



Liturgical Reflections

Tears in a Bottle — Jamaica ¹

For Celebration by the Transatlantic Writing Project at the Tomb of the African Ancestors, Seville Great House, St. Ann's, Jamaica, August 2024

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¹ This is Adapted from Nicole Ashwood's unpublished *Tears in a Bottle Liturgy for Trauma Transformation*; used with permission. Reverend Ashwood is the United Church of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands *Programme Executive – Just Community of Women and Men, World Council of Churches*. Any quotations should likewise reference Reverend Ashwood's original contribution.

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Procession

A silent procession is made to the graves of the enslaved with the Bible, a large container with water, a candle, and individual stones and our pens used at morning prayer, where we had heard a reflection from Daniel Justice Eshun on Luke 1:1 on “taking up our pens to write an orderly account.”

Opening Praise

“Goodness of God” by Cece Winans⁵

Prayer of Approach:

Responsorial Reading adapted from Isaiah chapters 40, 41, and 61

Leader 1: Holy God, God of Hagar the enslaved, we gather, recognizing that You are God above all others, You are the God of the oppressed, whose spirits seek solace and rest and comfort, amidst the ongoing trauma of enslavement, abuse, exploitation, and harassment.

We welcome You into this space: transform it as You transform us from pain, and shame, and disappointment, and dis-ease. Open doors of release as we gather in this space of re-membling, we pray, in Jesus’s name. Help us to name, tame, and reclaim our painful and traumatic history and transform it into a salvation history.

Congregational Response:

LORD, hear my voice when I call; be gracious to me and answer me.

Leader 1: Peace! Be comforted my people, says your God. Receive my assurance that your enslavement has ended, that I am Your ransom. Because you are my redeemed, you can return with singing, to wholeness, for this is the time of my favour, as I offer to comfort you as you mourn.

Congregational Response:

LORD, hear my voice when I call; be gracious to me and answer me.

Leader 2: Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. I have taken you from the ends of the earth and called you from its most distant places. I said to you, ‘You are my servant.’ I’ve chosen you; I haven’t rejected you. So don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.

Congregational Response:

LORD, hear my voice when I call; be gracious to me and answer me.

⁵ An audio recording is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sE5kEnitqE>

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Leader 3: Be at Peace! The Sovereign Lord is here and God’s Spirit is with us.

This day God will anoint us to receive the good news. Today, God is binding up the broken hearts, and has proclaimed freedom to the thousandth generation of those held captive by enslavement, and will release all who desire God from the chains of trauma. This is the year of the Lord’s favour and comfort all who mourn. Let us receive God’s crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Congregational Response:

LORD, hear my voice when I call; be gracious to me and answer me.

Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Ancestors

Each person names and says aloud an action or word describing the ancestors, whose faith and courage testifies to the liberating power of the God of their ancestors manifested in Jesus.

Ritual of Healing

Meditation Song

Listen to Jimmy Cliff, “Many Rivers to Cross” (1969).⁶

Leader 1: O Lord, we lament the dehumanizing nature of enslavement and the enduring trauma the transatlantic slave trade has caused. We confess that we carry the scars of generational trauma, from the deep wounds that seem to have taken over our hearts and minds.

Leader 2: Our foreparents were carried across many waters from the life they knew, loved and cherished to a new life that signified betrayal, enslavement. From across the African and Asian continents they came, forced into degradation and squalor. Denied dignity, agency, or autonomy, generations later, many still carry the shame of servitude.

Raped

Shackled

Brutalized

Forced to stay in cramped spaces,

Not fit for one person to live . . .

⁶ Jimmy Cliff (1944–2025) was a Jamaican musician and singer who popularized reggae internationally. Numerous recordings of “Many Rivers to Cross” are available.

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Brought to the castles by raiders who might not have imagined the horrors — 200 people packed like animals in each room; with no light nor air but for a one-foot square hole barred with a wooden beam.

Leader 3: Nearby villagers knew that the castles were points of no return. They were haunted by ghastly, ghostly sounds echoing through the forests — by the cries and despair of the inhabitants, testimony to the worst of which humankind is capable. The stench of human suffering in the dungeons is palpable: a combination of urine, faeces, death fill the air in the dungeons. And in the not-so-still sea breezes one hears/imagines the sound of worshippers . . .

