“For a Time Such as This”:
Scripture and Theological Ethics

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There is a time, a *kairos*, for everything and everyone under the heavens. This time, our time, challenges us in unique ways. There is a public battle over what is fake and what is truth even while essentially sadist policies are enacted against the vulnerable in our land. These include migrants and the poor, the uninsured, the religious and ethnic other, and African Americans; while still, 60 days after hurricane Maria,¹ millions of Puerto Ricans — U.S. citizens all — languish under horrendous conditions, essentially unattended by federal emergency response. In a time such as this we do well, then, to consider how we as a Latinx community and allies approach scripture for the task of theological ethics, the task of resisting and transforming unjust realities of profound suffering, the task of inching ever closer to a Kingdom of Justice, Love, and Hope.

In the brief space of this reflection I will share some thoughts on Latinx’s use of scripture for theological ethics. A social ethicist by training, my use of scripture enjoys loose boundaries and methodology, interreligious intersections, and interlocutors from outside the walls of the theological academy or the church. This might challenge more classically prescribed notions of the use of scripture in ethical reflection. The deep grounding I find in the story of Jesus the Liberator and the Christ, the narrative of the early Christian communities, and the heritage of the Jewish tradition in its complex and challenging fullness becomes a summons for me to a kind of life many of us call
discipleship. This life is guided by clear biblical principles such as the Sermon on the Mount and the Decalogue, but it is for the most part figured out along the way, in comunidad and en conjunto, in prayer and liturgy, but mainly in praxis and service to the most vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed.

Let me share a story with you about a recent project in which I was privileged to take part, and which I believe reflects the approach to the use of scripture in theological ethics I just briefly outlined, and that I see reflected in the work of Latinx ethicists. About three years ago Rabbi Or Rose from Hebrew College recruited a number of us to contribute to a volume dedicated to presenting different texts from our distinct traditions. The invitation was to “choose a short textual selection and share with readers how this source helps to inspire, guide, or inform their work in the interreligious sphere” for a volume that would help folks “engage constructively across lines of difference.” The selected text would hopefully represent themes of our work in interreligious reflection and cooperation. “Texts,” in this case, was a broadly understood term, as the volume sought to include reflections on scripture, poetry, fiction, theological thought, political commentary, and other texts considered formative for our interfaith work.

I decided to choose a text within a text. I chose Oscar Romero’s second-to-last sermon before being murdered by Salvadoran paramilitaries on March 24, 1980. The sermon was delivered toward the end of the Lenten season, over the diocesan radio station in San Salvador, a station that had been bombed and destroyed a number of times before this transmission.² The lengthy message used that day’s texts from Isaiah (43:16-21), Philippians (3:8-14), and John (8:1-11) to emphasize the hope that ought to
be the Salvadoran hope, that of being risen in Christ Jesus, because they were already a people going through crucifixion. Romero referenced the bloody repression suffered by the majority in El Salvador, naming attacks by military, paramilitary, and guerrillas, and most importantly, naming the dead, the impacted families, those who had disappeared. He used his message to assure those who were suffering that they were not abandoned by a God who came to know unjust suffering in the flesh.

As the faithful around the country were heading toward Holy Week, which always includes the readings from Exodus detailing Jewish enslavement in Egypt and God’s liberating hand and power, Romero makes a particular reference to the Exodus narrative to come. In his final broadcasted homily he included a stern challenge to the military. This is considered to be the message that finalized the plans for his assassination. Romero was killed the next afternoon, while saying mass at the Chapel of the Hospital of Divine Mercy. His words are as follows:

Let no one be offended because we use the divine words read at our mass to shed light on the social, political and economic situation of our people. Not to do so would be un-Christian. Christ desires to unite himself with humanity, so that the light he brings from God might become life for nations and individuals.

I know many are shocked by this preaching and want to accuse us of forsaking the gospel for politics. But I reject this accusation. I am trying to bring to life the message of the Second Vatican Council and the meetings at Medellín and Puebla…
Each week I go about the country listening to the cries of the people, their pain from so much crime, and the ignominy of so much violence. Each week I ask the Lord to give me the right words to console, to denounce, to call for repentance…

Every country lives its own “exodus;” today El Salvador is living its own exodus. Today we are passing to our liberation through a desert strewn with bodies and where anguish and pain are devastating us. Many suffer the temptation of those who walked with Moses and wanted to turn back and did not work together. It is the same old story. God, however, wants to save the people by making a new history…

I would like to make a special appeal to the men of the army, and specifically to the ranks of the National Guard, the police and the military. Brothers, you come from our own people. You are killing your own brother peasants when any human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God which says, “Thou shall not kill.” No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. No one has to obey an immoral law. It is high time you recovered your consciences and obeyed your consciences rather than a sinful order. The church, the defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such an abomination. We want the government to face the fact that
reforms are valueless if they are to be carried out at the cost of so much blood. In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression.

The church preaches your liberation just as we have studied it in the holy Bible today. It is a liberation that has, above all else, respect for the dignity of the person, hope for humanity’s common good, and the transcendence that looks before all to God and only from God derives its hope and its strength.

“To console, to denounce, to call for repentance.” In Romero’s message drawing from these key scriptural texts in salvation history, at a critical time when so many around him were being ruthlessly persecuted, abducted, and executed, he stresses God’s unwavering will “To save the people by making a new history.”

