

Ahmaud Arbery and the America That Doesn't Exist

Black Americans need more than a trial and a verdict.

By Esau McCaulley

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WHEATON, Ill. — Football does not prepare its athletes for a life of fitness. Its drills and exercises are meant to harden the body for collisions. After our playing days are over, we must find new ways to keep our bodies in shape.

Much like Ahmaud Arbery, the former high school football player who was shot and killed in Georgia in February, I took up jogging. I had a certain trepidation, but not because long distances gave me pause. I feared going on runs in the whiter neighborhoods that have marked my new reality in the portion of the Midwest that I now call home.

So I purchased the loudest orange and lime running shirts on the market. I didn't believe that they would save my life if someone saw my black skin and thought only of danger. But I did think that in the court case that would follow in the wake of my death, the lime shirt might make it difficult to claim that people didn't know that I was exercising.

After a few years of jogging, I thought that this was a silly practice and bought less blaring shirts. Now I'm thinking it wasn't so absurd. Mr. Arbery was wearing a white T-shirt when he was chased by a father and a son and fatally shot while jogging in a residential neighborhood in coastal Georgia.

Ahmaud Arbery is not a social or political issue, but a person with family and friends. Only those who knew him can remember and mourn him as he deserved. I pray that we take the time to do more than hashtag him on the way toward a reflection on what it means for African-Americans in this land.

The tragedy is not simply what his death reveals about how black life is valued here. The tragedy is not only the freshly invigorated fear that black men and women will feel as they jog the streets and trails of America. The tragedy is that his black life ended. For those who believe that all life is sacred, there is no bigger catastrophe.

Nevertheless, Ahmaud Arbery's name will move onto a list that stretches back far into our history. That list includes names like Emmett Till, Addie May Collins, Carol Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Rosamond Robertson, Medgar Evers, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and Eric Garner. Black Americans have become adept at recounting this litany of suffering that began when the first chained black bodies arrived on this continent 400 years ago.

After video of the events leading up to Mr. Arbery's death became public this week, the father and son were charged with murder and aggravated assault. While we pray that once more of the facts are fully known justice will be served, courts cannot resurrect the dead. They cannot complete a life.

A particular decision will not wipe away the dread that events like this cause in the homes of African-Americans. They will not change the tenor of conversations that black parents have with their children.

Black folks need more than a trial and a verdict. Our problems are deeper, rooted not in the details of a particular case, but in distrust of the system charged with protecting us and punishing those who do us harm. This cynicism is well earned, arising out of repeated disappointments. To begin to heal this distrust we need this country to take responsibility for its devaluation of blackness and its complicity in violence against black bodies.



More protesters at the courthouse. Friends say Mr. Arbery loved to go running. Sean Rayford/Getty Images

We need this country to become something different, something more. Black people need to be seen as fully human beings made in the image of God, not a menace to be managed, controlled and extinguished. In 1847, Leonard Black, who escaped slavery and became a prominent abolitionist, said, “Do you talk of selling a man? You might as well talk of selling immortality or sunshine.”

He knew what we were worth. We are free things gifted by our creator with the ability to love and laugh and learn and pursue our dreams. Anything less is unacceptable.

Ahmaud Arbery never lived in that America, and I do not expect to experience it in its fullness either. In this way, I am not far from the ancient Israelites of the Bible. Instead of pinning their hopes on corrupt rulers, they articulated a theology of the kingship of God. The Psalms, Israel’s hymnbook, are full of passages that say things like, “My whole being will exclaim, ‘Who is like you, Lord? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them.’”

When kings and rulers would not bring about justice, the disinherited put their hope in God. This is the root of black faith in this country: when faced with the denial of justice we set our hopes on a higher court, a more definitive vindication.

For the Christian, this vindication came in the person of Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection is the great reversal, the emptying of the power of sin and death on the one hand and the overcoming of the oppressive tendencies of the state on the other. That is, for us, the immovable fact of history.

There is no bigger rebellion or miracle in the history of these United States than that of the black Christians who saw in the very book used to justify their oppression a testimony to a God who disagreed. There is no greater audacity than their use of that Bible to construct, almost from scratch, a Christian anthropology that demanded a recognition of black worth. That struggle continues.

In the end, the question is not whether this country will finally fully value black lives. America doesn't get a vote in the matter. It lacks the competence. The question is whether this country will continue to find itself in the dangerous place of having policies, customs and laws that oppose the will of God.

My work, as a minister of the gospel, is not to fix America, but to remind it of what it is not. It is not the kingdom of God, our great hope. Indeed, far too often God has looked upon us and our notions of justice and found America wanting.

Alongside the litany of suffering that marks the black experience, there is a chant that grows in power in times of crisis. It is in the spirituals and the blues, in hip-hop, soul and gospel music. It is in black poetry, fiction and film. This is a chorus of defiant joy, a refusal to let fear stifle hope.

Many committed to running 2.23 miles, a nod to the date Mr. Arbery was killed, on Friday, which would have been his 26th birthday. Another way to honor his life is to find room for joy, knowing that we are not alone in our struggles.

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