

Lisa Sharon Harper: Coming to you from Washington, D.C. I'm [Lisa Sharon Harper](#), President of [Freedom Road](#), a consulting group dedicated to shrinking the narrative gap. Welcome to the Freedom Road podcast.

Each month we bring together national faith leaders, advocates, and activists to have the kinds of conversations we normally have on the front lines. It's just that this time we've got microphones in our faces and you are listening in. And this month we are welcoming special guest, Reverend Dr. Otis Moss III, senior pastor of [Trinity United Church of Christ](#) in Chicago. Otis is joining us on Freedom Road during this black history month to help us go deep on legacy and the power of pilgrimage.

We'd love to hear from you, and we really want to know what you think about this topic as well—the process of pilgrimage, the spiritual practice of pilgrimage. So, go ahead and tweet to me [@LisaSHarper](#) or to Freedom Road at [@FreedomRoadus](#), and keep on sharing the podcast with your friends and networks and letting us know what you think. We love the feedback, and also the back and forth. So, keep it coming.

So, my very first pilgrimage changed my life and if anybody has heard me speak really over the last sixteen years, you've heard about this one pilgrimage I took, which was my very first one. It was over the course of four weeks, through ten states in the American South, the Northern South and the deep South, and it retraced the Cherokee trail of tears and the African experience in America from slavery through civil rights. And I wrote about it in my book, [The Very Good Gospel](#). And now one of my biggest goals in life is to take as many people through pilgrimage as much as humanly possible, because I really do believe in its transformational power.

And I don't think there's any better way to transform communities or even our own individual worldview outside of moving in, like in living in a place for multiple years. The reason why we have Otis with us today is because Otis has got the pilgrimage bug as well. As a pastor, he is committed to taking his own church through pilgrimages once a year. Also, because this is Black History Month and we want to talk about legacy and how pilgrimage helps us to connect with legacy. And Otis is connected to legacy in his own blood and veins; his own father, [Reverend Dr. Otis Moss Jr.](#) was a hero of the civil rights movement, a friend and a colleague of [Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#), and so we want to offer this opportunity for us to hear from someone who has learned about legacy up close and personal, and also about pilgrimage. So, Otis, thank you so much for being with us and welcome to The Freedom Road.

Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III: Thank you so much, Lisa. It is a delight to be on the Freedom Road with my friend, Lisa Sharon Harper.

Lisa: Thank you, I appreciate that.

Otis: I apologize for your full name, I say everything.

Lisa: I know, it's so funny. You really do. And I have to say, I'm going to start off just with a funny story, y'all. Like, when I first met Otis, and I'm calling him Otis, and we kinda talked

about this before we actually got on the air, because I literally know him by like five different names, and he gave me permission, y'all, to call him Otis. So, you know, my good home training wants me to say Reverend Dr. Otis Moss III, give them all of the accolades that he has heard.

Otis: Otis is fine. Otis is fine.

Lisa: And he says, "Otis is fine," so that's why we're calling him that. So, thank you so much. So, Otis here, part of the power of pilgrimage is the way that it helps us to understand our history, really on a visceral level. And your father was a part of history. He's a part of that history, as we talked about before, a friend and partner of Dr. King and the Movement. So, I want to know, let's just jump in by asking, you know, how has pilgrimage helped you to understand your father's story, and by extension, our nation's history more deeply?

Otis: Oh, that's a wonderful question.

Lisa: Thank you.

Otis: So, let me begin by just kind of sharing with everybody who's listening. My dad was a part of the [Student Movement](#) of Atlanta when he was a student in seminary. My father, along with a persons by the names of [James Orange](#), [Charlene Hunter-Gault](#), [Marian Wright Edelman](#), [and] a variety of other students. There were the people that were a part of the desegregation of Atlanta. These were the stories that I grew up with. Hearing these names and then hearing other names such as [Dorothy Cotton](#), [Fannie Lou Hamer](#), who were friends of the family, [Ella Baker](#), and [Septima Clark](#).

Lisa: Oh my God.

Otis: These were the individuals who were close to my parents, so my mother was the office manager for the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#).

Lisa: What? I never knew that. Oh my God.

Otis: She was.

Lisa: Thank you. Thank you for honoring her by—really—by stating that, because that's something that is not often said. It's not often talked about. Thank you.

Otis: She was the office manager. Now, she's quite funny, because she said, "There were some people who were in the field, and there were some people who had to manage the office." She says that, "You know, your daddy was nonviolent. Me? I would have issues. So, they get me in the office." [laughs]

Lisa: [laughs] Oh my God. That's hilarious.

Otis: So, she was in the office when [Wyatt Tee Walker](#) was running the organization – Dr. King was, he had moved up to Chicago, actually. And they met in the Movement, and that's how they were literally got together. She was really close with [Jean Young](#), who eventually became a partner/spouse of [Andrew Young](#), and they got connected. Uh, literally they, uh, watching and being a part of the Movement. And so, I grew up hearing these stories. I grew up hearing the names of these people. I was born after this period, but the names and then [the] meetings, some of these individuals, whether it was [C. T. Vivian](#), [Marian Wright Edelman](#), who became part of our family, and [Wyatt Tee Walker](#), [Dorothy Cotton](#), all of these individuals.

And so that was normal for me. It was normative. I thought any person in the faith community was committed to transformation. I thought that's what you – when you went to church, that's what you're supposed to do. You love Jesus, change the world. That's what you do. Racism is a scourge, is a part of America's original sin. I thought that was a normal theological framework until I went to college and I found out about all these other individuals who were – they said they were pre-millennial and millennials – “Who are you, people?” I didn't understand anything, I didn't know this perspective at all. So, this was part of the legacy that I connected with. And then I ended up going to my father's alma mater, [Morehouse College](#), which on one level was a blessing. And on another level, it was a huge burden because this is the school he went to. And trying to make your way, trying to understand who you are in a space where your father casts a beautiful shadow, not one that is destructive. And that's sometimes very difficult for, you know, for a young man, especially a person of African descent when you have his name also.

