

Of Love & Justice: Celebrating
Twenty Years of The Rev. Dr. Jeff
Hood's Ordained Ministry

Jeff Hood

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OF LOVE & JUSTICE: CELEBRATING TWENTY YEARS OF
THE REV. DR. JEFF HOOD'S ORDAINED MINISTRY

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Written by Jeff Hood.

Table of Contents

Foreword.....	1
1. Don't You Dare Turn Your Head: The Self-Immolation of the Rev. Charles Moore.....	5
2. When Texas Descends Into Hell: The Vulnerability of Scott Panetti	9
3. The Wayward Movement of the Movement	11
4. The Last Visit.....	13
5. The Sermon after the Shooting.....	15
6. Babel.....	21
7. Joseph Hutcheson's Death Shows Why Lupe Valdez isn't Qualified to be Governor	25
8. Good Friday is a Time to Consider What the Death Penalty is Doing to Our Souls	29
9. The Blasphemy of the Flag in Church.....	33
10. Our Moral Imagination Continues to be Put to Death in the Execution Chamber	37
11. Being Present after the Tornado.....	41
12. An Unlikely Friendship Forged after an Oklahoma Execution.....	45
13. Rage and the Alabama Execution of Kenneth Smith by the New Method of Nitrogen Hypoxia	49
14. I Watched as Alabama Suffocated a Man to Death. No, Kris Kobach, It Didn't "Work Well"	53

15. President Biden Should Follow through on Ending the Death Penalty.....	57
16. Executions Traumatize Our Spiritual Leaders	61
17. As State Lawmakers Consider Execution by Nitrogen, a Witness Describes the Horror	65
18. In Sparing Tremaine Wood, We Wouldn't Endorse Evil, but Refuse to be Consumed by It.....	73
19. The Monster: The Archetype of Evil and the Death Penalty	77
20. The Abolitionist God.....	85

Foreword

Last week, Rev. Jeff Hood was in Florida to watch Dusty Spencer be executed. Dusty didn't want family or friends to attend the execution. He only wanted Hood to be by his side, performing last rites. When Dusty asked him to do this, Hood didn't hesitate to say yes. That's just the kind of person he is.

Hood has attended twelve executions in almost three and a half years. The first was Scott Eizember in Oklahoma. "I saw a need and stepped in," Hood told me. That's his approach with a lot of the things he's done in the last twenty years: getting involved in Troy Davis's case in Georgia while a theology student at Emory University, marching at protests, even organizing the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest in Dallas, Texas, in July 2016, which ended tragically with five police officers' deaths. Whenever Hood sees a need, he is there, no questions asked.

The path he took is a long way from the ministry he imagined when he was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister at The Rock Baptist Church in Rex, Georgia, in June 12, 2006. At the time, Hood was only twenty-two years old and would have no idea the transformation that would take place within him. He is even practicing his ministry in a different tradition altogether: Old Catholicism, a lineage that predates the Reformation and extends the priesthood to those the Roman Catholic Church would turn away.

Today, Rev. Hood, as he is known to his congregation at St. Oscar Romero Old Catholic Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, is committed to living his faith through action. Of course, showing up comes with consequences. There are those who see courage in his ministry and those who see recklessness. Some might call him radical; Hood counters that he's only doing what Jesus would have done. Despite

the polarization, he has consistently chosen presence over distance, involvement over neutrality—if only we would all be so brave.

Each execution breaks him; the gruesome details stay with him; his inability to stop each execution haunts him. In the aftermath of Dusty Spencer's execution, Hood will likely do what he has done so many times before: paint what he cannot say and write what he cannot carry alone.

Writing, in particular, is one thing that has saved him all these years. He has written from hotel rooms after executions, from long drives home, from moments of disappointment, exhaustion, grief, and unanswered prayer. This collection anthologizes twenty pieces of Hood's work, one for every year of his ordained ministry. It is not a greatest-hits collection or an attempt to settle old arguments. It is a record that faith must become visible and embodied. Presence, in Hood's work, is not sentimentality or agreement. It is a refusal to leave people alone at the moments when society decides they are no longer worth accompanying.

Whether expressing his frustration with the activist movement in a *HuffPost* op-ed or detailing what he saw in Kenny Smith's death chamber, Hood is not afraid to say what we all need to hear. When he participated in the BLM protest in Dallas, for instance, he said something that news outlets pounced on: "God damn White America!" Instantly, he became alienated to those on the right, if he wasn't already. But it *is* what we all needed to hear, especially Christians. As he said later in a sermon he delivered at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Denton, Texas, "I'm tired of hearing about 'White America.' There is no 'White America.' There is only America. I'm also tired of hearing about 'White Christianity.' There is no 'White Christianity.' There is only Christianity. A Christianity that is white

is not Christianity. I wish a few more people would start damning everything that is contrary to love and justice.”

Indeed, Hood works in the service of love and justice. That’s clear from the pieces chosen for this collection (which have been lightly edited for clarity). Some of them might not be comfortable to read. You may not agree with every word. But you’ll be asked to consider whether suffering belongs only to those who endure it, and whether love is something we merely feel or something we practice.

“Our ability to develop love for each other makes us divine,” Hood writes in “Our Moral Imagination Continues to be Put to Death in the Execution Chamber.” Whether or not we believe ourselves divine, we would all do well to put love into practice.

Kat Bodrie

Director of Publications, Execution Intervention Project

June 29, 2026

1. Don't You Dare Turn Your Head: The Self-Immolation of the Rev. Charles Moore

Patheos • June 24, 2014

Hood's first major op-ed to gather widespread attention and influence was published the day after Charles Moore, a retired Methodist pastor, set himself on fire in a Texas parking lot. Hood sees in Moore a martyrdom the church would rather dismiss as "madness."

The fiery passion of 79-year-old retired United Methodist pastor The Rev. Charles Moore is raging in my soul right now. On June 23 around 5:30 p.m., Moore exited his vehicle in Grand Saline, Texas, doused his body with gasoline and set himself on fire. After rescue efforts by bystanders, Moore was taken by helicopter to Parkland Hospital in Dallas and eventually died late last night. Based on notes left behind, Moore chose to self-immolate based on his frustration with the United Methodist Church's position on human sexuality, opposition to the death penalty, disdain for racism (especially in his hometown of Grand Saline) and his deep anger at Southern Methodist University's decision to house the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

Rev. Moore knew how we would react. On June 22, the day before he self-immolated, Moore wrote, "I know that some will judge me insane." When I first shared Moore's story with a table full of people at a Dallas restaurant, everyone immediately declared him insane. I know different.

While a graduate student in history at the University of Alabama, I spent six months studying self-immolations that took place in both the

United States and in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. With stark consistency, the persons who self-immolated that I studied were remarkably sane and unquestionably persons of deep conviction. The temptation of the hour will be to turn our heads and call The Rev. Charles Moore insane. If we do, we should also turn our heads from Jesus and call him insane too. For we must not forget, Jesus sat in the Garden of Gethsemane and made a conscious, clear decision to step out into death, just like Moore.

Instead of judging Rev. Moore, maybe we should try to ignite the passion for justice that burned so brightly in his life in ours. When Texas tries to execute Manuel Vasquez on August 6, maybe we should do something more than simply turn our heads and protect our dignity. When our churches and societies ignore racial segregation and discrimination, maybe we should do something more than simply turn our heads and protect our pride. When we are asked to perform a same-sex wedding ceremony or ordain a same-gender loving person, maybe we should do something more than turn our heads and protect our salaries/pensions. When institutional injustices occur all around us, maybe we should do something more than turn our heads and bless them with our silence. I will go to bed this evening thankful for the public witness of The Rev. Charles Moore and pray that the church would garner even an ounce of his passion and courage.

