



# Faith in a Prison Cell:

*A Personal Narrative of  
Transformation*

*By Peter Armstrong*

**M**Y ALARM WENT off at 5:00 a.m. that Tuesday morning in mid-January. I rolled out of bed, drank my coffee, and went quickly into my morning meditation. I had a lot to do before I headed out. When the twenty minutes were up and the chime on my phone rang, I made myself a big breakfast, because I had no idea when my next meal would be. As the sun came up over Washington, DC, I started working on emails that I knew I wouldn't be able to respond to later. Finally, when it was just about time to leave, I took

a big black marker and wrote on my left arm a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and on my right arm I wrote my girlfriend's phone number, in case I was allowed a free call. With that, I got on my bike and hit the road.

The night before, about fifty people had gathered in a church in the Capitol Hill district to listen as leaders of faith and people who had personally been affected by the death penalty talked about this cruel practice. SueZann Bosler shared with us how her father, a pastor, had always preached about forgiveness and mercy, up until the day he was killed by a knife-wielding intruder in the church parsonage. SueZann had been there and was also attacked when she came to her father's aid. She listened to her father take his last breaths a few feet away as she lay on the floor with multiple knife wounds, feigning death to save her own life. But her story doesn't end there. After she healed from the physical trauma, SueZann went on to become an advocate of abolishing the death penalty and saved the life of the man who took the life of her father. Listening to her story that night, I felt my heart being moved by the power of her lived example of witness to the Gospel.

After SueZann spoke, we also heard from a man named Derrick Jamison. Derrick is a black man who, along with countless other black people across the country, suffers from a racist system that falsely accuses people of color at a much higher rate than white people.<sup>1</sup> Derrick spent twenty years of his life on death row for a crime he didn't commit, until he was finally exonerated by new evidence and walked free. He stated that the government spent more than eighteen million dollars trying to kill him, but, in the end, failed to do so. Hearing him talk, I could see only the surface of the injustice that he had endured for all those years and knew I would never be able to fully comprehend what he had experienced. Most impressive of all, however, was to hear that, on that day in January, he was preparing to go with us the next morning to the steps of the US Supreme Court, just a few blocks from the church where we had gathered, to engage in civil disobedience against the death penalty. This action would take place on the day before another man, Ricky Gray, was set to be executed in nearby Virginia and it would be Derrick's first time to return to jail since he had been set free.

At the end of the evening, Shane Claiborne gathered us all in prayer, to center us on the stories we had heard that night and

take a moment to let all that we had experienced together sink in. Those of us who were willing to engage in civil disobedience the next morning were asked to take a stand and gather in the center for prayer. I stood, moved by the stories I had just heard and still unsure of what I was getting myself into. I felt the weight of what I was signing up for sink in as we received blessings from others who were there to support us. Afterward, those from out of town returned to the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker house, where they were staying, and I went home to my group house in Columbia Heights.

That next day, prepared for the day's protest action, I headed out on my bike. I met the other protesters at the lobbying office of the United Methodist Church, across the street from the Supreme Court. It was a gray, somber day, and it started to rain just as we were walking over to the Supreme Court building to begin our protest. Those of us who had planned to engage in civil disobedience walked up the marble steps and unfurled a banner that stated, "STOP EXECUTIONS!" Meanwhile, more than a hundred additional protesters stood on the sidewalk below. In the pouring rain, the two groups of people—separated by about fifty yards—sang in unison words rooted in the prophet Jeremiah (see 17:8):

We shall not, we shall not be moved  
We shall not, we shall not be moved  
Just like a tree, that's standing by the water  
We shall not be moved.

Meanwhile, the police officers took us aside, one by one, zip-tied our wrists, and took us away to the Central Detention Facility.

It seemed like a long time before I saw daylight again. We were all put into our cells and I spent the rest of the day and that night lying on my back on a cushion-less steel tray of a bunk bed. I tried not to move around too much, because the steel underneath my back would indent itself and then pop back out again with a loud bang—as if I were lying on the roof of a car. The cockroaches seemed to increase in size and number as the night wore on and a light blazed right above my eyes in the upper bunk. It was a difficult night, and I never did get my one phone call. In the words of faith leader, activist, and author Lisa Sharon Harper, one of the #DC18

# The entire Gospel of Luke is one long lesson in speaking truth to power.

who got arrested on that day, “Halfway I wondered if I could make it” out of the “bowels of D.C.’s domestic hell.”<sup>2</sup> Luckily, I eventually figured out a way to use one of my boots for a pillow and to block out some of the light by removing one arm from a sleeve and folding it over my eyes so that I could finally get some rest.