Lisa: So, your childhood in many ways was itself a pilgrimage, like the relationships that your family held immersed you in the stories like just around the kitchen table, I imagine.

Otis: Absolutely. Yeah. That's a great way of putting it. Yeah, it was.

Lisa: And, and when you went to Morehouse, you literally walked in the footsteps of your father.

Otis: I walked in the footsteps of my father. I was introduced to many of his mentors, and people who I'd heard about became real. So, I had been hearing about [Howard Thurman](#) all these years. Then all of a sudden, you know, I'm in a class learning about Howard Thurman, beyond just seeing some books on the shelf as a child. Or when we would take trips, road trips, my dad would put it in the Howard Thurman tape. I'm like, "Okay, this guy's pretty cool, he's really quiet but he's cool." And then all of a sudden, I'm introduced in a very different way to the depth and to the teachings of this individual; of course, to Dr. King, but seeing him in a very different way, and that I'm introduced to a wider group of activists and spiritual leaders, as I'm studying at Morehouse.

Lisa: You started to talk about the long shadow, and but benevolent, and I just was thinking of it, I wonder if that is another, I don't know, another experience of pilgrimage. It's not fun. It's not, you are walking in your father's footsteps and at the same time, there's something going on for you internally. What was going on for you internally there?

Otis: It's one of the great challenges for, I think, an African-American male. Try and figure out who you are. You have societal expectations, you have community expectations, then familiar expectations. And then you have this thing called the village, the church expectations, and the destructive nature of this. Many times people who are not just, you know, a PK, but anyone who has a mother or a father who has a prominent place in the community and has made contribution, whether positive or negative, people want to place a template on you and say, "This is who you must be, this is how you must act." All of that. And for most, especially for young men, you end up rejecting everything because you haven't really found who you are and--

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: You have to, you have to go through that. And in some ways, there was some rejection, but I have to just give it up to my mom and my dad for truly saying, "Hey, you gotta go your own way. We're not – you don't have to go to Morehouse. We're not forcing you to go here." So, I was always trying to make my own way. And one of the ways was a pilgrimage of really moving into the kind of Afrocentric movement for me. So, really studying, I became like this straight [Egyptology](#) head.

Lisa: Wow. Are you kidding me? What? I didn't know that.

Otis: I mean, I was the [Heru](#), Horus, you know, study or you know. Egyptology was my thing in college. I went to go to [Oriental School at the University of Chicago](#). I'm looking at black psychology, studying [Na'im Akbar](#), uh, [Wade Nobles](#). I'm becoming that someone who is deep into [Carter G. Woodson](#) and [Marcus Garvey](#). And then, of course, [Malcolm X](#), who becomes an icon for, especially for young black men. But that Egyptology piece became, you know, really near and dear to me in college. And it was a way to kind of shift my focus and question – question Christian roots and question my tradition. And then I moved into activism, and I said, "I was going to be radical." And I was, you know; I was highly influenced by [the Panthers](#). And it's interesting because it all came around; it came back around because I raised a question to my parents, and they, they shut me up when I said, "We need to, in this house we need to have a black picture and black--" I'm going black, black, black, you know, left and right. And so my mom said, "So, what, in here, is not black for you?" I said, "This picture over here," and she said, "Oh, that was painted by Malcolm Brown." Just because it doesn't have a black image in it, it's just a field. That's one of the black walls to cover paintings. I said, "I'm going around the room--" And she said, "Did you know all the art in here is from people of African descent." So, I was like, "Okay."

Lisa: You were like, "Those people have to be black."

Otis: Everything's gotta be black.

Lisa: That's so funny.

Otis: My mom is like chuckling inside because you're right on target with terms of your development, your parents. This is appropriate. You're nineteen and you're arrogant and ignorant at the same time. And that's good. [laughs]

Lisa: [laughs] That's exactly right. You are becoming confident in what you know. You don't quite understand what you don't know yet.

Otis: You don't know. It happens again, Lisa, so I'm in grad school, I'm in a class with Vincent Harding, uh, [Dr. Vincent Harding](#) who wrote [There is a River](#), editor for Dr. King, [who] was a premier historian of the movement.

Lisa: And the one who wrote [the Vietnam speech](#)?

Otis: Yes. Yes. That Vincent Harding.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: That gentleman right there.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: I'm in his program on religion and social change. So, I am in class with Dr. Harding, and I am communicating my radical perspective that non-violence is a tactic, not a way of life. You should have the right to utilize self-defense. We should have the right to any particular political modality that will bring us liberation.

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: Dr. Harding, as I'm talking and he just keeps saying hmm, hmm. If you're from the South, you know that that sound has a variety of meanings within it. [laughs]

Lisa: [laughs] I can feel it coming, I'm like brace myself. Oh my gosh. Okay.

Otis: So, he plays a clip from [Eyes on the Prize](#), Lisa, and it's a clip from 1967 in Memphis, the strike of sanitation workers--

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: --to the entire class. Now I'm the one who's, you know, got, I got on the radical soapbox that, "Nonviolence is only a tactic. We have to be able to utilize whatever we need to utilize because the oppressor uses whatever the oppressor wants to use against us. We have the right, you know, black people will not be cornered into one tactic." You know, I'm just, I'm, I'm going in and he's listening and saying, "Hmm." And so he plays the clip, and the way Dr. Harding can only do it, he says, "Did you see it?" And we're all like, "See what? Yeah, we saw people marching." He said, "Let me rewind."

Lisa: Oh, I love this.