On a personal note, I serve on the Board of Directors of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Rev. Moore helped found the organization. Because Moore lived, I am able to do the work that I do. My respect for Moore is unwavering and I am proud to follow in his footsteps. Jesus asks us to give our lives and Moore did.

Tonight, my passion for Jesus burns as intensely as ever. When I look straight ahead into the dark, I see Moore's bespectacled image burning. I see Moore giving his life so that others might live. I refuse to turn my

head. I know that Jesus is speaking to me from there. The courage of a passionate follower of Jesus can set the world afire with love. May the great martyrdom of The Rev. Charles Moore make it so.

Amen.

2. When Texas Descends Into Hell: The Vulnerability of Scott Panetti

HuffPost • November 11, 2014

After watching his children sleep, Hood reflects on the planned execution of Scott Panetti, a paranoid schizophrenic, and a society that has no problem executing those who are most vulnerable.

On October 30, I woke up and walked into the bedroom of our three young children. Our oldest children are twin boys. Their little bodies were contorted around stuffed animals and producing loud snores. I watched them sleep for a little while. The room was still dark. I walked further in. Our youngest was curled up in a ball. I watched him sleep for a moment. Shuffling over to a rocker, I sat for a while and let my mind wonder in the twilight.

The previous day, the State of Texas surprisingly announced that it would execute Scott Panetti on December 3. I wondered what Scott looked like when he was the age of my children. I imagined a mother watching her child sleep and dreaming about all that her child might become. I can imagine that Scott's mother never thought her child would be a paranoid schizophrenic capable of killing his in-laws in front of his estranged wife and child. The more I sat and thought, the more I couldn't help but look to my own children and wonder if they would ever commit such a crime. Who can say? I can only know what I would do if they did. I would love them.

We descend into hell when we leave love behind. The State of Texas is quickly descending into the hell of a loveless decision. Scott Panetti has suffered from documented mental illness for over 30 years. During a trial where he represented himself, Scott wore a cowboy costume

and subpoenaed the pope, John F. Kennedy, and Jesus Christ to testify. In 1986, six years before Scott killed his in-laws, the Social Security Administration of our country deemed him to be so mentally disabled that he was granted monthly benefits. In order to be competent enough to be executed, Scott must understand why he is being executed. Presently, Scott thinks that he is being executed for being a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Over the snores of my children, I couldn't imagine letting anyone take the life out of their vulnerable young bodies no matter what they did. If we don't think it is okay to execute children incapable of understanding their decisions, why would we think it okay to execute someone who is severely mentally ill and incapable of understanding their decisions? To execute either would be a cruel injustice that serves no constructive purpose in a modern world.

In his mental condition, Scott is as vulnerable as my sleeping children. How will we respond? Will we protect vulnerable life? I invite you to think about the vulnerable people that you love. Would you want the state to kill them? Texas plans to descend into a loveless hell on December 3. Somebody please save us. Oh, and by the way, the October 30 morning I spent with my children was also my birthday.

3. The Wayward Movement of the Movement

HuffPost • May 6, 2015

This piece is a short, sharp reckoning with activist hypocrisy that was written when Ferguson and Baltimore were still on fire. Hood names the bigotry he heard inside the movement and refuses the comfort of coalition loyalty.

I'm sick. I can feel it deep down in my stomach. The comments are eating at me. For the third time in less than a week, I heard a respected activist make a problematic remark. Now, I'm not talking about anything that was misconstrued. I am talking about blatantly problematic remarks. There was the black activist who casually declared, "No homo!" There was the feminist who spoke of keeping Muslims out of her neighborhood. There was the immigration activist who spoke of transgender persons as "Frankensteins." Though I didn't let these comments pass by unnoticed or unchallenged, I am beginning to wonder if the subliminal goal of activism is to help groups gain enough power where they can talk sh*t on everyone else. What good is a social movement that only grants rights to some and creates another group of marginalizers and oppressors?

While I am tremendously proud of all the organizing efforts that are taking place all over the country, I don't think we have spent much time thinking about where we are going. I think this is partly due to the fact that many people are just trying to survive. Regardless of the reason, I look around and see many of the strategies of the 1960s being redeployed and repurposed. From Baltimore to Ferguson, much of the work and organizing that is going on—from the marches to the mass

meetings to the teach-ins—seem to be a throwback. White liberals love this development, which tells me I need to be afraid of it. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s produced many tangible gains, but was probably most successful in paving the way for the continued economic oppression that has plagued black communities ever since. Our nation also left the 1960s more racially divided than ever before with no clear idea of how to come together. We have to remember that the same old strategies produce the same old results. Where are the innovators who are seeking to organize and create in ways that bring about revolution, liberation and reconciliation at the same time? We can do better than empty slogans and events that are simply a repurposing of the past that allows oppression and marginalization to continue.

Realizing that we have a shared past and future is the fundamental truth that is going to bring us together and move us forward. We have to understand that the liberation of the marginalized and oppressed can only come through the liberation of the marginalizer and oppressor. Do we not belong to each other? If we can't answer this question in the affirmative, we have already lost.

4. The Last Visit

HuffPost • September 22, 2015

Hood visited with Juan Garcia for two hours before Garcia's execution date. Hood recounts what it means to say goodbye for the first and last time, and what a man on death row taught him about salvation.

I only met Juan Garcia once. I was asked to visit him on September 15. For a couple of hours in a cold room in Livingston, Texas, we talked. With an unforgiving deadline approaching fast, the last things were at the forefront of our minds. For most people, eschatology or the study of destiny is a theoretical conversation. When one is scheduled to be executed on October 6, you're not all that concerned with the theoretical.

"Do you think I'm going to die?" The question was the toughest I'd ever encountered. Despite the fact that I knew the answer, I had to name it. "I cannot imagine a circumstance in which you won't be executed." Though I felt like my response was cold, the words loosened Juan up. We began our journey back to the future.

The stories of persons on death row always begin far before the murders. Drugs and abuse are common elements. In a short period of time, Juan tried to tell me all that he could. On multiple occasions, I got lost in the intensity of it all. When Juan expressed his regret over the murder, I looked him straight in the eye and said, "You're forgiven."

"What is salvation?" he asked. I don't think about the definition of salvation too often...I'm too busy living it. Nevertheless, I blurted out what came to my mind first: "We are saved when we place our faith in love." Since God is love, I have always believed that love is our only way

of knowing the divine. “I choose love,” he said. Even as time has put distance between us, Juan’s answer adheres to my soul.

The last topic was one we all think about, whether we admit it or not. “What will the judgment be like?” Growing up, I was always terrified of death. Our pastors constantly talked about fire and damnation. I was never able to shake the belief that the flames were for me. When I accepted the call to ministry, I promised God I would never talk like that. I haven’t. After a quick, silent prayer, I leaned in and declared, “Imagine encountering a love so powerful that it burns up all the evil within you and transforms all the love within you into something eternal.” Juan’s eyes started to water up. “I believe.” In the power of that moment, I knew that I did too.

Knowing that our time was coming to a close, I didn’t know how to say goodbye for the first and last time. In the agony of trying to think of the right words to say, I was paralyzed. Sensing my timidity, Juan smiled and said, “I think I know what will draw us together again.”

5. The Sermon after the Shooting

Patheos • July 10, 2016

Three days after police officers were shot—killing five—at a Black Lives Matter protest in Dallas on July 7, 2016, Hood delivered this sermon at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Denton, Texas. At the time, Hood was still processing the chaos of the march when gunshots erupted and his role in the center of a national crisis.

