

## Christian Nationalism & the Most Photographed Barn in America

A sermon on Isaiah 66:10-14

by Rev. Julie Davis, Little White Chapel, Burbank, CA

I am so confused by our country right now. I am seeing things I never thought I would see, and it makes me wonder if I ever saw America at all. These feelings take me back to a novel I love, *White Noise* by the writer Don DeLillo.

Early in the novel, there's a famous passage about a barn. Signs on the interstate advertise the barn as "The Most Photographed Barn in America." So when people show up at the barn, they have an image of the barn already: it is exceptional in their minds.

They show up because they have been told it is the most photographed barn in America, and they assume this to be true. And then they *make* it the most photographed barn in America by taking photographs of it.

Jack, the protagonist, drives to the barn with his friend Murray, and when they arrive and see all of the tourists looking at the barn, Murray says simply, "No one sees the barn."

They fall silent thinking about that.

Then Murray continues, "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn."

They fall silent again.

Murray is saying a lot here, and at the least, one of his meanings is that no one can see the actual barn *as it is* because everyone is looking at the exceptional barn that was advertised and expected and hoped for.

Murray then continues:

“Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender,” he says. “We only see what the others see. ... *We've agreed to be part of a collective perception.* This literally colors our vision.”

He wonders, “What was the barn like before it was photographed? What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how is it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura.”

And so the aura of the thing erases history and reality, makes truth impossible, and replaces these with the power of influence, the desire to be part of a collective experience, and the distortions of expectation.

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As I struggle this Fourth of July to see the America I thought I knew, I feel like Murray. I feel like saying: *America is the barn. No one has really seen America.*

Indeed, before any European had ever set foot on this soil, they had passed innumerable signs printed in tracts and advertised by travel-liars, investors, and speculators: the signs read “Gold is plentiful,” “Fruits drops from the trees,” “Men are free,” “Opportunity is limitless.”

One intrepid liar, well into the 18th century wrote in a promotional book that in America no one works for anyone else. He wrote that more than 150 years after the importation of the first enslaved African!

It is somewhat of a mystery how, but century after century, the messages of those signs have confounded history and replaced actual experience. As more and more people populated this land

because of the signs and their messages, they themselves *reproduced* the signs and messages; generation after generation retold the myths: parents taught their children, teachers taught their students. We called it history. But, Murray's right: it's aura.

And the aura got stronger and stronger. And the aura made America into what people expected it to be. It made America what people needed it to be: Land of equality, land of the free.

It made America the most photographed barn in the world. A thing made of expectation and assumption, not experience. An *unseeable* thing we nonetheless feel we know and love and are.

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I say that it is somewhat of a mystery how the aura of America came to replace the actual reality of this land, but I think I can show you a little bit of the mechanism.

Let's try an experiment. Tracy [our pianist] is going to play a song. You'll know the tune right away but you'll have to follow the slides to sing the lyrics, which is ironic because the lyrics you'll see up on the screen are the *original* lyrics to a tune you know all too well.

What we will be singing is a hymn called "O Mother Dear Jerusalem," and it references the beautiful passages from Isaiah 66 that Deborah read minutes ago.

*[Pianist plays the original hymn "O Mother Dear Jerusalem," which originated the tune we now know as "America the Beautiful"]*

How easily "O Mother Dear Jerusalem" became "America the Beautiful"! How easily a *sacred* hymn with images from a *sacred* text became a song about our *nation*! And how much this transposition hides and obscures — as what's most sacred to us gets associated with nationality!

It truly was easy, logical even, in America to move between the sacred and the patriotic — because Christians from the 15th century on had been advertising America with signs that read, *This is the New Eden/New Canaan/New Jerusalem/New World/Promised Land*’ and on and on.

The power of that Biblical frame *cannot* be overestimated. The legacy of that Biblical frame for America... Well, it made and makes America the world’s most photographed barn. We can’t see what it really is because too much has been projected onto it.

Christian nationalism is so dangerous because it goes the other way, too, as the transposition of the hymn shows us: we read America back onto scripture as if this sixth century BC text is about the United States! So let’s be clear that this passage today is not about America. It is about Judah. It is about God’s final and complete restoration of the people from Babylonian captivity to the Promised Land of Israel.

And it is about a God who loves and suckles us as God’s very children. A mother God who desires for her children the abundance of her breast.

Perhaps, as the *hymn* suggests, we can also invest this passage with our hopes for heaven: That heaven is a place where God will console us like a mother, where we shall rejoice and flourish like the grass, where we will finally be *home*.

Because we are *not* home in this nation. Some of us have this feeling more than ever — and as we feel it, we are looking at the barn and beginning to finally see it. We are beginning to see what the signs and the myths hid.

And if this is our experience, I want to suggest that what we are finally seeing is our own privilege. And that is a good thing. And that is a hard thing. We are recognizing that it was our race,

sex, gender, class, or religious privilege that made it possible for us to believe the myth, the myth of freedom, of equality, of the separation of church and state.

Some Americans have never had the blinding privilege of seeing America through the myth of the promised land. Enslaved Africans who boarded ships against their will, and natives who met the ships with terror in their hearts -- those folks and their generations of children have endured a brutal seeing. As Malcolm X put it in 1964: "Our forefathers weren't the Pilgrims. We didn't land on Plymouth Rock; the rock was landed on us."

I suspect *many* of us right now feel like *something* has landed on us. There's a heaviness, a confusion, and a disillusionment — a vacuum where security used to be and a desperate desire for things that feel like home.

Can we *use* this feeling of being lost and confused? Can we use it as the energy to forge a "third way"? A path to different kinds of wisdom and different kinds of community?

Can we, finally, as *Jesus* did, find our home with the marginalized, and not, as *Christianity* did, with empire and power?

God restored home for the Israelites. After generations in exile, God brought them back to the land they believed in. God can do the same for us.

But here's how it must happen. We must travel the gospel road. We must embrace our exile. We must embrace the exile in us; and in our hearts and in our labors and our struggles and our joys, we must unite with the marginalized, who have the most to teach us about being *resilient*, about being *human*, and about being *Christ*-like.

Amen.