Otis: And again he said, "Did you see it?" And we're all like, "Yeah, there were people marching." He said, "Let me rewind."

Lisa: Oh my God. Okay.

Otis: He says to me, "Otis, do you see it?" And I said, "What?" And then you know, some people can cut you and you say thank you after they cut you.

Lisa: Yes, that's right.

Otis: You are bleeding everywhere, thank you, thank you. And so he says, "Otis, did you notice there's a woman who's 90, marching? Do you see the man right there with the – he only has one leg and he has, he has crutches. Do you see this young girl?" He then says, "Your vision of liberation is centered on men liberating everyone else, able-bodied men--"

Lisa: Oh my God.

Otis: "This movement allows the ninety-year-old, the child, the differently-abled person to participate. Only non-violence does that."

Lisa: Oh, Lord, Jesus. Wow. My hands are raised. I'm worshiping in my living room.

Otis: I mean, I'll never forget, I'll never forget it. It was the most amazing way of helping a young brother who was grasping at, you know, my maleness was, it has to be rooted in, "I have to defend somebody, I have to be physical. You cannot, you know, corner me with just nonviolence. I need to be able to use my fist because that means that I am truly being a man." And he called out my patriarchy.

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: And called out my shallow, thin spirituality.

Lisa: Oh my God. Wow. See now, this is the thing is that you were in a class, most people would not say that was pilgrimage, but when you expand pilgrimage, especially for folks like you who, one of the central tenants of pilgrimage for Freedom Road that I've come to understand is that you sent her the voices that are normally pushed to the margins, and that those that we want to hear from. We don't want to hear from necessarily from the expert who learned what they learned in, you know, at Harvard or whatever, and that's it.

We want to hear from the people it happened to and we want to hear from the people that are descended from those people. And maybe last on the list might be someone from the community who learned what they learned at Harvard. Do you know what I mean? Um, and so you had the

amazing benefit of just walking through your life and talking with the people, with those people. So your life has been a pilgrimage in so many ways and so you have been transformed just by living your life in the way that most people require to go and separate themselves from their everyday life and go and walk on the land where things happen and hear the stories from the people that happened to. That's powerful. That time sitting there in that classroom with Dr. Vincent Harding was a pilgrimage, transformation moment.

Otis: It was – it was a transformation-moment for a young man who was trying to figure out what does it mean to be a black man in America. And I was defining my manhood and that's what Dr. Harding helped me out with. You are defining your manhood through the lens of someone else.

Lisa: Whoa. Whoa.

Otis: Non-violence is a courageous act. Picking up a gun is a relatively easy act. And one that is lifted up so often you are defining your power through someone manufacturing something you can hold in your hand and not what you hold in your heart.

Lisa: Oh my gosh. So, in other words, another way to articulate that story is that there is a story that happens outside of us, outside of you, outside of me. It's the story of the gunmaker, the story of--

Otis: Yes.

Lisa: --the Western, you know, the story that's crafted by Western culture and is centered on the acquisition of power through domination. And that gun represents that story. And here you have the opportunity to pick up that gun, but when you do that, you then are actually bowing to somebody else's story.

Otis: That's right. That's right. That, that is absolutely right. It's similar to when the Israelites, uh, they're bowing down to the golden calf. What they fail to realize is all of the material that I gave you was not to be manufactured so that it could be create an image that you could bow to. John Kenny puts it this way: They were bowing to the residue of their blessings. Instead of recognizing that the gold was really a reparation to build a new nation. They decided to be like the nation they came out of. So, they did the [Audrey Lorde](#) thing: they use the master's tools to rebuild the master's house.

Lisa: Dang. And all they did was just occupy it as opposed to understanding they actually had their own home that was envisioned for them.

Otis: That's right.

Lisa: That had no connection to any master at all.

Otis: But they wanted to be like everybody else. And so often we connect our liberation to being like the one who holds us back. So, in every movement, I mean, whether it's black people, whether we are talking about people of a different orientation or we're talking gender, we end up framing what freedom looks like from the vantage point of the artist who blotted our images out.

Lisa: Wow. These are our stories. You're listening to the Freedom Road podcast where we bring you stories from the front lines of the struggle for justice.

[music]

Lisa: Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? The very first one I ever did, changed my life forever. We do a lot of things here on Freedom Road, but the most powerful of all is a pilgrimage. Freedom Road journeys road through cohesive stories and helps us understand better how the world broke and what it will take to be whole. Our absolute favorite thing is to leverage the power of pilgrimage, to straighten a group's capacity to do justice in their communities. Check out the show notes for this episode. Click the link to learn more about Freedom Road pilgrimages and contact us through the website if you'd like to join us on Freedom Road.

[music]

Lisa: How did you gain your value for pilgrimage itself?

Otis: The first pilgrimage that I had the opportunity to take was after I graduated from college, my father, uh, in his church, the [Olivet Institutional Baptist Church](#), they had a ministry called Faith, Hope, and Heritage, where every other year they would do a diaspora pilgrimage. I wasn't able to go on the first one that they went to West Africa. Then they went to another West. They went to several West African pilgrimages, [but] I wasn't able to make that one. And so, while I was in school, I told you I was becoming an Egyptology head.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: Afrocentric mode. I say we have to do Egypt and we need to do it from, you know, an African-centered perspective – not a perspective that views Egypt as if it's not in Africa or if it's the Middle East that is just, just the weirdest term anyway, that's, that's a whole another story. So, after I graduated, my father asked me, he said, “You know, I want you to assist me in this pilgrimage. I want you to put together a study guide. I want you to do a couple of lectures. This is your job and this is going to be your graduation gift, but you've got to work, uh, when you go.” And so Egypt, we did an, uh, an African-centered trip to Egypt. The other interesting piece was the tour company, consolidated tours based in Atlanta. This was run by a gentleman by the name of Moses Hadonaya who was from Egypt, and they don't advertise only they have a website. They started out setting up trips solely for churches that came out of the social justice movement, black churches.