It's been a very busy time. Just a few days ago, I organized the rally and march that preceded the deaths of five police officers in Dallas. This morning, I want to journey through the story of Dallas and end with the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

On Wednesday, I partnered with others to organize the protest. We were all disgusted at the video of Alton Sterling's death at the hands of the police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The next day, another video showing the death of Philando Castile at the hands of police in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, became widely available. Seeing those men bleed out—watching black Americans regularly bleed out in our streets, remembering Ferguson, remembering Baltimore, remembering city after city where black lives do not matter, including our own, Denton, Texas—is overwhelming. We see it over and over again. We see black communities overpoliced. When communities are overpoliced, there is no doubt that tragedies happen in greater frequency.

Someone asked me the other day to prove that there is police brutality in Dallas. I simply responded, “Why would a thousand people show up to a police brutality rally if there wasn't brutality?” We never expected so many people. We thought there was going to be a hundred or so. When the video of Philando Castile bleeding out went viral, the

numbers increased exponentially. We gathered at the rally. When I looked out into the sea of people, I wondered, "What does Jesus have to say in a time like this?" By traditional interpretations, the answer is absolutely nothing. We keep on offering salvation to people who are dying in the streets. We keep on talking about Jesus loving the world and we can't even take the time to love our neighbors.

We say that we are a people who believe that God loves the world, but look around. We don't do shit. People are being gunned down in our streets and we don't do shit. Look around! We keep on hearing people demand that the church do more. The church doesn't have anything to give. The church has no voice. The church has no witness. The church has no purpose.

We traded our voice for influence. We traded our witness for political power. We were most concerned about protecting churches. We wanted to make sure we maintained our denominations. In the meantime, we gave everything away. Do you care more about your church or denomination than you do these black bodies that are lying in our streets? If you do, you are not following Jesus. You are following evil. We have to wrestle with difficult questions in these difficult hours. What is salvation? What is love? What is truth? Where do we go from here? We gathered last Thursday night to wrestle with these questions and many others.

Anyone who declares that Thursday's protest should have been less angry doesn't understand the daily violence facing black people in this country. People were mad as hell and they had every right to be. Many have criticized the language that I used at the rally. I declared, "God damn White America!" I'm tired of hearing about "White America." There is no "White America." There is only America. I'm also tired of hearing about "White Christianity." There is no "White Christianity." There is only Christianity. A Christianity that is white is not

Christianity. I wish a few more people would start damning everything that is contrary to love and justice.

Throughout our nation, you have heard the phrase, “Fuck the police!” Why would people say such a thing? Have we considered that the situation has become so dire that people don’t feel like they have any other language to use? Those who criticize the language of those who are being beaten and killed and don’t stop to help are the enemies of Christ. People are being slaughtered in our streets. Why can’t we love our neighbors as ourselves? We must get saved. We must stop police brutality. We must rip the racism from our hearts. We have to change.

As we began the march, we followed the directions of the police. At every turn and with every step, the protest was nonviolent. I remember the officers repeatedly commending the peaceful nature of the protest. I was thankful that the protest remained nonviolent. Why do you think protestors keep calling for nonviolence in this country? I think it’s the same reason that I keep on calling for nonviolence: it’s the only logical choice. Violence never achieves love or justice.

Towards the end of the march, we gathered at the Old Courthouse. After hearing about the horrific 1910 lynching of Allen Brooks from multiple speakers, we made our way back toward our starting point, Belo Gardens Park. As I led our march to its finish, I talked with a Sergeant from the police department. We talked about how successful the protest had been. I’d just passed Austin Street. I had on my white robe. I was carrying my [ten-foot-high] black cross. I had on one of my favorite stoles. All of a sudden, I looked up and heard *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop*. I was close enough that I thought I might be shot. My first reaction was to grab my stomach. The Sergeant ran toward the shooting. The eight hundred people behind me were walking directly into the line of fire. I ran to get as many people out as I could. I repeatedly screamed, “Active Shooter! Active Shooter! Run! Run!

Run!” My cross very quickly became a staff to push people out of the way. It was total chaos.

We didn’t know who was shooting. We just knew that there were many shots. I remember the question that came after: “Why?” I repeatedly heard that one-word question. When people asked Jesus questions of meaning, he consistently responded with answers of being. I did too. I kept telling people that we have to learn to be love and justice. We can’t talk about justice without love and we can’t talk about love without justice. When you start talking about peace and nonviolence, you better make sure that you are talking about love and justice, too. There is no peace or nonviolence without love and justice.

The five officers who lost their lives during the shooting remain heavy on my heart. It is difficult to experience something like this and not feel like you have some level of responsibility. There might be a million pieces of evidence to prove the contrary, but still you wonder what you could have done to prevent the tragedy. For twenty-four hours straight, I was on television. I didn’t have time to mourn. I just had to spread the message of love and justice. I did television, newspaper and radio interviews all day long. It went on and on and on. I knew that if I didn’t get the message of love and justice out, somebody else would be ready with a more sinister message. When we are silent, other messages fill the void. As followers of Jesus we are responsible for getting our message out. We are responsible for sharing the good news. If we don’t, there will be other messages.

Last Friday night, I arrived home to hundreds of threats. People were looking for someone to blame. When you become a public figure in a time like this, you become a target for hate. People have said all sorts of shit. I even had someone tell me that the reason I act this way is because I’m a vegan. People can make some pretty wild connections. That’s why we have to help them make the right connections.

Devastation doesn't come close to describing the totality of what I feel. I couldn't believe what happened. Noises scare me. Movement scares me. Crowds scare me. This morning I thought the car might blow up when I turned the ignition. We live in a crazy time, a dangerous time, a dark time. Jesus still has a word for such a time as this.

There were two people who saw suffering and walked on by. There were two people who saw great difficulties and walked on by. But in the midst of it all, there was the Samaritan. There was the person who stopped. There was the person who bandaged up the wounds. There was the person who held the hurting. There was the person who refused to walk by.

In the midst of great conflict, we keep on walking by. We say that we can't stop. We say that we can't talk. We say we don't have time. Where are the Samaritans amongst us? We need you now more than ever.

6. Babel

Christian Century • July 19, 2016

Published nine days after the previous sermon, this Christian Century piece weaves the Dallas shooting through the biblical account of Babel, a world where language has broken down and the words we have for each other are no longer enough.

Writing used to be easy. Now, nothing seems easy. Leaning in, I just stare at the screen. Occasionally, I try to type something. Despite my desperation to write, my mind is held captive to a former place.

Bloody films never leave you. Every image sticks. The officer took his gun and shot Alton Sterling dead. Amidst the screams, Philando Castile bled out. Everyone wanted to talk about their lives; I couldn't get past their deaths. I wasn't alone. We put out a call. Over a thousand people responded.

Downtown Dallas has been the site of dozens and dozens of rallies. Over the last year, we've repeatedly marched for endangered lives. The rally was large. We didn't hesitate. The crowd was ready to go. The speakers were ready to go. We were ready to go. Cries of justice rang out.

In the midst of misery, God is incarnate. When we believe all is lost, God speaks from the bones. The bones rise up and lead us on. They did that night.

I was nervous about speaking. When I opened my mouth, everything seemed clear. Though I spoke for a long time, people have only remembered one phrase: "God damn White America." The gathered understood the adaptation of Jeremiah Wright's infamous phrasing,

“God damn America.” The message of unity was simple. The message of love was heard. We must become one. There is no White America. There is only America. Violence has a way of creating confusion.

Fear is not a part of faith. I didn’t care. I was afraid.

Safety was at the front of my mind. The Dallas Police Department guided the marchers through downtown with tremendous grace. On multiple occasions, we stopped or changed routes to make sure that everyone had the chance to keep up. I stayed at the front of the line. In time, I settled into the rhythm of the movement. Throughout the march, anything seemed possible. Love and justice was within our grasp. Then, confusion reigned.

