

Turntables *Psalm 87*

Introduction

Janelle Monáe was born in Kansas City, Kansas on December 1, 1985. She grew up in the Baptist church where her family also performed as musicians; it was in the church that Monáe learned to sing. Her mother worked as a janitor and motel maid while her father was a truck driver. When Monáe was only five, her parents divorced and sometime later, her mother remarried a postal worker. Monáe has released 3 albums, 20 singles, and 18 music videos to-date.

Not only is Monáe a gifted singer, but she is also a very good actress. In 2016, she made her theatrical debut in two high-profile productions in the academy award winning movie, *Moonlight* (Best Picture) and in *Hidden Figures*, where she starred as the aerospace engineer, Mary Jackson. Monáe has received 8 Grammy Awards, she received the Billboard Women in Music Rising Star Award in 2015, and the Trailblazer of the Year Award in 2018. In 2013, Monáe was honored by the Boston City Council with the naming of October 16, 2013, as “Janelle Monáe Day” in recognition of her artistry and social leadership.

Sometime last year, Monáe was asked to write the theme song for the critically acclaimed documentary, *All In: The Fight for Democracy*, which examines “the history of voter suppression and the activists who fight for the rights of U.S. citizens.” It is worth noting that the documentary (which can be seen on Amazon Prime) received 100% positive reviews on Rottentomatoes.com. Monáe was in a writing funk because of the emotional and mental toll the pandemic was having on her, but after one of the producers showed her a rough cut of the documentary, she wrote “Turntables.”

After Monáe watched the film she said that she reflected on something said in the film by Stacey Abrams regarding voter suppression: “I’m not optimistic nor pessimistic. I’m determined.”¹ As she began to think about how hope and rage without action is useless, she concluded that “there is no solution to our nation’s problems if people do not act and do whatever they can to help amplify the truth.” In her interview with *Variety* about her song, Monáe explained what she meant by her lyrics:

when I said, “America, you a lie”... *this* is important, because when I was writing that lyric, I was not excited about saying it, but it was also a cathartic experience. I think that we have to remember that truth is at the center of any healing and any reconciliation. We can’t heal or reconcile without the truth. And the truth is that America has not held up to

¹ Chris Williams, “Janelle Monae on Why She Went ‘All In’ With ‘Turntables’ to Spotlight Doc’s Tales of Racial Injustice” (*Variety*; March, 5, 2021).

its promise. The folks who were in or have been in the position of power have not taken care of the people that it promised to take care of. And because America is a place that I call home, a place that I'm proud of, a place that my ancestors helped build, it's hard to call America a lie. But the reality is that there are people who are treated unjustly, and I don't need to go down the list of what those people look like or where those people come from. We see it; we know it.²

The song's release in 2020 came in the midst of a pandemic that we still find ourselves in and the prominence and rise of both the Black Lives Matter movement and the organization. It also was released when Critical Race Theory was a national conversation. For many, the lines from Monáe's song resonates: "Hands dirty, mind clean, A different vision, with a new dream." What dream is she referring too? I think it is the dream Martin Luther King talked about in his "I Have a Dream" speech. In his speech, King said something that many, like Monáe, still feel is true:

"When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men - yes, black men as well as white men - would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds."

There is an uneasiness in our nation felt by people of all ethnicities. There is talk that we are more divided as a nation than ever before. There are many who feel strongly that there is a system that stands against people of color. Today, you may have heard of Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matter (the movement), and The Black Lives Matter organization. To mention these already is causing some of you to feel uncomfortable, defensive, or even angry.

I think we are all familiar with the phrase, "Black Lives Matter." You may be aware that Black Lives Matter as a movement is different than the Black Lives Matter organization. The Black Lives Matter movement began as an outcry over the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota and what is perceived as the ongoing systemic racism in America. The movement said that the lives of black people matter in the same way that evangelicals say that the lives of the unborn matter. Out of the Black Lives Matter movement came the organization which is something much different. The BLM organization may say that they exist to promote the sanctity of the lives of people of color, but its founders are Marxist and the organization's mission promotes transgender rights and the dissolving of the black nuclear family.