Lisa: Wow. Okay.

Otis: Literally became a word-of-mouth piece where his whole company was designed were primarily eighty-five percent of those that he works with were people of African descent who wanted to either go to Africa or to Israel. But they wanted to have an experience where they would connect with people who were from their community. So, the Ethiopian Jews and the Palestinians, they would go to Egypt and connect with the Nubian community. They would go to West Africa and South Africa and so on and so on. And it was very interesting that an entire company was built around black faith communities. To do a pilgrimage in spaces to connect with the community and to understand the social justice narrative in those communities.

Lisa: And this was when? This was like right around, what time, the 90s, the 80s?

Lisa: This was 92, it's 92, it was the first time I went to Africa. It was literally transformative because you know, you read about the fact that the, you know, those wonderful book that I read in school called [Stolen Legacy](#) by [George G. M. James](#), and James makes the argument that everything you see in Greek culture, in Greek history, has its origin in Africa – said you cannot begin to understand Greek architecture until you see that there are older temples that have the exact same design. He goes on to talk about [Herodotus](#), and how Herodotus revered the Nubian-Ethiopian population, and stated that this is where we receive our information from. And then he does this wonderful thing that's actually hilarious – a scholar by the name of [Martin Bernal](#) who wrote [Black Athena](#), you know, really kind of lays it out in more detail. Along with a gentleman by the name of [Ivan Van Sertimaand](#), his work on Nile Valley Civilizations, another West African scholar, uh, Diop, D-I-O-P, is from West Africa. He said, "If you look at the pyramids, in order to build a pyramid, you have to understand the Pythagorean theorem. So how can Pythagoras create a theorem that was already, obviously, in existence several thousand years before he was born?"

Lisa: Oh my God. What? Y'all heard it here. What?

Otis: Pythagoras did not start the theorem. And he said, "It's impossible to build a pyramid without the mathematical understanding of what we call the Pythagorean theorem. It's really the African theorem. It's the Imhotep theorem--" he has all these different names. But it's a wonderful way of saying, "Oh my gosh, we completely miss this." This gentleman, Diop, D-I-O-P, Senegalese scholar, he did melanin tests of mummies and he said, "They are not, you know, light-skinned individuals, the melanin test demonstrates that they are black Africans."

Lisa: This was in the 90s? He did this in the 90s? Or you read about it in the 90s?

Otis: I read about it in the 90s – he did it in the 80s. And when he did the tests at the Egyptian museum, he discovered that they were black Africans. He made a funny – he makes the joke in one of his lectures, [and] he did one of the lectures at Morehouse before I arrived at Morehouse. They had a conference there. He said all of a sudden, he could not get access to any more mummies after that from the Egyptian government.

Lisa: Whoa.

Otis: But historically--

Lisa: Wait a minute, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a minute. Are you saying, I mean, so I'm sorry-- one of my understandings of Egypt, or, Egyptologist as you are, one of my understandings of Egypt is that it was very much claimed, kind of, by Europe, you know, in the 20th century maybe even before that – you would know the details. I know kind of, or I understand broad swath, but because of that, like Egyptians and the whole biblical story is cast with a white hue, but the European view. And so people, when they talk about Egypt, they talk about it as if it's not in Africa. So I've always wondered how do, what does Egypt say of itself? And what you just said that just struck me is that the government of Egypt didn't want it to get out that their mummies were black.

Otis: Correct.

Lisa: Okay. So talk to me about that. Does that mean that there's like internalized white supremacy there?

Otis: Very much so. So, you have in about 626 you have what is called the Arab invasion. That's from the North.

Lisa: Okay y'all so we're going on a pilgrimage right now.

[laughter]

Lisa: We're gonna talk about pilgrimage. We actually are on a pilgrimage. All right, so go on, Professor, go for it.

Otis: So we have Arab invasion coming from the North, coming down into those regions--

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: --that this place, the inhabitants of that area that were known as Nubian.

Lisa: Oh, yes.

Otis: That's the biblical term, the Nubian, the Kushites. And Nubians still live in Egypt today, but what was interesting is that the Arab population obviously mixed with the Nubian population, but the Nubian population was displaced and pushed farther south. So, when you go to Cairo or Alexandria, these are Northern cities. When you leave those cities, it's rather interesting that the literal color of people change once you leave the city limits--

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: --because you have the most people. When people settle, especially during the time period of the 600s, [in] the 6th and 7th century, people always settled by water. It makes sense because

that's a precious resource. So, they settle by the mouth of the Nile, but they do not settle down the Nile in, you know, Southern, moving South.

Lisa: Okay.

Otis: And so the mummies, there had been always this claim that they were European because of the [Ptolemies](#). So the Roman folks came over as colonists, but the people were still African. They just had individuals who were of a lighter complexion who were in power at that time. The second thing that Diop did is that he then took the hair of mummies. Now this was hilarious. In the Cairo museum, there is a section where you can look at the wigs of mummies. And so, we went into the Cairo museum, and I was so excited about this because I'd heard about it; we went into the section, we looked at the wigs and everybody fell out laughing because they were straight Afro wigs. And he raised the question, "Why would you create a wig that is not designed for the pattern of the hair that you had looked at?" That's the question that he raises and he says, "Well, here is-- here are the wigs." And so you had braids, you had dreadlocks, you had just straight up Afros. I took pictures of it. I remember that I was like, "Oh, this is amazing."

Lisa: Oh my God.