Darkness was all Jesus knew. The disciples professed their allegiance to him. Now, they couldn’t even stay awake. Unable to function, Jesus cried out in fear. No one was woke.

Our march wound through downtown. Stopping at the Old Courthouse, we took a minute to talk about the 1910 lynching of Allen Brooks. There was no denying that the march for love and justice was long. For a few seconds, I stared at the bricks. What did they know? What would they say? How much further is the journey? Organizers and the police shouted for me to run up to the front of the march. I did.

For the next few blocks, I talked to a DPD Major. In the midst of the rally and protest winding down, we talked about the success of the night. The conversation felt natural. There seemed to be a genuine connection. A few steps past Austin Street, everything changed.

Things seemed clearer before Babel. Now, no one speaks the same language. Confusion is all anyone knows.

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop. I heard it so clearly. I've heard it ever since. The shots rang out. The violence was all that was clear. Bullets flew in every direction. Multiple people dropped. The echoes only enhanced the terror of it all. Pandemonium took over. Grabbing my shirt to make sure I hadn't been shot, I ran back toward the protestors. I was terrified that a thousand people were about to walk into the middle of a shootout.

Throughout the evening, I carried a ten-foot cross. At this moment, I used it as a shepherd's staff and started swinging it around, screaming, "Run! Run! Active Shooter! Active Shooter! Go! Go!" I got as many people out of there as I could.

The march was beautiful. Every step was about stopping violence. Love and justice seemed so loud and so close. Evil didn't listen. Five officers were dead. Devastation set in.

Total confusion arrived.

For the next few days, I told my story on every major news outlet in the country and beyond. The officers were never far from my mind. Repeatedly, I reminded people that this was a nonviolent, peaceful protest. "Love" and "justice" were the only words on my lips. I looked directly into the camera and declared, "Stop shooting, America!" I don't know if anyone heard me. Violence always confuses the ears. I saw it happen. I saw it happen again in Baton Rouge. Former words are confused and present words are confusing. We will not be able to understand until we stand down.

Oh God, deliver us from Babel.

7. Joseph Hutcheson's Death Shows Why Lupe Valdez isn't Qualified to be Governor

The Dallas Morning News • December 18, 2017

A man in mental distress ran to a Dallas jail for help. Deputies restrained him until he stopped breathing. Hood saw the video and spent months demanding that the sheriff— the democratic gubernatorial candidate at the time—be held accountable for what happened in her building.

On drugs and out of his mind, Joseph Hutcheson raced around Dallas. It was Aug. 1, 2015, and Hutcheson knew he was taking a ride for his life. With every second, he felt worse and worse.

Seeing the Lew Sterrett Justice Center, Hutcheson swerved to a stop. Seeing the glass doors, Hutcheson raced up the concrete hill. Busting the lobby doors open around 10:24 a.m., Hutcheson started to do whatever he could to get help.

As time passed with no response, Hutcheson grew more desperate. When deputies started to approach, he started shouting out, “Don’t be scared of me. I just need some help.”

Their patience having run its course, the deputies pounced. Other people in the lobby could not believe what they were seeing.

As Hutcheson pleaded that he couldn’t breathe, witness April Berryhill described one deputy having a “knee to his back” and another having a “knee to his throat.” The force being placed on his body was incompatible with the maintenance of life.

Eventually, all of the screaming stopped. Hutcheson's face turned from white to blue. In the midst of his decline, the deputies were still forcefully restraining him. Once they realized that he had lost consciousness, they called for help.

CPR was not started for some time. No matter how many times they pumped, there was nothing they could do. The lobby security cameras recorded it all. Through brutalizing force, the Dallas County Sheriff's Department killed Joseph Hutcheson.

Responsibility for this incident rests squarely on the shoulders of Sheriff Lupe Valdez. Now, she wants to be governor.

Throughout the duration of the video, it is clear that the deputies did not have adequate training to deal with this situation. Many departments around the country have spent considerable resources on training for dealing with people who are mentally ill or on drugs. There are plenty of options besides lethal force. Responsibility for such a glaring omission rests with Sheriff Valdez.

How many more Texans would die if a Gov. Valdez made such omissions?

As the body of Joseph Hutcheson lay on the floor, people didn't seem to know how to administer proper medical treatment. CPR was abysmally tardy. Sheriff Valdez did not put mechanisms in place to provide medical care for an incredibly vulnerable man.

How could we trust a Gov. Valdez to make sure other vulnerable people receive proper medical care?

Immediately after Hutcheson's death, Sheriff Valdez presided over a declaration that officers found drugs in Hutcheson's truck. Ultimately, the department had to admit that statement was a lie. Did the department mean to defame the victim to absolve itself?

How many more advantageous lies would a Gov. Valdez tell?

As the Hutcheson family mourned, they heard nothing from Sheriff Valdez. Even though Hutcheson died in her jail, they heard nothing. Even though her deputies killed their loved one, they heard nothing. After some time, in the midst of rallies and protests, Sheriff Valdez released a statement of condolence to the Hutcheson family. Did politics dictate her conscience?

It took weeks and weeks to get Sheriff Valdez to release the video of the incident. Friends and family of Hutcheson rallied and rallied and rallied. She wouldn't budge. It wasn't until we garnered a significant amount of media attention and spoke before the Commissioners Court that she decided to release the video. Politics won again.

Time continued to pass. Believing that people have a right to know who is policing them, we kept demanding that Sheriff Valdez release the names of the deputies involved in the death of Joseph Hutcheson. She wouldn't do it. Ultimately, a leak provided all of the names. Valdez remained an obstructionist.

Though the questions are many, there is only one conclusion. Sheriff Lupe Valdez is not qualified to be the governor of Texas.

The dead body of Joseph Hutcheson is all the evidence you need.

8. Good Friday is a Time to Consider What the Death Penalty is Doing to Our Souls

The Dallas Morning News • March 29, 2018

For Christians, Easter is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What many fail to consider is the implication it has for the death penalty today. Hood's op-ed reveals that a story that applies to Jesus also applies to someone who was recently executed.

Good Friday always beckons us to think deeply about our role in the execution.

Word spread quickly. The crime was unspeakable. The reward for his capture was great. The government was desperate to get him off the streets. Nobody knew what he was capable of next. Considering him to be exceedingly dangerous, law enforcement planned carefully. For some time, they'd practiced and discussed the take. When the moment arrived, one of the fugitive's confidantes revealed his location. As authorities made the arrest, those closest to him pushed back. It was no use. It was as if he knew his fate.

Government officials repeatedly declared that a monster had been taken off the streets. Everyone wanted justice. Believing some level of due process was necessary to keep from giving their power over to the mob, local officials restrained themselves. Everyone knew that this was a big one. Insult after insult flew. Then, the time came.

When the doors opened, he immediately became aware of how public his case was. Though he'd seen reports and heard rumblings, he just wasn't aware of the magnitude of the hate. The weight of it all was

almost too much to carry. Weak in the knees, he determined to keep moving. The people kept calling him a monster. The words were painful. However, it was more painful to realize that they were calling everyone he loved monsters, too. When the walk didn't seem like it could get any longer, he was there.

There was no question what everyone wanted. Death was in the air. The authorities gave him a chance to save his life, but he didn't take it. Nobody could believe it. Who wouldn't take the opportunity to save his own life? He was subjected to further punishment and then offered the chance at life again. He declined. Death it was.

The path was long between the place of judgment and the place of execution. At every step, the cries of "monster" overwhelmed his brain. The religious people seemed to be the ones shouting the loudest. In the midst of it all, he stumbled a few times. I guess that's the nature of all difficult paths.

