

DESCENDED FROM THE PROMISED LAND

THE LEGACY OF *Black Wall Street*

A woman in a long brown coat stands in a derelict, abandoned building. The floor is covered in rubble and debris. The word "GREENWOOD" is painted in large, white, stylized letters on the wall behind her. The scene is dimly lit, with light streaming in from a window or opening in the background.

GREENWOOD

MULTI-FAITH SERMON GUIDE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT	3
<hr/>	
KEY THEMES AND YOUR FAITH TRADITION	6
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INTERFAITH PRAYER TO ACCOMPANY THE SERMONIC MOMENT	8

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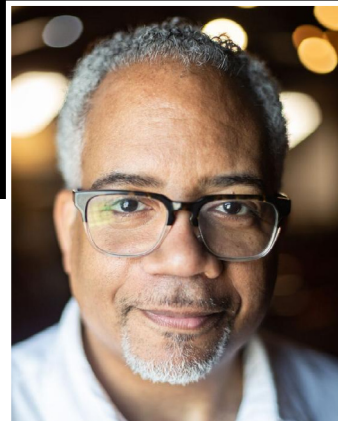
ABOUT

DESCENDED FROM THE PROMISED LAND: THE LEGACY OF BLACK WALL STREET



Rev. Dr.
Stephanie M.
Crumpton

Assoc. Professor of
Practical Theology,
**MCCORMICK
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY**



Rev. Dr.
Michael "Dr. Mike"
Elam

Author, Trainer
and Lecturer,
OSOFO MINISTRY

Descended from The Promised Land: The Legacy of Black Wall Street documents the atrocity that occurred on May 31-June 1, 1921 in the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, and the horrifying, persistent effects of this on the African American community 100 years later.

Family secrets, trauma, resilience, despair, hope, and survival are the backdrop for the stories told in *Descended from the Promised Land: The Legacy of Black Wall Street*. The film primarily focuses on two families and their descendants. This is not solely a documentary about the horrors in Greenwood; it is a film about family and legacy. What could have been a legacy of generational wealth turned into generational trauma and pain. What could have been a thriving community spanning several square miles was reduced to a city block after the initial massacre and a subsequent matrix of structural oppression. Because the events of that night were incorrectly identified as a riot rather than a massacre, the business district was crippled when insurance companies used loopholes to deny insurance claims to rebuild. Subsequent zoning laws, combined with urban renewal plans to construct a freeway through Greenwood, sealed the fate of this Black section of Tulsa.

Jacqueline Blocker, granddaughter of Greenwood entrepreneurial businesswoman Leona Corbett, succinctly captured the structural injustices that occurred when she said, "The citizens and the descendants of Tulsa were robbed twice. The race riots of 1921 and the laws that dismantled the rebuilding of Black Wall Street."



As a result, residents today are left with a memory of the generational wealth that could have been, while living in the now amid the reality of generational devastation and loss.

Byron Crenshaw, the great-great-grandson of John and Loula Williams, is one of the central voices in the film. He spoke of his great-great-grandparents' wealth and the bravery of their son, W.D. Williams (Daddo) that night. The Williams' owned several businesses including a candy store and a movie theater that were both central establishments in the community. In the film, Byron explained, "Something more than a theater was destroyed that night." He affectionately called his great-grandfather "Daddo" when telling the story of how Daddo set out to find work the day after the massacre without even knowing where his parents were or what had happened to them. He found a day job washing dishes, seemingly setting aside the trauma of the night before, and deferred his thoughts of family.

The traumatic effects of watching a city set on fire, families lost, and utter destruction of a community still resonate 100 years later in Greenwood. It can be felt in some families' silence and unwillingness to remember that night. Byron Crenshaw's mother, Leslie Christopher, the granddaughter of Daddo, shared in the film that she was never taught about the race massacre.

Daddo never spoke about it. Black families developed patterns of silence and repression as they navigated the trauma of the experience. And white narratives diminished or erased the horror of the events to maintain privilege and superiority.

The historic photographs placed throughout the film help us better understand the trauma that took hold of Greenwood. One photo features the following caption written on it: "Captured Negroes on the way to the convention hall during the Tulsa race riot, June 1st, 1921." The photograph shows militia who had been deputized to arrest Black citizens under the guise of protecting them. Meanwhile, the real aggressors looted and destroyed Black homes to disrespect and displace Black citizens.



Arguably the most disturbing scene of the documentary occurred when Rev. Robert Turner, Pastor of Historic Vernon AME Church, retold the story of that night. He narrated the hours when the church basement became a haven for people to hide from the chaos outside: shouts and screams; shotguns and machine guns randomly shooting people; airplanes dropping bombs.