Otis: And so we're seeing that the literal hair that is used is a hair of lambswool. So now we are witnessing the actual imagery that is used biblically, and imagery that has been blotted out in terms of Hollywood, and all of a sudden Egypt then becomes Nubia. It becomes an extension of Ethiopia, it becomes Kushed, it becomes black again, which then as my father would love to preach--

Lisa: Hmm.

Otis: He was saying that Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Africa.

Lisa: Yes, that's right.

Otis: Now, if you want to hide somebody--

Lisa: Go now.

Otis: You don't hide someone in an area where they are going to appear--

Lisa: Stand out.

Otis: You know, they stand out. He says you hide them among camouflage.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: And so God says, "I want to hide my child. I'm not taking him to Athens. I'm not taking him to Rome, I'm taking him to Africa so that he can hide around people who look just like him."

Lisa: Wow. What? Wait, you kind of-- you made a little bit of a twist there. I caught that you said, God said, "I'm taking my child to Africa." Wow-- wow.

Otis: And imagine if we had that narrative. Now what's interesting America has an issue with the color of Jesus.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: It's interesting that Europe doesn't, you know, there's a Black Madonna. That's not a big deal in Poland, that's not a big deal in other areas of Europe. But in America, it causes deep anger.

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: Because it's deeply connected to enslavement. Because you can't--

Lisa: Well.

Otis: --enslave people who look like your Savior.

Lisa: Ooh, wow. So-- [laughs] It's like, "Wow." Let me ask you this. Let me ask you this. How has pilgrimage, how did that pilgrimage then change the way that you understand your faith?

Otis: Blew everything apart. In terms of the imagery.

Lisa: Yeah, yeah

Otis: In terms of understanding and seeing-- I no longer saw Africa through the eyes of the [Berlin Conference](#).

Lisa: Oooh.

Lisa: So the Berlin Conference of 1840 – was that 1848? Actually, I don't remember the year--

Otis: Yeah. But the Berlin Conference, for those who may not be familiar you can look it up, is the moment when European powers got together and carved up Africa for their own use. While we have--

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: Nigeria, uh, the British had Nigeria and Kenya and we had the French. We had Senegal and so on, and so on and so on.

Lisa: Mm-hm.

Otis: And in that, we did something rather radical in terms of what Europe did and how we accepted a particular belief. We looked at Africa through the borders and the eyes of Europe. And we said, "Africa stops here and this other – these other areas start over here." So, places such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and Iraq, they can't be connected to Africa.

Lisa: Right.

Otis: Or Israel and Palestine.

Lisa: Right.

Otis: They can't be connected to Africa, because we have something called the Suez Canal.

Lisa: Right.

Otis: So.

Lisa: Which is man-made. [laughs]

Otis: Right, that's right. So, anything on the other side of that, that's not Africa. That's the Middle East.

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: Which is bizarre in the ancient world. Remember that Egypt didn't end under the borders that we see it now. I mean, it moved into areas that we call Libya. It moved into areas that we even call Palestine, Lebanon. It slipped over into areas that we call part of Saudi Arabia. They didn't have the borders that we have now.

Lisa: Oh my God.

Otis: People did not view the world through race, the way we did. They viewed it through nationality.

Lisa: Right.

Otis: So, people would move into different areas. And remember, you have Hebrew people, you have Jewish people who move out of Africa, and moved farther north.

Lisa: Right.

Otis: They moved, you know, north. And they settled in those areas. They were people of color. They were Semitic people. They were non-white. That trip changed literally the complexion of the Bible for me. I mean, I knew it intellectually. But once I went to Egypt, and spent time with the Nubian population, made the connections between Africa and Greece, and then made the connections of the biblical connections of how we come out of this area. I no longer could open up Genesis and see Abraham looking like, you know, a Charlton Heston character or a Moses looking – I no longer could. That image was shattered forever.

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: Which then raised other questions--

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: About how we envision our faith in America in particular.

Lisa: We have – oh my Lord, literally, I mean, seriously, we could go there. So you, what you do is you take Trinity UCC on pilgrimage every year now because you really believe in the transformative power of pilgrimage for your congregation. So, what is the most transformative pilgrimage your congregation has experienced?

Otis: Ethiopia, without a doubt.

Lisa: Ahh.

Otis: Ethiopia.

Lisa: Why, what happened?

Otis: Ethiopia did two things. It shattered the myth that black people adopted Christianity. Because, we have the opportunity to go to a country that not only is Christian, but has never been colonized and does not reference Rome at all.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: They have their own Pope. They're like yeah, that other guy in Rome – Pope in Rome. We have our own and we have our own, a lot longer. They've been a Christian nation.

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: More than any other nation on the planet? And they will tell you, said, "We were practicing Christianity before anyone or any other country on the planet." Then number two, they will tell you that before we practiced Christianity, we were Jews. I mean, they're real clear. They're real clear.

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: They say, "We are an ancient people." And then you go to the sites. And then they will also tell you, "The reason that we've never been colonized is because we've got the Ark of the Covenant." Which is a great story around this.

Lisa: Wow. Woah.

Otis: They have one of the holier sights is in [Axum](#). They have this uh wonderful, beautiful temple where they have a person – a group of priests that their job is to protect them to hold the Ark of the Covenant.

Lisa: Mm-hm.

Otis: Several years ago, [Henry Louis Gates](#) was in Ethiopia. He's doing this whole thing on it. You've seen some of these PBS programs he's done.

Lisa: Definitely yes, I watched actually, yes.

Otis: Oh, man.

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: Yes, yes. Yes, he does a wonderful job on this. And he was in Ethiopia, talking to the holy patriarch. And he was sharing the history that Ethiopia says that they have the Ark of the Covenant. And it was brought back to Ethiopia, under the reign of Solomon, and he kind of goes through this whole thing. And so, he asked the holy patriarch, "Who is their Pope?" He says, "You know, we understand that you have the Ark of the Covenant. Why don't you allow some scholars from Harvard and from other places that can verify that you have the Ark of the Covenant?" The answer with the most beautiful answer I've ever heard, the man looks at Dr. Gates, [and] he says, "We know we have it." [laughs] I mean literally he says, "We don't need Europe to validate what we already know." And it was so powerful.