As the place of execution approached, the governor had one last chance. Citing his faith, the governor let the killing continue. Waiting for death, the man prayed. Slowly, he was strapped in. His great crime was raised up for all of the world to see. God felt so far away. How could he have been so forsaken? His final words echoed in the beings of all who heard them, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." Death came with a rush. In great agony, he took his last breath. It was finished.

The accounts of Jesus' sacrifice and death always move me deeply. But this narrative is not about Jesus. This is a narrative of Rosendo Rodriguez, convicted of killing two women and stuffing their bodies into suitcases. Texas executed him last Tuesday. God was there and so was I. Under the rain, I watched. While I cannot say what Rodriguez's crimes meant for his soul, I can say what his execution means for ours.

The message of God died on that gurney. We killed our neighbor. We damned our persecutor. Surely, God hates what we have done. Like it or not, our death penalty makes killers of us all. How are we any different than he? Only abolition can save us. The offer of life is on the table. Will we take the deal?

9. The Blasphemy of the Flag in Church

Denton Record-Chronicle • September 26, 2019

A memory from Hood's Baptist childhood—soldiers processing flags into sanctuaries, patriotic hymns replacing the Gospel—becomes a sustained theological argument about nationalism, idolatry, and the blasphemy of conflating a nation with God's favor.

A United States soldier processed the flag of the United States of America into our sanctuary as we stood at attention singing “God Bless America.”

The veterans in our midst were honored as we sang the “Star Spangled Banner.” The “Battle Hymn of the Republic” preceded the pastor’s fiery sermon on the coming destruction of our beloved nation if we “...did not turn from our wicked ways.” Somehow, gays, abortion and popular culture always made it into these services, but that is another story.

The service concluded with an invitation to salvation as the congregation sang “God of Our Fathers.” To say that the services of my Baptist youth were precariously wrapped in nationalism is an understatement. We believed that the United States military was God’s military. Despite the fact that we did so much else that was problematic, my mind remains focused on the U.S. flag on that gold stand up on the altar.

In many “patriotic” services throughout our nation, some of those who have fallen victim to our thirst for violence and power will be honored and celebrated. We will remember the soldiers and attempt to reconcile their sacrifice with our faith. Unfortunately, there will be little conversation about peace and preventing the deaths of anyone else.

There will be no conversation of the millions and millions of people who have died as a result of our failed foreign policies and military interventions. The words of Jesus will be forgotten amidst the words of nationalism.

No one will recite Jesus' words in Matthew 26:52: "...Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Matthew 5:44 and Jesus' reminder to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us" will not make an appearance. Least of all will we remember the millions and millions of people who have died in places with names like Hiroshima, Hanoi, Waziristan, Nagasaki, Kabul and Baghdad in the infernos created by our bombs.

Those "least of these" are dead because we failed to see Jesus in their midst. No, these words won't be remembered, and I know most congregations won't be talking beyond the soldiers who have died. They will miss the opportunity to have a conversation about the wider call of Jesus to peace and justice.

My mind wonders back to that flag, though. To put the U.S. flag on the altar of a church is to insinuate that somehow the United States has a claim to the grace of God that other nations and peoples do not. To put the U.S. flag at the front blurs that glorious declaration, "For God so loved the world." Can you imagine what someone from another country thinks when they see the United States flag up front at our churches? There is no nationality barrier to the altar of God. Jesus does not love the United States more than any other nation. To put a flag at the front and bless the atrocities committed by an incredibly powerful people in the name of Jesus is blasphemous.

A real conversation about the non-violent love of Jesus and our purpose as followers can only happen when we take down the United States flags that stand in the way in our sanctuaries. If we want to truly honor slain soldiers, we will stop perpetuating the nationalism that killed

them. So let's toss out all the flags and start emulating Jesus' love for all people. Let's kill the nationalism that fooled us into thinking that violence can bring about peace.

10. Our Moral Imagination Continues to be Put to Death in the Execution Chamber

Religion News Service • March 9, 2023

This op-ed marks the beginning of Hood's most consequential years as a public voice on capital punishment. It is the first of his execution witness pieces, written the night before the scheduled execution of Arthur Brown, Jr. in Texas.

Today, morality will be asked of the state of Texas when the chamber will be opened once more. Among those scheduled for execution is Arthur Brown, Jr.

These are dangerous times. Our ability to interact with each other is limitless. Yet, our understanding of our common humanity seems to decline with each second as if the more we connect, the less we really see each other—the less we are willing, even, to see ourselves beyond the masks we put on for society's approval.

Indeed, our inability to love ourselves is precisely the source of our inability to engage with the other, including those we've condemned to death.

Who are we? We have ritualized killing. In the process, we teach each other that killing is okay. Morality doesn't exist in a void; it exists in the places where we make moral decisions. The moral ethic of the chamber is death—and, ultimately, that says more about us than about the condemned.

When I visited Arthur last night he told me, “We live in the most supposedly Christian society in global history, and yet we can’t seem to morally advance enough to stop killing each other.”

For decades, it has been presumed that Brown (along with co-defendants Marion Dudley and Antonio Dunson) brutally murdered Jose Tovar, Jessica Quinones (seven months pregnant), Frank Farias and Audrey Brown. In recent days, Arthur Brown, Jr.’s attorneys have revealed critical new evidence in their final filings that could exonerate their client.

Unfortunately, society is conditioned to dismiss such claims as desperation. What’s wrong with desperation? Isn’t it part of the human condition to be desperate to preserve life? Maybe the wisest thing we could do when we think someone seems desperate is to figure out a way to connect our own desperation—that all of us inevitably feel at points in our lives—to the desperation they feel. Now is the time to try to touch Arthur Brown, Jr., to try to find some level of empathy with him. Not to run away.

Maybe in encountering his final appeal, we might find a life worth saving, a life not all that different from our own. Then again, if we would take the time to listen, we would figure out that they’re all worth saving, because they are us and we are them. Our interconnectivity makes us human. Our ability to develop love for each other makes us divine.

If we are to see where God is, to know where love is, we must be willing to see and to be seen, to step into places of deep discomfort and offer our true selves. To do anything other than place our bodies into life, into the pursuit of being human, is to fail at the one thing that matters most: love. Love of self and love of neighbor.

How are we to recapture any semblance of moral imagination? Surely, we must look to the evil we hide in the chamber.

As his spiritual adviser, I've been asked by Arthur Brown, Jr. to accompany him to the execution chamber. If he is executed, I will watch him die. This is real. Legitimate, moral questions always are. At stake is who we are.

11. Being Present after the Tornado

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette • April 23, 2023

A week after losing his home to a tornado in North Little Rock, Arkansas, Hood writes about what words cannot do in the face of catastrophe—and what presence can. The most personal piece in this collection, it reminds us to live with empathy and compassion for others, especially those who suffer unthinkable tragedies.

Our home is gone. That which the wind didn't take, the rain did. Nobody prepares for it...realizing that your life as you knew it is forever changed. What do you say to your kids? The only thing that I knew to say was to repeatedly say, "I love you." Other than that, I'm just present. I'm just trying to be the best dad I can be.

Have you ever really thought about what most people say amidst tragedy? Most words fall woefully short. I can't tell you how many funerals I have been to and repeatedly heard, "They're in a better place." Such words seem so trivial when people are mourning. It's as if people are minimizing the pain of the here and now. Or what about, "I know how you feel." Pain is dependent on the person. How could anyone know the uniqueness of the pain of another? While I realize that people speak because they don't know what to say, perhaps it's most appropriate for people to simply be present in situations when words will always fall short.

In the wake of our experiences, one of the phrases I've consistently heard is "at least you all have each other...think about if you had lost one of the kids." While such words are unquestionably true, they fail to appreciate the magnitude of what we've lost—not the least of which is

the innocence of our children. So what's an appropriate thing to say? Often, nothing at all. Presence is enough.