Romero’s scriptural reflection is organic to the community, bears its suffering, and lifts it up in hope, a challenging hope that even embraces the perpetrators of that violence. In true base Christian community form, he takes God’s liberating activity in the Exodus text as a message of empowerment for all oppressed peoples of El Salvador to break through the incessant persecution of the military and proclaim God’s salvation for all people. He did this not only for the oppressed, but also for the oppressor by extending the summons of God’s liberation from tyranny to the military as well. Approaching the biblical text as testament of God’s history of salvation, Romero
highlights how salvation and liberation are echoed throughout history, summoning each generation to write their own text, their own liberation in the Spirit.

Latinx scholars such as Virgilio Elizondo, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Elizabeth Conde Frasier, Eldín Villafañe, Jean-Pierre Ruíz, Jacqueline Hidalgo, and so many others also approach scripture with an eye toward the ways in which the biblical text in conversation with the lives of the oppressed summons entire communities to liberative practices in the everyday, en la lucha of a people often excluded, made invisible, underpaid, detained, entrapped, deported, ignored to languish. I began by stating that Latinxs’ use of scripture for theological ethics exhibits permeable and flexible boundaries as to what is “text” and as to who ought to be our interlocutors, our compañeros on the journey of faith. With Virgil Elizondo and his generation we discovered how the people of the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio and other places near the border read the story of Jesus as one of their own, as the marginalized Galilean peasant, the stone that the builders rejected. Their story, then, is not alien to or even an addendum to the biblical text. It is an integral part of the text, of its interpretation, and its receptivity as a message of liberation and hope. For Isasi-Díaz the text expanded beyond scripture to include Latina’s narratives of struggle for identity, liberation, autonomy, wholeness, and justice, sometimes within prison walls, sometimes on the streets, in kitchens, or harsh work places. Elizabeth Conde Frasier asks us to make children an essential interlocutor and voice of how we look at our texts. As for me, a Catholic engaged in interfaith theological education, my use of scripture for the work of justice demands that we attend to perceived and real fissures among different groups, particularly among groups who rarely get invited to conversations about their
political and social destiny. In particular, I am moved to uncover facile claims of unity or homogeneity among Latinxs and between Latinxs and other groups that may veil deep discord on critical issues of justice at this time. I cannot engage the texts – broadly understood – for ethical reflection outside of the context of my conversations and collaborations with Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Humanist students.

We find ourselves at a time that reflects the idolatry of our certainties. In many respects Christian leadership in the public square has established more intransigent and ill-informed tests of fidelity, heavily mingled with an obtuse vision of patriotism. How and with whom we read our sacred texts – again, broadly understood – can be the difference that allows us to interrupt this idolatry. We must read the texts that come out of the friendships established in detention centers between Syrian refugees and Central American detainees, both groups rounded up and locked up as sacrifices to the idols of our certainties. We must read the texts that come out of our children and youth, walking out of their schools in protest when their black and brown friends, or queer friends or undocumented friends are on the receiving end of racist approaches to education and gendered policies that threaten everyone’s dignity. We must listen to the preaching coming out of Native American water protectors, environmental activists – many murdered for their texts that are their very lives, such as Berta Cáceres in Honduras, and the scientists that provide a different scripture to speak of God’s magnificent creation. Breaking the idolatry of our certainties in such a time as this means reading the texts, the subtexts, the texts within texts where the Spirit of a new history edges and urges us on.
These reflections are meant to honor the work of Eldín Villafañe. Through his development of an urban liberation Kingdom ethic he pushed the theological academy to acknowledge some of the most ignored and trivialized texts: those of the urban poor, the storefront churches, and the urban networks of survival, empowerment, and resistance. In the name of the Spirit of life and justice, Villafañe showed that these texts reach back to the biblical witness of the God of life and the liberating Spirit, while sustaining the eschatological hope of a Kingdom that comes despite our best efforts to sabotage it. It truly has been enriching and challenging to have Villafañe’s work lift up the urban text as a hermeneutic for the use of scripture in ethical reflection.7

For a time such as this, a time measured in moments of outrage, violence, exclusion, and crass violations of the human spirit, I invite you to be summoned by a text and interlocutors outside the boundaries of your disciplines and your churches. Like those already in the canon of Latinx theology have done, be summoned to promote an ethic of unbounded grace, challenged by the ever present Spirit of Justice, empowering the potential for transformation and even a revolution of love as the in-breaking of the Kingdom announces what we are to become en Cristo Jesús.

End Notes

1 These remarks, originally prepared for the La Comunidad gathering at the 2017 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, fell on the two-month anniversary of hurricane María making landfall on Puerto Rico. Reports around that date still had over 50% of the population on the island struggling without power, an exodus from the island to the mainland of at least 100,000, and mounting challenges in


3 When originally delivering this reflection on the two-month anniversary of hurricane María striking Puerto Rico I was forced to pause on the word “exodus”. This word carries with it a particularly painful sting. With hundreds of thousands fleeing Puerto Rico (some estimates put the number at 500,000 by the year 2020 as a result of hurricane María and its aftermath), Puerto Ricans are seeing a massive exodus with profound consequences for the stability and redevelopment of the island. For a detailed review of various waves of emigration from Puerto Rico please see Pedro Cabán, “Puerto Rico’s Forever Exodus,” nacla.org (February 22, 2018), https://nacla.org/news/2018/02/22/puerto-rico%E2%80%99s-forever-exodus. Accessed April 16, 2018.


6 Elizabeth Conde Frasier, Listen to the Children: Conversations with Immigrant Families (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011).

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