

“100 and One!”

Steve Ramer
Sunday, June 6, 2021

Scripture: Jeremiah 6:10-14

Jeremiah 6:10 To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? See, their ears are closed, they cannot listen. The word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it. 11 But I am full of the wrath of the Lord; I am weary of holding it in. Pour it out on the children in the street, and on the gatherings of young men as well; both husband and wife shall be taken, the old folk and the very aged. 12 Their houses shall be turned over to others, their fields and wives together; for I will stretch out my hand against the inhabitants of the land, says the Lord. 13 For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. 14 They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

Sermon

Our nation recently marked two very tragic anniversaries. First there was the one year anniversary, on May 25, of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis, MN police.



The other occurred this past week, one hundred years ago, when one of the nation's most prosperous Black communities — the Greenwood district of Tulsa — was destroyed by a White mob.

In less than 24 hours perhaps 300 African Americans were killed, and more than 10,000 left homeless as their entire neighborhood was burned to the ground.

We can only hope and pray that by remembering those horrible events white America not only will learn some important history but can use this information to awaken its conscience!

The death of George Floyd, one man, did awaken the voices of millions in this country which has sparked some real changes. But the continued murders of unarmed black persons by law enforcement in the past year painfully reminds us that far more needs to be done.

The horror of what occurred in Tulsa seems only eclipsed by the additional tragedy of the subsequent successful cover up. So successful that most white Americans have only recently become aware of what actually happened.

I certainly did not hear about it in U.S. history classes growing up, but likely learned about it while attending seminary in the early 90's at Howard University (let's hear it for the HBCUs!) Hopefully, you all have been able to watch or read some of the many recent documentaries produced for this anniversary.

But whether the information is new or merely a timely review it must still be placed into a context in order to be fully understood. And, especially for us white folks, we must also listen to the voices of our African American sisters and brothers, as they inform us and reflect upon their experiences of systemic oppression, if meaningful long term change is to occur.

First, I would like to share parts of a Washington Post Op Ed by Eugene Robinson to help place the Tulsa massacre into context:

“No one should be under the impression that the burning of ‘Black Wall Street’ in Tulsa a century ago was a one-off atrocity. In fact, it was part of a long and shameful pattern in which White mobs used murderous violence to erase African American prosperity.

It happened in Atlanta in September 1906. Fabricated “reports” of sexual assaults by Black men against White women were used to inflame White vigilantes to attack African Americans... Store windows were smashed, in what amounted to an American Kristallnacht. Men and women were randomly snatched from streetcars and murdered. No one knows how many Black Atlantans were killed in the riot — at least 25, according to most historians, and perhaps many more.

It happened in East St. Louis, Ill., in the summer of 1917. White workers at steel, aluminum and meatpacking plants resented the fact that African Americans — part of the Great Migration moving north out of the Deep South — were filling jobs. Thousands of White men marched through downtown, attacking Black people on the street and setting fires... A reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch wrote: “For an hour and a half last evening I saw the massacre of helpless negroes... in downtown East St. Louis, where black skin was a death warrant.” Estimates of the final death toll ranged from 40 to 250.

It happened in Chester, Pa., that same year. Once again, Whites resented the influx of African American workers who were competing for jobs in the booming industrial sector. Once again, mobs attacked Black businesses and individuals at random.”

And it happened nearly 60 times across different state in the US, during 1919 earning it the title, “Red Summer!”

For a list of the cities and states where riots occurred, visit this website:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Summer

NOTE: The list is based on George Edmund Haynes' report, as summarized in the *New York Times* (1919).

Perhaps the worst of the 1919 riots was in Chicago, where the spark came on July 27, when a Black teenager crossed the unofficial color line demarcating where Whites and African Americans were allowed to swim at the 29th Street beach.

The youth was pelted with rocks by a White beachgoer and drowned. When Black Chicagoans protested, Whites rioted and set fires throughout black neighborhoods. Chicago police refused to take action against the attackers of white mobs led mostly by ethnic Irish.

In the end, 38 people were dead (23 Blacks, 15 whites), 537 injured, and 1,000 Black families left homeless.

In rural Georgia, a riot in Jenkins County led to 6 deaths, as well as the destruction of the Carswell Grove Baptist Church and three black Masonic lodges in Millen, Georgia.