After a tragedy of this magnitude, you don't have long to mourn. You must get to work. We didn't have any clothes. We didn't have anywhere to sleep. We didn't have any food. Thankfully, armies of help presented themselves. I will never forget how people from everywhere stepped up to help. Even today, the support continues. Presence, not words, is what is getting us through.

Presence, however, can also have its own drawbacks. For over two weeks, we have done our best to pull things out of the rubble of our house. To say that such recovery is painful is an understatement. For everything you are thrilled to find, there is something that you're devastated to lose. While the help of our community certainly stands out currently, the cruelty of the outsider does, too.

Can you imagine what it's like to be consoling your crying children and you look up to see someone driving by to take pictures with their cellphone? It has happened repeatedly. Often, we have felt like animals at the zoo. We are trying the best we can to survive amidst incredibly painful circumstances, and all that many seem to be interested in is taking pictures of our pain. Of course, it's important to document these events. I am beyond thankful for the work of journalists near and far to share what we're going through. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the outsider who seems to get tremendous satisfaction at staring at the pain of our neighborhood. My children should not be natural disaster muses. We are not here for your entertainment.

Such thoughts draw me back. Words and voyeurism will always fall short. Presence will not.

If you are interested in being human or humane in the midst of the ongoing tornado recovery that the Walnut Valley Neighborhood and

so many others are going through, give those of us who are suffering your presence, or please don't be present at all.

12. An Unlikely Friendship Forged after an Oklahoma Execution

Tulsa World • May 11, 2023

Co-authored with Lindsey Barnett, granddaughter of Hood's death row advisee Scott Eizember's victims, this piece presents two people who should have nothing to say to each other, but who found themselves on the road outside Oklahoma State Penitentiary and discovered they were carrying the same thing: trauma—and the conviction that it should stop.

A Plea to Stop Executions from Opposite Sides of the Glass

On January 12, 2023, the State of Oklahoma executed Scott Eizember.

We will never forget that morning. It seemed that the entire world was swirling around us. Repeatedly, we were told where to go. Repeatedly, we were told how to act. Repeatedly, we were told how we were supposed to feel. Repeatedly, we were alone. Trauma has a way of stripping everything down to leave you shaking in the corner. Though we were on opposite sides of the glass, we were there together, alone.

Violent crime is more than just a grief that comes for a time and passes. It is something that never leaves you. This is one of the great lies of the death penalty—it convinces the believer that the death of another will somehow excise the pain that they brought you. The opposite actually takes place. We felt it. These executions only cause the trauma to grow and metastasize. The false promise of deliverance from the pain of an evil moment is one of the cruelest lies of these executions. More killing always creates more pain.

In a world of trauma, there is something unique about executions. The journey to those final moments begins many years before. There is the brutal crime. There is the exhausting trial. There is the painful sentencing. There is the excruciating wait. Everyone claims that justice is being served. Yet, the slow burn of year after year causes the taste of such justice to grow more and more bitter. Trauma plays out over and over. Every news story a fresh cut. Every legal argument a new source of questions. Every judicial decision a false promise of finality. The entire process is meant to bring about justice, yet trauma is repeatedly the only end. As spiritual persons, we know that we are called to love our neighbor, but the process of chasing the death of another is anything but loving. Execution kills more than just the condemned; it suffocates the souls of those who chase them.

They did everything in secret so that no one could see our pain. What were they afraid that people would see? The great secret of these executions is that nobody leaves the same. It's not that the execution itself is all that bad. In fact, it [sometimes] really just looks like someone falling asleep. Of course, appearances can be deceiving. It can be hard to know what is happening behind the initial anesthesia. Nevertheless, the trauma is most visceral when you realize that you are a part of killing someone. You are a participant in a murder. We were literally accomplices to a great evil. How is that any different than the crimes that the condemned committed? Though our roles were different, the expectation of our behavior was the same. We were to be quiet and not interfere as the state executed Scott Eizember. Our collective inaction was championed as "respectful."

As soon as it was over, we were pushed out. At that point, all that anybody wanted to talk about was justice. [We] couldn't figure out what "justice" they were talking about. All we felt was pain.

We met each other on the road leading out from Oklahoma State Penitentiary. It was a moment of courage. We weren't supposed to be talking. The granddaughter of the victims of Scott Eizember, AJ and Patsy Cantrell, and the minister who was tasked with comforting the man who killed them in his final moments. What would we have to talk about? Our two worlds had been incredibly critical of each other. One side, determined to save the life of a killer. The other side, determined to punish a killer. Yet here we were. In time, we became friends. For many, such a friendship is astonishing. What would we have to talk about? The answer is simple: trauma—and how we never want anyone to have to experience it again.

The trauma that these executions force on all parties involved is simply not worth it. These executions turn generous loving people into monsters ravenous for blood and revenge. We sensed it. We felt it. We breathed it. We choked on it. To senselessly inflict trauma on another is the apex of evil. Yet, this is what the State of Oklahoma continues to do to all parties involved in these executions. Let there be no doubt, the execution of Scott Eizember did nothing but add to our collective trauma, and any further executions will, too. Thus is the nature of the death penalty. So, let us be clear: Damn it, for the love of God and each other, stop.

Lindsey Barnett, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Granddaughter of AJ and Patsy Cantrell

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, Little Rock, Arkansas, Spiritual Advisor to Scott Eizember

13. Rage and the Alabama Execution of Kenneth Smith by the New Method of Nitrogen Hypoxia

AL.com • January 21, 2024

Four days before the world's first nitrogen hypoxia execution, Hood writes as Kenneth Smith's spiritual advisor. Hood describes what he knows is coming, the paper he has been forced to sign, and why he will be in the chamber anyway. This experience, and a later witnessing of a second nitrogen hypoxia execution, will become fodder for his book Suffocation to Design: The Story of America's Newest Execution Method.

In March of 1988, Elizabeth Sennett was brutally murdered by two hitmen hired by her husband, Charles Sennett. One of those hitmen was Kenneth Smith. These facts are not in dispute. Nor should they be. What was done to Elizabeth Sennett should never be forgotten—ever. However, we remember evil so as not to perpetuate it, not as a means of manufacturing rage.

In the State of Alabama, a great many want to see Kenneth Smith executed. The present self-serving platitudes of politicians illustrate as much. There are even those who say they would execute Smith themselves. Such people illustrate why rage is something we travel through, not to. Indeed, these people most often know nothing about the case or anything that surrounds it. They just want a reason to rage. Manufactured rage causes us to do really stupid things.

Presently, I serve as Kenneth Smith's spiritual advisor. Of course, Smith is shortly scheduled to be executed by the novel method of nitrogen hypoxia. Let there be no doubt, I am opposed to the death penalty. I

find it barbaric. I know Smith. I could fill pages with reasons why you shouldn't execute him. I could tell you that it is evil to kill people. I could tell you that the jury didn't sentence Smith to death. I could tell you about the proud father and grandfather that he has become. I could tell you about the worship services he helps lead. Unfortunately, the State of Alabama has repeatedly ignored such arguments, and I have no doubt that my arguments would meet the same demise. Such reflex is part of maintaining manufactured rage: dismiss everything reasonable to keep trying to meet evil with evil—while calling it something other than evil.

Nitrogen hypoxia is an untested, unproven form of execution. Never has nitrogen been intentionally forced into the lungs of the condemned through a mask until there is no oxygen left. Kenneth Smith is basically going to be suffocated to death. Since no one has ever been executed by nitrogen hypoxia before, we simply don't know the extent of the evil that might be unleashed. I am convinced that a great many like the cruel and unusual nature of it all. Of course, they haven't had to have the conversations that our family has.

