

Friday after the Third Sunday in Lent, March 17, 2023

Recommended readings: p. 210, "September 20, 1830," pp. 211-212, "We as People," pp. 220-228, "Citizenship" (part one)

In chapter eight, Martha S. Jones recounts the hard work of securing full citizenship for Black Americans. "Twenty-first century Americans become citizens by many routes, including naturalization after marriage and migration. The foremost way to citizenship is, however, the accident of birth. This is due to the first clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, which established that: 'All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside.' This birthright principle is so foundational that many people assume citizenship in the United States has always worked this way. It has not.... The birthright principle distinguishes the United States as a democracy and while that rule predominates in the Americas, it is not a standard feature of democracies worldwide. Instead, many nations determine a child's citizenship by a mix of factors in addition to place of birth, including the citizenship status of their parents. Today, some U.S. lawmakers charge that birthright citizenship is an arbitrary or excessive principle by which to define national belonging.... These dismissals of birthright citizenship's importance overlook the critical history of how this principle has secured the promise of democracy for all, regardless of differences in color, religion, political affiliation, and more. They also erase the decades of work by Black activists, joined at times after 1830 by some white antislavery allies, to clearly define citizenship in the United States. Their efforts are reflected in the first sentence of the Fourteenth Amendment. In twenty-eight words, it is made plain that Black Americans were not outsiders; they were citizens."

...you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God. (Ezekiel 47:21-23)

The book of Leviticus had commanded the Israelites to treat as citizens the "aliens" who lived among them. Their unwillingness to do that was judged by the prophets as one of the reasons the Israelites were exiled to Babylon. As they prepared to return to their homeland, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel, calling for what we now call "birthright citizenship."

Prayer

God of generosity, forgive our insistence on a mindset of scarcity, saying that there is not enough blessing for it to be offered to all. Forgive our fearfulness and our refusal to trust in your power as we clutch your gifts to ourselves. Teach us how love increases as it is allowed to flow without restriction. Amen.