth that was given, we find one of the adjectives used is "dirty." During a time in history where there were no paved roads and every town, no matter how wealthy or poor, would have had dirt and dust within and around it, for Nazareth to be described as "dirty" would have to mean the description does not refer to the ground it stood on and more than likely refers to its overall condition. Nazareth has this in common with some of the impoverished areas throughout the United States as well as many "urban areas" in the world. For the sake of this article I'll concentrate my comparisons of Nazareth and "urban areas" to Philadelphia. On just a superficial level we can easily see the descriptions fit much of the pre-gentrified urban landscape throughout the city.

Anyone driving in Philadelphia, who has been detoured off of the Schuylkill Expressway, Kelly or Martin Luther King Drive, or Interstate 95 (near Frankford), and has had to travel along some of our main streets such as Broad, Market, or Frankford Avenue, has quickly discovered that all of the hundreds of millions, dare I say even billions, of dollars that are generated within this beautiful city have not made it to the neighborhoods that connect to these main streets. These neglected, abandoned, and forgotten spaces of human habitation have been missed by the steady financial wave that overruns the Philadelphia landscape through real estate development, fine art holdings, medical research grants, and tourism. While there is more than enough money floating around the city, not enough of it gets dispersed to the Streets and Sanitation Department to maintain a more visually pristine surrounding for the poorer communities in the city. Therefore, the residents of these communities are forced to navigate life through filth—much like Jesus and the other residents of Nazareth must have had to do.

Another way in which Nazareth was described was with the word "obscure." One of the definitions of the word "obscure" is, "not important or well known." Some other words that could be used in the place of "obscure" are: *unknown, unheard of, unnoticed, undistinguished, unimportant, insignificant, inconsequential, minor, lowly, unsung, unrecognized, forgotten*. If we were to poll a diverse group of people, both male and female, of various ages and backgrounds, who have all have experienced the un-gentrified urban context, I'm sure the vast majority of those people would use one of the before-mentioned words to describe that place. Granted, I have not done a scientific study to prove this, however, throughout

my 49 years of life, I have lived in several un-gentrified urban areas and can attest to these words being expressed from the mouths of the members of these communities.

Even if the people who have lived in these communities have not expressed their feelings of hopeless insignificance, one only needs to take a drive through these areas to see the amount of blight—from run down and abandoned homes, discarded and uncollected trash, unkept vacant lots—as well as the broken-spirited human beings who seem to wander the streets aimlessly, to conclude that these are the forgotten areas of our city.

Nazareth is also described as being “wicked.” There’s not a whole lot written about Nazareth prior to Jesus’ birth so it’s hard to find stories that would speak to this wickedness specifically. However, we can deduce that Nazareth and its surrounding areas were pretty wicked when we consider some of what was going on there. There are biblical accounts of demon possession, financial exploitation of the poor, prostitution, adultery, violence both state-sanctioned and criminal. One of the violent acts committed in and around that region was what today would be known as strong-arm robbery, which was frequently committed by bandits, which in today’s vernacular are called gangs. One of the scholars who confirms this does so in his description of the region: “bandits, pirates of the desert and robbers” were also common hazards along the major trade routes such as the one Joseph and Mary would have traveled, said the Reverend Peter Vasko, a Catholic priest and director of the Holy Land Foundation, an organization that works to retain a Christian presence in Israel and promotes the restoration of sacred Christian sites there.⁵ This is not unlike many of the same situations experienced by the youth raised in un-gentrified urban Philadelphia. Which brings me to my close.

Our lives matter, because the Master of the Universe chose to be one of us. He chose to be born and raised under many of the same socially oppressive conditions that we from the un-gentrified urban neighborhoods of Philadelphia were, and still are, forced to live in. Our lives matter, because Christ was a *Good Guy* living in a *Bad Guy* space, if you will, but rather than seeking a way out for Himself, chose to do it in order to show us the way and bring the ultimate value of life to those discarded and constrained to such circumstances. Our lives matter, because Jesus navigated in physical form the same earthly conditions that oppress and defeat one’s spirit, yet He was not defeated. This is important to those of us who have navigated and continue to navigate these same circumstances because it shows us that our lives matter so much to God that He chose to live like and be one of us. Jesus can truly relate to our suffering, and it gives us hope for the future. James H. Cone helps me with this in his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, when he quotes Martin Kahler saying, “Unless the

Our lives matter, because the Master of the Universe chose to be one of us. He chose to be born and raised under many of the same socially oppressive conditions that we from the un-gentrified urban neighborhoods of Philadelphia were, and still are, forced to live in.

contemporary oppressed know that the Kerygmatic Christ is the real Jesus to the extent that he was completely identified with the oppressed of His earthly ministry, they cannot know that their liberation is a continuation of His work.”⁶ Knowing that the place where Christ was raised was a lot like the places where we, the citizens of the un-gentrified urban context, were raised and are living, lets us know that without the shadow of a doubt, our lives matter.

5. “A Long, Cold Road to Bethlehem: Nativity: Gospel Accounts of Mary and Joseph’s Journey Gloss over the Arduous Reality of Life and Travel in Ancient Galilee, Scholars Say.” *Los Angeles Times*. December 23, 1995. [Accessed July 6, 2019]. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-12-23-me-17102-story.html>.

6. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (N.Y., Orbis Books, 1986), 120.