Throughout history, spiritual advisors have accompanied the condemned to their executions. In recent years, the United States Supreme Court has repeatedly protected such a right. Since I serve in this role with Kenneth Smith, I will be there with him in the chamber. In a waiver I was forced to sign, the State of Alabama has basically admitted that while they know the nitrogen poses a risk to me in the chamber—they're just not sure how big of a risk. How many times have you heard government tell us to trust them, only to be given over to dreadful consequences? Like you, I don't trust government in the slightest. Can you imagine allowing government to have this level of control on your life? Manufactured rage seems to grow dumber with time. An experimental form of execution that could kill everybody in the room in the event of a leak? Come on.

Can you imagine if ministers throughout the State of Alabama were forced to sign a waiver to preach next Sunday? To offer communion? To lead the choir? To pray? To counsel? There are few greater forms of tyranny that I can think of than government forcing ministers to sign waivers to live out their callings. Yet here we are. The State that claims to fight tyranny the most being amongst the chief perpetrators of it. Manufactured rage strikes again.

Trust is not manufactured. It is earned. So, if the State of Alabama wants me to trust it in this process, then send Governor Kay Ivey into the chamber with me. If the nitrogen leaks, the Governor and I can go see Jesus together. Indeed, I've heard that she too is a person of strong faith. I hope that hers, like mine, rests on more than just government.

Presently, I only know to follow my faith. If I am to give my life, so be it. God has called me to stand with those that nobody else will. The risks be damned.

Honestly, I still can't believe this conversation is even necessary. Don't people know that murder is wrong? Don't people want to stop killing each other? Don't people want to figure out ways to save lives rather than destroying them? Don't people think that suffocating another person is at least a little problematic? Don't people even try to love their enemies anymore? The questions seem endless.

Manufacturing rage is a foolish task with no moral destination. The bizarre risks and consequences of nitrogen hypoxia prove it. Surely, Elizabeth Sennett deserves more than all of this.

14. I Watched as Alabama Suffocated a Man to Death. No, Kris Kobach, It Didn't "Work Well"

Kansas City Star • February 25, 2024

A month after the execution of Kenneth Smith, Kansas Attorney General Kris Kobach declared that nitrogen hypoxia "worked extremely well." Hood witnessed it himself and argues it was torture. In this op-ed, Hood attempts to change the Attorney General's—and others'—minds about a procedure sold as humane that is actually anything but.

Our common humanity will either be our common triumph or our common downfall. Right now, it is our lack of humanity that is making room for conversations about new execution methods. We are desperate to find ways to humanely kill those we condemn. There is no humane way to kill a person. We seem so determined to go backward. Last month in Alabama, we were promised humanity in the first nitrogen hypoxia execution. What we saw was everything but.

As Kenneth Smith's spiritual advisor, I was in the execution chamber before, during, and after the curtains were opened for his execution. Meaning, I watched him slowly suffocate to death. Presently, there is no one alive that has been closer to a nitrogen hypoxia execution than I have. Having witnessed four previous executions and being a student of history, I can assure you that the experimental barbarity that I witnessed has few comparisons. Nitrogen hypoxia is not just an execution method; it is a torture method. Which is why I find it so curious that Kansas Attorney General Kris Kobach is so certain that he wants to bring the same barbarity to your state.

[He] even comment[ed] in a recent interview, “I have spoken directly with the attorney general of Alabama, and he confirmed that the hypoxia method worked extremely well.”

Let me put the above quote in context: you have Kansas Attorney General Kobach describing his desire to pursue an execution method that he has never actually seen carried out, based on the perspective of Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall, who has never actually seen the method carried out either. Due to Kansas’ large beef industry, such a juxtaposition reminds me of an old saying: “All hat and no cattle.” Meaning, somebody wears a big hat to hide the fact that they don’t actually own any cattle. Both of these guys talk a very big game for something they’ve never even seen before—much less had to carry out themselves. Runaway big government always rises and falls with such bluster.

The reason I know that Kobach’s quote is so absurd is that I did see the method carried out. I know that Alabama Attorney General Marshall didn’t tell the truth and, in the most generous possible way of stating it, Kansas Attorney General Kobach is being led astray. The only way that one could say that what I saw went “well” is if the only measure of “well” is whether or not Kenneth Smith died. If such a standard is a measurement, then we should start hanging people on a short rope and watch them squirm until they die in front of our courthouses. I’d like to think that our society has evolved beyond such lunacy. Then again, what I saw wasn’t all that far off from that.

Affixed with a firefighter’s mask that went from the top of his head to under his chin, Kenneth Smith said goodbye. Then, the nitrogen started to flow. I watched as Kenneth’s head turned redder and redder. His body began to pump adrenaline ferociously. It looked as if his head was going to explode, perhaps even his whole body. We were told that Kenneth would go unconscious in seconds. Then, seconds started to

turn into minutes. Kenneth began to heave. Each time he rose, mucus, saliva, and other fluids shot out of his mouth and hit the front of the mask. Such fluid began to drizzle down like a waterfall. His eyeballs were bulging out. Back and forth, over and over, everything everywhere moving all at once. Like a fish out of water being stepped on until it flops no more.

There are times when the bluster of politicians is nothing more than that. There are other times where such bluster has real consequences. Morality is earned, not given. Nitrogen hypoxia is evil. When the Kansas Legislature begins to discuss the possible adoption of suffocation as an execution method, I encourage legislators to not take the bait of Kansas Attorney General Kobach's declarations of humaneness. If you'd seen what I saw, you'd know that he has absolutely, positively no idea what he is talking about.

15. President Biden Should Follow through on Ending the Death Penalty

Newsweek • March 28, 2024

Published in Newsweek on Good Friday, Hood calls out the president's inaction directly: Biden did not follow through on his promise to voters in 2020. Hood describes what he saw at the first nitrogen hypoxia execution and asks why executions continue.

On Good Friday, President Joe Biden will likely go to church. While there, I hope more executions than just that of Jesus fester in his mind.

I was Kenneth Eugene Smith's spiritual advisor during the first nitrogen hypoxia execution in Alabama. There was no one closer. Witnesses from all sides described the same thing, something incredibly evil.

A few weeks ago, Smith, 58, was completely immobilized on the gurney. On his face, there was a tightly secured mask that covered from the top of his head to the bottom of his chin. In fact, it was so tight that I could see tight red bunches of skin around the entire seal. With little warning, the nitrogen started to flow. Like an expanding tomato, Smith's head grew bigger and bigger. His body was pumping adrenaline in every possible direction. Every inch of him looked like it was going to explode. Seconds turned into minutes.

The state of Alabama lied. We were told to expect Kenneth to go unconscious within the first few seconds. Smith began to heave back and forth. No one with a conscience could have wanted the entire moment to continue. Fluids shot out of his mouth and caught on the inside of the mask. The concoction looked like a waterfall. His eyeballs protruded out of their sockets. It was like watching a horror movie.

Conversations about nitrogen hypoxia as a method of execution and the death penalty in general followed. Perhaps with wishful thinking, I expected bold leadership from President Joe Biden. Instead, we got a short statement from White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre: “The president has long said and has had deep, deep, deep concerns with how the death penalty is implemented and whether it is consistent with our values. So we are deeply troubled by it, by what we heard about Kenneth Smith’s death.”

“Thoughts and prayers?” It’s a phrase that has come to define indifference. Whenever tragedy strikes, it’s always the auto response. But when do “thoughts and prayers” lead to action? The use of the word “troubled” by Jean-Pierre strikes similarly. There was a time when use of the word “troubled” meant that you would be stirred to do something. Not today. Jean-Pierre speaks for an administration that is so “troubled” that it has done, and seems aimlessly determined to do, absolutely nothing.

This isn’t what we were promised. Back in 2020, President Biden declared on his campaign website that he would “work to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government’s example.” He’s done neither.