To be honest, I did not know what Critical Race Theory was until recently. The best definition I have heard of CRT so far is the one given by Tony Evans, a black man, who serves as the founder and senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas; here is how he defined CRT:

Critical Race Theory is a post-Civil Rights, social construct that seeks to demonstrate how unjust laws have served as the embedded foundation and filter through which racist

² *Ibid.*

attitudes, behavior, policies, and structures have been rooted throughout the fabric of America, American life, and systems.

There is much that I want to say and should say, but time will not allow me to do so today. What I will say is that I do not believe America is racist, I do not believe that its laws are racist in nature, I do not believe that most white people are racist, nor do I believe America is a lie. However, slavery existed long before America was founded, slavery was an integral part of the economy and way of life in America for decades after our nation was founded, and that it has only been 57 years since segregation was officially outlawed in the United States, therefore I have no expectation that the roots of an old system birthed out of an ideology that was racist in nature will die off quickly.

Since Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, America has gotten better in the way people of color are treated... so much so that we had our first black president and now have our first black and Indian female vice president (regardless of how you may feel about their politics). What I also believe, is that there is much work that still needs to be done. America is not a lie, but it is a project; the promissory note our founding fathers signed guaranteeing the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are still not experienced by certain segments of our nation. In America nearly 50,000 children and women are trafficked as sex slaves and the legalized porn industry is one of the primary sources that fund such trafficking, and a mother's womb remains the most dangerous place for a baby with just under one million abortions in America this past year alone. We still live in a nation where human life is not given equal value.

Do you know why we hate one another? Do you know why we murder each other? Do you know why wars exist? Do you know why more humans suffer as slaves today than any other time in human history? Do you know why we live in a world where genocides still exist, why some are considered worthless because of the color of their skin or their ethnicity? The answer to these questions are found in the Bible where we learn of Satan, a being who hates all of humanity because each of us are born reflecting the image of God regardless of ethnicity or culture. The good news is that God has promised us a city where we will experience that which only nations can dream of; we are given a glimpse of that promise in Psalm 87.

The Paradise of God Promised (vv. 1-3)

The city on the holy mount the Psalmist is talking about here is Jerusalem, but it is much more than Jerusalem. Jerusalem, which is also referred in the Bible as the city of God, the city of David, the city the Messiah will reign from, and it is also known as Zion. The Jerusalem that David reigned as king was not the city God promised, for it was only a prototype of what was coming. The city God loves and will give to his people is the one Abraham longed and looked for:

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:8–

10)

This is not only the city Abraham was looking and longing for, but it is the one Jesus promised us, when he said: **“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you”** (John 14:1-2)? It is the same city that is described in Hebrews 13:14, **“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”**

This city we were made for, God established, esteems, and exalts. This city is not one that pilgrims discovered or a nation taken by force, but one that God established that can never be destroyed, polluted by sin and wicked politicians, and will never fade into obscurity with age. God could have picked any place he wanted but chose Jerusalem. Why did he choose Jerusalem as his city? We are given the answer to that question in Psalm 24, **“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers”** (Psalm 24:1–2).

We are told that, **“the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob”** (v. 2). The gates of Zion represent the pathway into God’s city and the place where the people gathered. As one commentator pointed out,

The gates of the city not only provided protection from enemies but also served as the primary pathway of entrance, where both visitors and citizens gained access. Inside the gates usually was a plaza where friends met together, the people bought and sold their goods, city officials pronounced legal decisions, and preparations were made for entering the place of worship. In essence, Zion’s gates represented Israel’s heart and soul (Ross, Psalms, vol. 2, 794). God set his delight on the essence of their very being.³

The gates of Zion were the life of the city and it is where people of all backgrounds and experiences gathered to do life together. God loves the gates of Zion because it is where his people gathered together from all over Israel. Why Zion? What’s so special about Jerusalem? What is so special about the people who gather in her gates? They are loved by God. Why are they loved by God? Because he loves them. Maybe you are asking: “Show me chapter and verse where it says that!” Okay, check out the answer God gives for why he loves the gates of Zion in the book of Deuteronomy,