Leader 2: The contradiction of a loving God preached in Christianity and the reality of a Chapel sitting on top of dungeons where enslaved men and women were kept under conditions not even pigs deserve, by persons who claimed superiority by virtue of their Christian belief, is an experience that does not end with the end of the tour; it stays with us.

Leader 1: The door of no return (and the dungeons of the ships) still traumatizes even now when people can walk through it and return or come by the shores of revival. Yet we must return. To tell others, to safeguard against continued heresies/atrocities; to ensure the restoration of dignity for those millions of lives lost; to secure reparation for those who survived.

Leader 2: In many religions, water carries spiritual significance representing purification, cleansing and life for adherents . . . And the Garden of Eden, the biblical cradle of humanity, was framed around four rivers. The very same river that provided supernatural healing for Naaman, became the baptismal font for Jesus. He also presented Himself as Living Water that quenches every thirst.

Leader 3: But water, recognized as healing and spiritually refreshing has also been a source of pain and suffering. For the waters of the Atlantic, like the Nile, were the graveyard for innocent Africans. Some threw themselves overboard, some were discarded as waste stock, some made it across physically. The malaise and dis-ease of the filthy berths, rare access to sunlight, water, or healthy food, combined with the de-humanizing attitudes of the enslavers has wrought trauma from which we are still recovering. Yet there is Hope.

Leader 1: Come. Come to the water of restoration, and receive a healing balm for your soul. Come to the water and pour your tears in a bottle. Come to the water, and secure strength for the journey.

[Participants invited to come forward to engage the elements on the altar.]

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As you come forward, dip your finger in the water and use it to mark yourself. Let the water remind you of the turbulent pain of the Transatlantic journey and the healing power of God's grace.

Leader 2: Take a stone/pebble from the waters to anchor you when the experience gets overwhelming. Feel the pebble's roughness and its strength and be reminded of Jesus's exhortation to build our houses, including our African and Caribbean academic houses, on the solid rock of Jesus Christ.

Leader 3: Take your pen — symbolizing the power of transformation, placing it on the tombs of the ancestors, and listen to the divine call to "rewrite the Middle Passage with our academic writing."

Leader 1: I take a moment to light a candle, symbolizing the light of hope and healing that we seek.

Leader 2: We will take the water of container with us, to hold our tears and remind ourselves that God sees our tears and suffers alongside us as God did with our ancestors five centuries ago.

Prayer for Healing

Leader 1: Holy God, they were allowed to place whips on our backs, they justified their actions by presenting us as nonhuman and villains in Your name.

Congregational Response:

Lord, bring healing.

Leader 2: When we feel their pain anew and face their trauma, their resilience, the strength to overcome —

Congregational Response:

Lord, bring healing.

Leader 3: When the urge to retaliate in kind rises up, help us to leave vengeance to You.

Congregational Response:

Lord, bring healing.

Leader 1: For the transformation of our trauma into a commitment to justice,

Congregational Response:

Lord, bring healing.

Leader 2: As we prepare to visit these sites of historical significance and immeasurable pain and trauma, let us invoke God's intervention to transform our grief into understanding, action, and the relentless pursuit of justice for the marginalized and oppressed.

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Congregational Response:

We commit ourselves to healing, transformation, and justice.

Leader 3: For the grace of forgiveness for the residents of this Seville and other so-called Great Houses who traumatised our ancestors through oppressive and repressive words and actions.

Congregational Response:

Lord, bring healing.

Leader 1: Close your eyes, hold your stones and take a deep breath. As you breathe in, imagine the names of those whose history must be written and rewritten; breathing in the strength and resilience of those who endured. Now breathe out, taking care to exhale the past, while letting it inform the present and rewrite the future.

Closing Prayer

All:

Healing God, as we have journeyed to this site, trouble the waters of reparatory justice; fill us with Your peace and strength to move past the anger and trauma. Let Your power fall on us to be Your agents of reconciliation between the past and present, we pray, in Jesus's name. Amen.

Closing Hymn

Max Romeo, "Let the Power Fall (on Me)," (1971).⁷

⁷ Max Romeo (1944–2025) was a Jamaican reggae and roots reggae musician and singer. An audio recording of "Let the Power Fall" is available at https://youtu.be/yAYGlyH113o?si=r3rB_7RZuzp-28mH