The Charleston riot resulted in the deaths of 3 black men and the injury of 5 white and 18 black men. Following the riot, an investigation found that four U.S. sailors and one civilian—all white men—initiated the riot.

In early July a riot in Longview, Texas led to the deaths of at least 4 men and destroyed the black neighborhood in town.

Local police in Bisbee, Arizona attacked the 10th U.S. Cavalry, an African-American unit known as the "Buffalo Soldiers."

Beginning on July 19, Washington, D.C. saw four days of mob violence against black individuals and businesses perpetrated by white men — many in the military uniforms — in response to the rumored arrest of a black man for rape of a white woman.

In Norfolk, Virginia, a white mob attacked a homecoming celebration for black veterans of World War I and at least 6 people were shot.

The Knoxville Riot in Tennessee broke out after the arrest of a black suspect on suspicion of murdering a white woman. While searching for the prisoner, the lynch mob stormed the county jail, and liberated 16 white prisoners, including suspected murderers. The white mob then attacked the African-American business district leaving at least 7 dead and wounding more than 20.

The riot in Omaha, Nebraska erupted after a mob of over 10,000 whites attacked and burned the county courthouse to force the release of a black prisoner accused of raping a white woman.

The mob first lynched the suspect and then burned his body. The group then spread out, attacking black neighborhoods and stores, destroying property valued at more than a million dollars.

The massacre of blacks in Phillips County, Arkansas was white reaction to black sharecroppers trying to organize a labor union. While trying to disrupt a meeting, one white man was fatally shot and another one wounded. A white militia was formed and for more than two days attacked black people at random. During the massacre, the mob killed somewhere between 100 to 237 black people, while 5 whites also died in the violence.

The Governor appointed Committee to investigate concluded that the Sharecroppers' Union was a Socialist enterprise and "established for the purpose of banding negroes together for the killing of white people." Local courts tried 79 black people, who were all convicted by all-white juries, and 12 were sentenced to death.

During this same period across the South a revived Ku Klux Klan also committed at least 64 lynchings in 1918 and 83 in 1919!

Then, of course, two years later came the horrific events in Tulsa. “Tulsa,” Robinson adds, “may have been the worst of the early- 20th-century race riots — and that’s what “race riot” meant in those days, a pogrom by Whites against African Americans — but it was part of a familiar pattern.”

But even in the aftermath of that white terrorism we also saw the codification of Jim Crow laws and the intensification of unwritten practices such as redlining, intended to keep Blacks “in their place.”



And the past 100 years has not been kind to those who managed to survive the Tulsa massacre. According to information in another Washington Post Op Ed by Suzette Malveaux who is provost professor of civil rights law and director of the Byron R. White Center for the Study of American Constitutional Law at the University of Colorado Law School,

“To this day, not a single criminal act has been prosecuted for murder, theft, arson or assault in the Tulsa massacre. City and state officials hid evidence and destroyed information. Victims were buried in unmarked graves. Talk of the destruction was squelched and Oklahoma’s history books excluded it...”

Eighty years after the Tulsa massacre, a bipartisan commission found that state and local officials had armed, authorized and commanded the White mob to wreak havoc on their fellow Americans. Now, with this evidence, survivors of the Tulsa massacre could sue the government for violation of their constitutional rights. But the case was dismissed as untimely, under the statute of limitations... “

Survivors would have been expected to bring their lawsuit within two years of the massacre - or almost 80 years before the government’s role in the death and destruction would be revealed.

But back then, survivors were homeless, destitute, traumatized and by no means in a position to seek justice.

There was also no viable pursuit of justice for Black Americans at that time. The Ku Klux Klan had infiltrated every facet of local government and lynchings were regularly used to terrorize and intimidate. State and local officials and white-run newspapers initially deemed the massacre a “race riot,” for which Black residents were responsible.

Even, when in light of such extraordinary circumstances, a federal judge would later set aside the two-year statute of limitations, he also concluded that with the end of the Jim Crow era in the 1960s,

it was reasonable to expect plaintiffs to file the lawsuit before the 2001 report's publication. The federal courts concluded that it was too late for justice to be done.

According to Eugene Robinson's Ed Op,

"The point is this: There are those who deny that anything called systemic racism' is a feature of the American landscape [. . .]They should be aware that history actually tells a very different story."

Ignorance, while "blissful" for the privileged, can never be a valid excuse but is sadly a prerequisite for repeating the same old mistakes!

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