Lisa: [laughs] And is classic.

Otis: And Gates did not know how to answer. He was like, "Oh, I guess if you all know you got it, you got it."

Lisa: You don't need to verify.

Otis: We don't need you to verify the truth we already had.

Lisa: Oh, Lord.

Otis: And to have that kind of perspective and then to know that every time Italy tried to press into colonize Ethiopia.

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: It was the Orthodox Church: what they would do is they would have these replicas of the Ark of the Covenant [made], and they would begin to march in these small cities and small towns. And that was their form of resistance to say that "We are the holders of the ark, and God is standing in us."

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: And He will push you out of our region. And that was a part of their narrative of pushing out the Italians. The Italians tried several times, and they will tell you, say, "They occupied but they never colonized."

Lisa: Yes, yes.

Otis: They will tell you real quick. They said there's a difference, they say, "They occupied but they never colonized." And each time--

Lisa: Oh my God.

Otis: They defeated the Italians and push them out. And they made the claim to say that, "Because of our faith, because of our, with the Spirit dwelling in us, we have been called never to have another country to control our narrative." And so you have in Ethiopia, these amazing stories we were in [Lalibela](#), which has the eleven rock-hewn churches, and these churches that are built into mountains, out of one single, one single piece of stone. And we brought our architect with us. She came on the tour. Her name is Ramona Wenham Brooks. She is an amazing, gifted architect, one of the few African-American women in the state of Illinois, who has an architecture agency – [she] was one of the first I should say, that was licensed and it was given a full architecture agency that she runs.

Lisa: Okay.

Otis: And she was walking around holding her head, her hand on her head when we were going through these churches and Lalibela. One was called St. George, actually the one that we were going through, and I said, "Ramona, what's going on?" She says, "I'm an architect, and I cannot figure out how these people did this."

Lisa: Woah.

Otis: She said, "Out of one piece of stone, the difficulty, the precision, the challenge of using ancient tools to do this--"

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: Is mind-boggling.

Lisa: Oh my God.

Otis: She says that "For modern architecture is that actually we can use lasers. We have tools for precision. How do you get this kind of precision and the magnitude and size of the building?"

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: She said, "This is really mind-boggling." These are not bricks that have built this church. This is one, one particular brick. Now, the other thing is you can't see the churches. The only way you can see the churches that are designed in this beautiful African cross, you can only see it from the heavens.

Lisa: Oh my God.

Otis: So, they were designing a church that only God could look at and enjoy. It was not St. Peter's Cathedral that we can look at and God can look at. This was a church designed in such a way that no human being unless you're in a plane could actually understand the beauty of the architecture.

Lisa: That's incredible.

Otis: It is. It is incredible.

Lisa: What?

Otis: It is pretty amazing.

Lisa: I'm trying to even imagine it. I mean, I know that there are churches that are hewn out of rock and they're inside the ground. That's not what you're talking about. You're talking about a structure that is like on a level place, it's on a plateau.

Otis: It's in the ground-- yeah, it's in the ground. But the only way that you can get a sense of the design, is you have to be elevated above the church.

Lisa: Oh. Wow.

Otis: So they were designing and they were creating a design that was not designed for human eyes.

Lisa: Right.

Otis: But for people that were able to see or, you know, a God who's able to see above.

Lisa: Yeah, yeah.

Otis: Below and around. And that in itself was absolutely extraordinary.

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: And this one little wonderful story is [why] I love these little Ethiopian stories. So, the story of when the Italians were, again trying to colonize, they knew that the one way to break the spirit of the people is if they could destroy the churches. They said, "Their spirit, their soul is wrapped up in their faith. These people believe in this, you know, you know, Mussolini." You know, he's completely dismissive of faith. And these people believe in this stuff, this superstition, so we will destroy the churches.

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: We will torture the priests. So, we had the opportunity to speak – my father was in – we had to break up in smaller groups in order to go to all the different churches.

Lisa: Uh-huh.

Otis: And the group my father was in, had the opportunity to speak to the nephew of one of the priests who was present during the period of Mussolini.

Lisa: Okay.

Otis: And he said that his nephew, or his uncle, I'm sorry, was captured by Italian soldiers. He was tied to a post. And he was left out there day and night in there, you know, [and] it would come out every morning every evening and say, "Have you given up, you know, given up your God, you know, will you, you know, pledge allegiance to Mussolini," or whatever statement they would give. They were always asking him to give up his faith. He said, "No." Over and over, "No, I will not."

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: He said, "We're gonna destroy your temple. If God is so great, then God will not allow us to destroy the temple." And of course, the priest was saying, "I'm still not going to give up whether you destroy the temple or not. It has nothing to do with me and my faith." So, they put dynamite all throughout as a priest he is telling the story, so they put dynamite all through the church.

Lisa: Uh-huh.

Otis: And they were preparing to destroy this, absolutely wonder of the world. And the priests tell the group, he [then) says, "As they were about to push the plunger, the clouds had darkened, and a storm had moved in. And lightning struck the person who was about to destroy the church."

Lisa: What?

Otis: And the story goes that the rest of the soldiers started to flee and then the Ethiopian Resistance Army was making its way into the mountains and pushed the rest of the Italians out. And everybody, my father said everybody was just sitting there in absolute awe.

Lisa: Oh my God. And you said the Ethiopian army?

