

VIDEO FOUR: Mark Person, Persons UMC, Drewryville, VA

The Sword of the Spirit: The Word of God

What stories do we tell each other? Who is the keeper of his story, or her story--our stories? Who has the power to shape, to change a narrative from birth? Who has the fundamental right of education, to read and to write? Is your story predetermined because of your family or place of origin or the color of your skin?

Many stories were left untold or told from the perspective of the dominant White culture in Virginia. Video Four tells the story of one insurrection during the time of race-based slavery in Virginia. It is a complicated story to tell, to recall, and to process. The curriculum writers searched for a path into the account based on historical truth, leading us into the Way, Truth, and Life of Jesus. Each of us carries our social, religious, and political context to what we read. We bring ourselves, our family, and faith tradition to reading and understanding the Bible.

In this lesson, we invite you to bring Jesus, as the Word of God, the Alpha and Omega, God's eternal Word into your discussions.

Opening Prayer

Small Group Covenant

Scripture Passage: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. The Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word, nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light. (John 1:1-5 CEB)

Light in the New World

Early Virginians trusted God for a future filled with hope and light, not darkness. What did they envision for themselves and their descendants?

Our founding fathers' radical vision declared that all men are created equal and have the right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. How did the light of Jesus shine through this declaration? What darkness allowed the founders to accept and codify buying and selling human beings as law?

As Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke planted Methodism in America, they shared a vision that "slavery was contrary to the laws of God and hurtful to society." While some Methodists emancipated men, women, and children, many Methodists believed that God allowed slavery, and, therefore, it could not be evil. They thought that to uphold slavery was to protect the authority of the Bible itself.

Those who defended the authority of the Bible were literate. Most slaves were not. In 1819, Virginia instituted an anti-literacy code that prohibited free Negroes and mulattoes from meeting or assembling to teach enslaved people how to read or write. The penalty was up to 20 lashes for any persons convicted of this unlawful assembly.

Benjamin Turner, a God-fearing Methodist and owner of Nathaniel (Nat) Turner discovered that Nat could read as a very young boy. Nat's master encouraged him to study the Bible. Nat Turner studied and learned that Jesus came "to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18 NRSV). In a period of 30 years, five people were masters of Nat Turner in a system of chattel slavery. His last owner was a nine-year-old White boy. Like his father, Nat Turner ran away from this system that sanctioned buying and selling Black bodies as property and commodities for exchange. Unlike his father, Nat Turner, a student of the Bible, and the people's Prophet returned to the plantation with a vision from God "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2 CEB).

One Bible, many interpretations, and warring visions are the roots of Virginia history. Darkness covered the land: redemptive violence, Whiteness as superior, Europeans as blessed, Africans cursed by God, and Native Americans as savage. Where was life that was the light for all people?

VIDEO

Discussion Questions

What are your personal feelings and reactions to Nat Turner's rebellion? (Please listen to each other's answers without the need to judge or correct each other.)

Resisting injustice is a core part of the church's mission. Who are some heroes or role models that you look up to for inspiration in how to fight injustice today?

What is the role of the church in healing these wounds of our history that Nat Turner's story so starkly reveals, and whose legacy of inequality and division is still present among us?

Nat Turner used his sword to murder. Slaveholders dehumanized God's children with their swords of power, property rights, and unearned privilege. The Bible became a weapon that authorized and anointed people who ruled with power "to steal, kill, and destroy." To them, there was no higher authority than the words in the Bible.

Scripture Passage: Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age (Matthew 28:18-20 CEB).

Jesus, the Word of God, the Light of the World, received all authority. What commandments did Jesus expect his disciples to obey? John's gospel echoes this refrain again and again: Love one another as I loved you. Do you want to be my disciples? Loving every child of God is the only way.

Discipleship in Action: The Power of Love

As human beings, we extend love by degrees first with our birth family. Next, the extended family and friends enlarge our circle of love as well as our faith community and nation. Where does the call to love stop? Does our group expand to people who disagree with our social norms or political party? Will we extend love to a stranger? Will we obey and make disciples of all people through the power of God's love?

Time for Self-Reflection

Loving oneself is a prerequisite to loving our neighbors. Do you notice barriers to loving yourself? Can you affirm I am a precious child of God? Reflect on ways to honor and love yourself.

Closing

Take time for comments, questions, and announcements. The facilitator or a participant offers a closing prayer.

Participant

Mark Person is a direct descendant of John Person, founder of Persons UMC in Dreweryville, Virginia, located in Southampton County. He serves as trustee, treasurer, and historian of Persons established in 1838. Mark has been a family spokesperson with the donation of Nat Turner's Bible to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. Also, Mark appeared on television shows documenting his family's role in Nat Turner's Bible history.