During those sixteen hours I lay waiting for something to happen, I had a lot of time to reflect on how I ended up in that little jail cell. This certainly wasn’t what I would have predicted when I first became a Christian, just two years prior, during my senior year in college. At that time, I had little or no interest in political engagement and even actively worked to keep the religious student group with which I was involved at Georgetown out of the university’s politics. I was interested in faith and Christianity because of the contemplative tradition I was exploring through my own reading and practice of meditation; the idea of a God who works through us in daily life, transforms us through prayer, and ultimately comes to live within and among us is what drew, and still draws, me back to faith. But that faith had very little to do with getting arrested on the steps of the Supreme Court building and fighting to change our country’s laws—or so I thought at the time.

Little did I know, back then, that I would soon be nudged in the direction of a deeper engagement with our society’s politics, and, ultimately, my own faith. Upon graduating from college, I went to live for a year on the north side of St. Louis, not far from Ferguson, with a program called the Episcopal Service Corps. I had recently joined the Episcopal Church and was talking with my rector about becoming a priest, and she advised me to take a year to engage fully with the Church and see if it really aligned with all that I imagined it to be. I was thrown into the post-Ferguson social justice activist environment of St. Louis, where I quickly began learning about my own white privilege and what I needed to do

to help dismantle the oppressive systems from which I benefited. #BlackLivesMatter was on everybody's minds, so I started going to protests, teach-ins, book talks, and other events to learn more, feel more, and get a glimpse of and better understand the gap between the experiences of white and black Americans.

In the end, it was through relationships with people different from myself that I was convinced of the need to step out into the streets. Just as Jesus was moved to ministry by entering into relationship with other people along his path, we too are moved by stories and relationships. For me, it took actually showing up at different events in order to learn about white (and male, and straight, and other forms of) privilege—and meeting people who were experiencing the negative side of this phenomenon—for me to have my heart transformed with compassion and a desire for action. In short, I could read all about redlining, mass incarceration, and the case for reparations, but it wasn't until I actually started showing up at actions with the intention of being transformed through relationship with other people that I began to want to become a better ally.

As a straight white man whose faith has been formed in contemplative Christian circles, places dominated by white, male speakers (even if the majority of audiences consist of women), I need to seek out voices that are different from my own. In a multicultural, multiethnic, pluralistic society, choosing to live comfortably in a bubble of people who share almost everything in common with me—as I have done for most of my life thus far—is a rejection of God's work of Creation, for God didn't create us all the same. We are not meant to live isolationist lives, because God created diversity and it was good (see Genesis 1). And though I often fail to keep my practice of stepping out of my comfort zone as fastidiously as I do my daily meditation, I take comfort in knowing that even Jesus needed to be called out by the Canaanite woman (see Matthew 15:21–28), and learned from her truth in the process.

The work of getting to know others different than ourselves, made so difficult by our society's divisions, is nevertheless the work of following Jesus. I knew I was going to be transformed by following Derrick, SueZann, and the others up the steps of the Supreme Court building. I knew their stories would take time to sink into my heart, but being there with them, sitting with them through

court, and staying in touch even after taking action, has continued to challenge me, reminding me of the ways our society needs to change. It keeps the “WWJD?” question—“What would Jesus do?”—right before my eyes.

We know that Jesus wouldn’t execute people. That, for many, is a no-brainer.<sup>3</sup> But the real question is whether we know what Jesus would do with the various societal problems facing us today. Many say that their faith is personal and not to be mixed with their politics. But, in my journey over the past two years, I’ve come to understand that religion has everything to do with politics. Jesus wasn’t executed because he went around healing people; he was crucified as the worst kind of criminal because his Gospel message was viewed as dangerous by the ruling class. In fact, the entire Gospel of Luke is one long lesson in speaking truth to power—to the corrupt elite in Jerusalem. If we Christians claim to have anything to do with Jesus, then we must inherently be engaged with the political issues of our time. We need not seek division and further polarization; however, we can continue to engage in tough debate and conversation across dividing lines, expressing our own deeply held convictions and being willing to be changed by our encounter with the other, because that is the way that Jesus engaged with others.

The eighteen of us who were arrested for protesting the death penalty were finally released from jail on Wednesday evening, after thirty-one hours in the belly of the district’s judicial system. I was exhausted, worn out, and could hardly think of anything more than how glad I was to finally be able to eat real food again and lie down on a comfy cushion. But, after biking home and grabbing a quick bite to eat, I headed to my church to catch the end of the monthly Taizé service. We sang our songs, and I said a prayer for Ricky Gray, who was scheduled to be executed later that night. As we sat in the silence, I knew that the past two days had changed me. I was transformed; I was healed. But, most of all, I felt that I had come to a fuller understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. •