Otis: Yeah, the rebel army then was able to push the Italians. Lalibela is way up in the mountains, so it is high elevation. They were able to push them out of that region. And once again, these eleven churches that sit in this mountainous region, were safe and--

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: And a curious place of worship and beauty. And they're still used today. These are not places that you just come and say, "Oh, look at this nice architecture. And this is what people used to worship in." These are working churches. I mean, we were there during worship, we went to worship. These are churches that were built 1,300 years ago; we were worshipping in these churches – not thirteen, sorry not thirteen. They were built about eight hundred and then some nine hundred years ago.

Lisa: Walking Freedom Road from coast to coast, and around the globe. This is the Freedom Road podcast.

[music]

Lisa: [Thinking Cap](#) is a weekly podcast hosted by the [Center for American Progress's Michelle Jawando](#) and [Igor Volsky](#). In the current political moment, we find ourselves in, full of protests, anger, and activist momentum. Thinking Cap hopes to lay the groundwork for the bold progressive policy ideas we need to continue moving this movement and our country forward. You can find new episodes each Thursday on Apple Podcasts, Sound Cloud and [americanprogress.org](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. Also, find them on Twitter at Think CAP Pod.

[music]

Lisa: Otis, this summer Trinity will embark on a pilgrimage with Freedom Road, through the entry rebellion and resistance, and then the rising of African peoples on U.S soil. We named it the 1619 pilgrimage, which people usually associate with Eastern Shore, Virginia, Jamestown,

[and] Hampton, but our pilgrimage will be based in Charleston, South Carolina. That was something you were really adamant about. So, why South Carolina?

Otis: First of all, I absolutely love South Carolina. Number one.

Lisa: [laughs]

Otis: So, all the folks in South Carolina we have Gullah roots, you know.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: Major shout-out. The second thing is that now it is reported that close to 80% of people of African descent came through Charleston.

Lisa: What?

Otis: There was one scholar that was saying fifty [percent, but] there's a new museum has been put together in Charleston, [and] they are now saying a close to eighty percent.

Lisa: Okay.

Otis: The other piece in reference to South Carolina is [that] there are two places in the US if you can't go to Africa, you can do it in America. One is New Orleans, and the other is South Carolina.

Lisa: Okay.

Otis: There are more Africanisms in those two regions.

Lisa: Ah.

Otis: In terms of dialect, and language, food, music, dance, general culture, the value system, even the soil in South Carolina is identical in terms of nutrients and what you can grow to the soil that you would find in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana. That's why certain things grow very well in the region, whether it is certain types of rice, where you're talking about okra, peanuts, whatever it is.

Lisa: Yeah, yeah.

Otis: There are certain [things that] grow very well in this region because it has the same soil and the agricultural technology.

Lisa: Uh-huh.

Otis: Africans brought, they brought to South Carolina and they also brought their architecture technology.

Lisa: Uh-huh.

Otis: So, the design of homes in Charleston, they have African influences. We think of porches as being something that's, you know, rather European. But in reality, this was something that was also assisted in design by Africans who said this is the meeting space. Porches are places on the front that are designed to create community. But in Charleston, the design of homes has high ceilings – you have these porches, but they're also turned in a direction that allowed the natural breeze to flow through them. So, you don't necessarily need AC. There was no AC back then obviously.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: But that was an African design. So, you had enslaved Africans that were creating – they were not just building.

Lisa: Mmm.

Otis: They were coming up with the design for many of the homes in Charleston. They were coming up with the food technology – the spices and how you mix things together. All of the alchemy around food. You have very a rich heritage in South Carolina. And of course, you have the Gullah people. You have this vestige of Africa, right in America, a different language, a worldview, stories and songs, and a powerful spirituality that is deeply connected to the Spirit of God and Christ, rooted in South Carolina. And then you have the habit of resistance.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: Black people were resisting left and right in South Carolina.

Lisa: That's exactly right.

Otis: And anytime they even heard a biblical story, they were like, "That's right."

Lisa: [laughs]

Otis: God said, "Let my people go." And they were ready to – they're ready to roll and the myth we tell and it's just true, really, truly is a lie that Christianity made people docile.

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: The truth is that they had to keep or have someone watch over the preacher or the person from the prayer meeting. Because when we were in free black space – free black spiritual space, and we prayed, we worshiped and we spoke of the Word of God – these are the spaces that

resistance and revolt started. [Nat Turner](#), preacher. [Gabriel Prosser](#), preacher. [Denmark Vesey](#), preacher.

Lisa: Uh.

Otis: All of them, when they had the biblical narrative, they had a hermeneutic of suspicion around what they were being told by white preachers and missionaries. And they ended up blackifying it and saying, "Let my people go." And even if they weren't able to read, they had songs, "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land--"

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: "Tell on Pharaoh--" Who is Pharaoh? Pharaoh is the person who owns the plantation, "Let my people go," and sing a song right in front of somebody and tell them I'm either going to burn down the plantation, or I'm going to say, "Roll, Jordan, roll. And I'm getting up out of here tonight because I'm going down by the riverside and if the dog is chasing me, then I'll just try travel the water by going through the water so they'll lose the scent." There was this coded language and that's South Carolina.

Lisa: That's South Carolina.

Otis: Yes.

Lisa: Wow. See my grandmother grew up in South Carolina till she was in her teens. And then she was brought North because her mother – my great grandmother – was part of the Great Migration. And she moved our family from Camden, South Carolina to Philadelphia. So when I grew up, I knew we were part of Philly, but I had never actually stepped into the state of South Carolina for any significant amount of time. But I went back, actually, and my grandmother never went back. When she left, she left because it was all so brutal.

Otis: Mm.