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

(Deuteronomy 7:6–8)

Zion is not only the place God established and esteems, but it is the place where his glory will be experienced and enjoyed. This is why the Psalmist sings, **“Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God”** (v. 3). The city Abraham looked for and the city we long for is the city that the apostle John describes in Revelation 21,

³ Platt, D., Mason, M., & Shaddix, J. (2020). [*Exalting Jesus in psalms 51-100*](#). Nashville, TN: Holman Reference.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’” (Revelation 21:1–3)

What will life be like when we inherit this city? Peace. It is a peace God will bring through his Son Jesus, as was promised by the angel Gabriel to Mary: **“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end”** (Luke 1:31–33). This is the reason why America is a dream that cannot fully deliver what our founding fathers hoped for. There is only one government that can bring the kind of justice and peace we all long for, and it is the one God will establish through Jesus forever as the prophet Isaiah foretold long ago:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:6–7)

The People of God Celebrated (vv. 4-7)

Is the city of Zion only for Israelites? No, it has always been for the nations. Notice who is included in the city: **“Rahab and Babylon, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush...”** (v. 4). These represent Gentile nations! Rahab is the nickname given to Egypt (see Isa. 30:7), Babylon oppressed Israel while Philistia and Tyre sought to destroy Israel. Cush sought to persuade Israel to follow after other gods. None of these nations were friends of God or of God’s people, but it is from these nations that God will draw people to himself to be his people who will be loved with the same covenantal love that Israel enjoyed as a people. This is the point of verse 5, **“And of Zion it shall be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her’; for the Most High himself will establish her.”**

No culture and no people will be above the other, as all of the redeemed will be one people while at the same time retain the beauty of their individual ethnicity. How will they be redeemed? Through Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (see John 1:29-34). This is why Jesus was nailed to the cross! He died for Rahab and Babylon, Philistia and Tyre, and he even died for Cush! This is why all of heaven sings today: **“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.’”** (Revelation 5:9–10).

In our sin and fallenness, we are a species set on destroying ourselves. Why? Because we are the only species on earth that have set ourselves against the God of Zion! If you bristle at this, what part of Romans 3 do you not understand?

...as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Romans 3:10–18)

This is why the Bible gives us the following indictment: **“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air [the devil], the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:1-3).**

So what happened? Jesus happened! Jesus died on a cross and endured the wrath of God that you and I deserved. Why did God choose to do it this way? It is the same answer he gave Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6-8... because he chose to love you (see Eph. 2:4-10). So, what is the result? It is just as the old children’s song states: “Red, and Yellow, Black and White, they are precious in his sight... Jesus loves the little children of the world.” Oh, my dear brothers and sisters, consider who you are in Christ, not what CRT assumes that you are! Listen to what the Word of God says that you are: **“for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:26–29).**

If you are a Christian, you are now a sojourner and an exile in the country you live. Your citizenship is now found in Christ and his Kingdom. What God says of you is who you now are: **“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9-10).**

Conclusion

Because a day is coming when people from every tribe and nation will find themselves in the gates of Zion because of the cross of Christ, the psalm concludes: **“Singers and dancers alike say, ‘All my springs are in you’” (v. 7).** People from China, Russia, Korea, Europe, Africa, South America, and North America will find their home within the gates of Zion under the rule and reign of King Jesus. Although they will retain their ethnicity, their tribe will be Jesus’ and their national color will be red with the blood of the Lamb! Only then will we know the peace and justice we all long for. In God’s kingdom there will be no room any form of nationalism but the one that will be enjoyed as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Our world is a complete mess right now. It is divided, it is violent, and it is dark. What is happening in our nation may not improve but only get worse, but that does not have to be the story of the Church of Jesus Christ. America cannot not be a shining city on a hill in the same way the Church is called to be. It is not America that Jesus described in the sermon on the Mount, but we the Church: **“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”** (Matthew 5:14–16).

Amen.