What transpired was not solely a massacre. It was a war on a people living their own lives, and a message to other Black people who looked to Greenwood as a vision of Black possibility. At one point the Greenwood section of Tulsa was a haven for African Americans. At the time there were no state laws restricting their movement. In the film, Rev. Turner explained that Greenwood had “the highest home ownership per capita” in the century at one point. Black people who had been displaced by violent racism in other locations relocated to Tulsa seeking peace, prosperity, and a better way of life, only to be displaced again in the most violent way imaginable.

The Tulsa race massacre is a clear example of how white supremacy employs violence, displacement, and subsequent erasure as tactics of oppression. These were antecedents to gentrification, which has since been used to erase and displace Black communities in major cities such as Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant in New York; San Francisco and Oakland in California; Chicago in Illinois; and hundreds of other towns and cities throughout the U.S.. These are historic patterns of dehumanization to which faith leaders are called to respond.

What, then, are we to say as people of faith about race-based erasure, violence, and displacement? What helps a sermon function as a tool to urge communities to act in faith?

KEY THEMES AND YOUR FAITH TRADITION

VIOLENCE

The violence chronicled in *Descended from the Promised Land* is complex. It resulted from unjust, systemically racist local economic practices and resulted in multigenerational injustice. For example, recall how the events of May 31-June 1, 1921 were labeled “riots,” when in fact they were a massacre. This created a loophole for insurance companies to deny loss claims that would have supported the recovery of Greenwood’s business sector.

- Are there instances in your community where race-related violence and economic suppression impact the community’s capacity to recover and thrive?
- Where do you situate yourself when you consider this? Are you a member of the community trying to rebuild? A participant in the structures that negatively impact those communities? A mix of both?
- How do your own social locations impact what you see?
- What is the call to speak truth to power in the face of such violence, and to whom are you speaking?
- What scriptures from your faith tradition instruct you to seek justice and repair?

ERASURE AND DISPLACEMENT OF BLACK BODIES AND LIVES

In addition to the collusion of racist violence and economic suppression, the film also draws attention to how these oppressive practices erase history and displace Black bodies and lives. Years after the economic support to rebuild was denied, city plans further disrupted community recovery by authorizing the construction of a highway straight through Greenwood. In the film, Mildred Blocker, descendant of business woman Leona Corbett, and her granddaughters pointed to places in the community where businesses and homes used to exist. They highlighted to a section of original brickwork on a building and a lot where a home used to stand. Ms. Corbett talked about the difficulty that to this day nothing is there. They gave voice to the impact of erasure and the forced displacement that came with acts like building a highway through a community and not allowing communities to rebuild their homes and livelihood.

- Are there instances in your community where the narrative and evidence of violent tragedy have been suppressed to prevent subsequent generations' awareness and understanding?
- What scriptures from your faith tradition speak to the power of keeping stories of trial and tribulation alive?

REMEMBRANCE

Descended from the Promised Land issues a call to remember what and who has been killed and erased, and whose legacies have been damaged, silenced, and distorted. Yet some voices have elevated, willing the community to remember.

- When you look at your community, what used to be there?
- Who in the community knows the history? What stories do they hold? How can listening to those stories combat the erasure of those people's histories in order to secure a place in the community's awareness and commitments?
- How does and how can the community remember what others will forget?
- What scriptures from your faith tradition speak to the power of remembrance?

INTERFAITH PRAYER TO ACCOMPANY THE SERMONIC MOMENT

Below is a brief interfaith prayer that can accompany a sermon that engages the sacred texts from your faith tradition and the themes from *Descended from the Promised Land*.

○ God, you are called by many names, yet we all recognize the sound of your call to the work of compassionate action on behalf and alongside of the oppressed. We know it is you who turns our minds to thoughts of peace. Let us not move too quickly to peace without doing the hard, yet necessary work of speaking up against the acts of violence, displacement, and erasure that impact Greenwood. Erasure of injustice, and erasure of the stories of how faith and determination have sustained this community even as it has and continues to face tremendous loss. Hear our prayer as we muster the courage to remember and name the impact of historic trauma not only in Greenwood, but in every community that struggles with the legacy of racial and other systemic violence. We turn to you, Creator, in search of direction on how to restore communities and no longer repeat that pain and suffering. Strengthen our resolve to move with clarity about what will be right and good for all, not just some. Empower our hands, hearts and minds to do the good work of bringing about a world where we no longer fear memories of the past, but we rely on the lessons we learn to build a vision for the future. Help us seek understanding of your desire for healthy, vibrant communities. Sustain our hearts and hands as we do the work of making these desires reality. Amen



RESOURCES TO SUPPORT SERMONIC REFLECTION ON DESCENDED FROM THE PROMISED LAND

Burke, Tarana, and Brené Brown, eds. *You Are the Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame, Resilience, and the Black Experience: An Anthology*. New York: Random House, 2021.

Eulinberg, Jerrolyn S. *A Lynched Black Wall Street: A Womanist Perspective on Terrorism, Religion and Black Resilience in the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre; Remembering 100 Years*. Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021.

Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Nevada: Central Recovery Press, 2017.

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