Lisa: Like the level of brutality that it took to subjugate South Carolina and South Carolinian people of African descent must have been huge because there were so many of us, you know, so she was traumatized by the experience that she never went back. But when I went back there it was there was like a kinship to the land that I experienced that I didn't expect. And to know, to hear this, I can't wait. I am in the midst of returning in order to lead this pilgrimage, and I know, I know that you're going to, in fact, I'm really looking forward to learning from you in the midst of crafting this experience. But I never understood how very much South Carolina itself has to offer to us as people of African descent, who want to understand who we really are.

Otis: If you want to find out about your family--

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: More than likely, people who are listening to this podcast, if you're of African descent. You have some connection with South Carolina. You have some connection with New Orleans, you have some connection with Virginia.

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: Those three regions.

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: And what is interesting is that the nation that you're from, where your family roots come from, for example, if you're about, Nigeria, more than likely, your people came through New Orleans. If you were a con, or from the [Fulani](#) nation, more than likely, you came through South Carolina. So, there are different regions in West Africa that ended up coming through certain areas in the Americas. And South Carolina is very important. Now, South Carolina was very oppressive because it was a majority-black state at one point.

Lisa: Yes, yes.

Otis: So, they had to put in restrictive measures to ensure that we did not have power. We will notice that the South still uses the South Carolina template to disempower black people.

Lisa: Okay, explain that.

Otis: What we call voter suppression--

Lisa: Oh, yeah.

Otis: Is a South Carolina move. What we call in and around census use is a South Carolina move. When I say census use, it means to under-represent, uh, under report. Incarceration is the South Carolina move. The idea: I want your labor, but I don't want your power. South Carolina had some of the most vicious laws in place because they were so fearful of black empowerment. And the GOP today is using the same narrative, the same tactics to ensure that people of color, whether they are coming from south of the border, or whether they are living in the south or the North will not have power or be able to claim power in the United States.

Lisa: Hmm, so, I'm sure that there are a few pastors out there who are listening in and I want to know, what would you say to them about the power of pilgrimage to help form the faith and spiritual strength of their own congregations?

Otis: Within the black community, we believe in a story and in the journey, Jesus takes his disciples on a journey, a pilgrimage.

Lisa: Mm-hm.

Otis: For three years, and says, "All right, I'm gonna leave you and I'm gonna leave you with an advocate and a counselor. But I want you to begin to understand how I am to minister." When you go on a pilgrimage connected to your spirituality, your faith and your understanding of who God is, and who Christ is in your life, it will change you. When you marry your history or your Africanity to your Christianity when those two things become married. All of a sudden you will explode myths. Because unfortunately the majority of our pastors, as much as I love them – I'm one of them – we have been raised and nursed by a theological narrative that is anti-black.

Lisa: Yes. Yes. Not only is it anti-black, but it's false. [laughs]

Otis: Yes, yes, yes, absolutely.

Lisa: Like it's literally lifted the story of Jesus and Moses and Adam, and the first women and man, it has lifted it from its actual context.

Otis: That's right.

Lisa: And placed it in the halls of, white, Western Empire.

Otis: That's correct.

Lisa: And therefore, the meaning, all the meaning changes. The meaning of the story changes when you change the context. So, honestly, I feel like, I literally do feel like I've been on a pilgrimage listening to you today. [laughs] And I think you're right. I think there's something about our spiritual formation, and as people of African descent who are followers of black Jesus, a physically brown politically black Jesus.

Otis: That's right, a black Jesus, and not a Jesus who just happens to be black.

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: [laughs]

Lisa: Yeah, of that Jesus who comes from that story. I mean, what do you think of it-- I mean, this is actually something that I think it's necessary to reprogram all of us in the church.

Otis: Absolutely.

Lisa: That we all have been programmed with a lie. Like, literally a virus has been placed into the system of Christianity.

Otis: That is a beautiful way to put it. I think that is the perfect language: a virus.

Lisa: It's called white supremacy.

Otis: That's right.

Lisa: And so--

Otis: It functions as a virus. And it spreads as a virus, and we spread it through the air, through the words that we speak, we infect other people spirits in the process, and it is a spiritual virus. And I think also for those who are listening, Lisa--

Lisa: Yeah.

Otis: Many times people who are not of African descent [say], "If I'm not a part of the story, you're not talking about me." I say that, especially for those who, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who think they're white.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: Who consider themselves white, who operate out of that narrative. When you embrace a faith that is not dominated by this colonialism, it will be transformative to you and to your congregation. Can you imagine if the Southern Baptists had a black Jesus or Jesus who was Jesus in 1956?

Lisa: Wow.

Otis: What they would look like today.

Lisa: Uhh.

Otis: And can you imagine if Evangelicals used the narrative that God is a mother to the motherless and a father to the fatherless, to see that *Elohim* is not necessarily just a male word.

Lisa: Well--

Otis: But the word that cannot be defined solely as male and female, but comes out of a feminine Hebrew root. Can you imagine?

Lisa: Yes, preacher.

Otis: Can you imagine if we view the world through the eyes of a God that does not put us in a box, but says that, "You are beautiful because you are black, you are phenomenal because you are Latino, you are incredible because you are Asian, you are gifted because you are gay, you are something magnificent because you're a woman." All of a sudden, we would be "The headlight." In the words of Dr. King, "Instead of the taillight of driving how society should be designed."

Lisa: Yes, yes. And to add for those people who are Lithuanian or Swedish or Irish or Scottish to reach back to your own roots.

Otis: Come on.

Lisa: Roots that would actually colonize themselves at different points, at different times and--

Otis: Let the wild goose go in the Celtic tradition.

Lisa: Yes.

Otis: You know, come on.

Lisa: Yes, I love that, and yes, and also not adopting the story of your oppressor, just like we were saying earlier with the gun.

Otis: Yes.

Lisa: Yeah. Oh, I love it. I love it. Thank you so much. The conversations leaders have on the road to justice. This is the Freedom Road podcast.

[music]

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