Far from offering leadership of any kind, executions are happening regularly. The U.S. Justice Department continues to seek new death sentences. Now, we even have a new execution method that allows the government to suffocate someone to death. These are not all federal issues that Biden has direct control over, but he promised effort and we have seen none.

President Biden’s inaction is not theoretical. As a spiritual advisor to people on death rows throughout the nation, I provide comfort to those who are to be executed by their government. I work to end such

moments because they're completely unnecessary, a waste of resources, and contrary to my faith. Executions are also bolstered by unfair systems and generally morally repugnant. But these conversations about President Biden and capital punishment go beyond basic objections and extend to fair and timely questions of failed governance.

On April 4, the State of Oklahoma is scheduled to execute Michael Smith. If the execution proceeds, I will be standing next to him doing my best to provide him comfort. That's my job. President Biden promised to take on the death penalty, and he is not doing his job.

16. Executions Traumatize Our Spiritual Leaders

The State (South Carolina) • September 5, 2024

As South Carolina prepared to resume executions—including by firing squad and electric chair—Hood addresses the people who are least often considered in these conversations: the clergy who stand in the chamber. By this point, Hood had witnessed seven executions in four states. He argues that clergy of any religion should not have to witness their religion’s followers suffering—or have to live with the resulting trauma.

In the coming weeks, South Carolina is scheduled to resume executions. Since the State’s last execution in 2011, the functioning of an execution chamber has radically changed by several decisions from the United States Supreme Court. Perhaps most significantly, the *Ramirez v. Collier* (March 2022) decision mandated that executing states must allow an inmate’s spiritual advisor (pastor, minister, priest, imam, rabbi, etc.) into the chamber during an execution. Since the decision, spiritual advisors throughout the nation have accompanied the condemned in their final moments. During this time, I’ve served as a spiritual advisor to seven men in four different states: Scott Eizember (Oklahoma), Arthur Brown (Texas), Anthony Sanchez (Oklahoma), Casey McWhorter (Alabama), Kenneth Smith (Alabama), Michael Smith (Oklahoma) and David Hosier (Missouri). As such, I’ve seen more executions in more states than anyone else. In the coming months, I’m scheduled to accompany another five men to their executions. I plan to do this work as long as it is necessary. It is a gruesome task filled with trauma and waves of resultant grief.

Spiritual advisors in South Carolina are not ready. Such an assertion has nothing to do with their competence or abilities or education or anything else. It has to do with the fact that no training or direction could ever prepare anyone to see someone murdered right in front of their eyes. In terms of preparation, I can assure you that the South Carolina Department of Corrections could care less. If they did, there would be no execution to begin with. Indeed, there would be a recognition that these executions probably aren't good for anybody.

While the gagging and gurgling sounds of a lethal injection are disturbing enough, more visceral or physiologically violent forms of execution seem to offer an added layer of visual trauma and extended grief. South Carolina is about to expose spiritual advisors to seeing someone shot and electrocuted. While I've never seen either type of execution, I was in the chamber for the world's first nitrogen suffocation execution in Alabama last January, that of Kenny Smith, and there are not enough words to describe the horror that remains in me.

We were told that the execution would last seconds; it lasted over 20 minutes. This is some of what I saw:

When nitrogen gas started to flow, Kenny's face grew more and more intense with every second. Colors started to change. Veins started to flex. Every muscle in his body started to tense. When things began to last way past the seconds that we were told it would, I began to wonder why.... I couldn't believe my eyes....The restraints weren't enough to keep him still....Kenny was shaking the entire gurney. I had never seen something so violent. Kenny's muscles went from tensed up to looking like they were going to combust. Veins spider-webbed in every direction....There was nothing in his body that was calm....His face. My God, his face. Repeatedly, Kenny's face jerked toward the front of the mask.... Saliva,

mucus and other substances shot out of his mouth.... back and forth Kenny kept heaving.

I went through all of this to simply live out my calling as a priest. I did it because it's my job. Spiritual advisors in South Carolina are just as dedicated and courageous and will do the same thing. But they shouldn't have to.

South Carolinians need to consider what they are about to put their finest religious counselors, teachers, and leaders through. Imagine the priest forced to watch the chest of a dedicated follower of Jesus explode at the crack of a bullet. Imagine the imam forced to smell the burnt flesh of the faithful Muslim after electricity is shot through their body. Imagine the rabbi forced to listen to an observant Jew drown after being injected with poison. One could easily imagine all sorts of faiths and nightmares. Such images and sounds and smells would never leave you.

Most people are unable to manifest a tremendous amount of empathy for the condemned. I guess that's why a great many states still have the death penalty. But I do hope that the people of South Carolina will manifest some empathy for those of us who are simply living out our calling to minister to all people.

We don't need more trauma. We don't need more gruesome images. We simply need to be allowed to do what we do best: the cultivation of hope. Let's face it, South Carolina. There ain't no hope in killing.

17. As State Lawmakers Consider Execution by Nitrogen, a Witness Describes the Horror

Arkansas Times • February 26, 2025

The following is a complete account of Kenneth Smith's execution, written for an Arkansas audience as the state legislature considered adopting nitrogen hypoxia as an execution method. Although previous pieces in this collection briefly describe Hood's experience, it behooves the reader to learn about his time at Holman Prison, from Kenny's joyful responses to last rites, to the horror of the gas's effect on him. This piece was later published in a different form in Hood's book Suffocation by Design: The Story of America's Newest Execution Method.

Holman Prison in Atmore, Alabama, is a place of nightmares even on sunny days. On Jan. 25, 2024, the day of Kenny Smith's state-ordered execution by nitrogen gas, the rain poured.

As Kenny spoke on the phone in his cell for the last time, I kept a steady eye on the oxygen monitor, newly installed to catch any nitrogen leaks. The nitrogen was meant to kill only one person that day, but the technology was untested, and the danger was real. I'd had to sign a waiver beforehand, absolving the state of Alabama of any blame should they suffocate me, too. The oxygen reading was 25.4, higher than the 22 that I had observed during my orientation previously in the week. I figured that they had to be pumping oxygen into the chamber. I started to get a headache, but tried desperately to ignore it and keep all my focus on Kenny.

Guys always have their last requests. He wanted me to make sure I told his family how much he loved them. Then, he wanted me to make sure that I told the world that he wasn't just ready to go, but that he was ecstatic about it. Convicted for a 1988 contract killing, he talked joyously about his release date and the fact that he was finally getting out of prison. Repeatedly, he said, "I ain't scared of no valley of the shadow of death." I knew better. We both were.

The guards lined the walls. Licensed murderers standing at attention, twelve guards and one state official. I couldn't believe that it took all these folks to strap Kenny to that gurney. By the look on Kenny's face, though, I could tell he was very proud. He just smiled and whispered, "I'm giving them hell."

When it was time for last rites, nerves birthed nerves as I tried to command a vial of oil, a prayer book, and a Bible in front of the prison staff. They all looked at me as if I was the devil incarnate. If theirs was a God that blesses executions, then I guess I was.

Kenny whispered, "We got this." We were walking deeper and deeper into the valley that both of us feared. I started to read the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John.

"Jesus said, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled.'" It was then that Kenny started to talk back with fierceness.

"I won't."

"Believe in God; believe also in me."

"I do."

"In my Father's house there are many rooms."

"Thank you, Jesus! Yes, Lord!"

“If it were not so, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you?”

“I believe!”

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come and get you, that where I am, there you will be also.”

“I’m so ready for freedom, Jeff. This is my release date. Praise God! Hallelujah.”

“You know the way.”

“I’m not looking back. I know the way.”

Through it all, Kenny kept smiling. I’d never seen someone approach death with such fierceness, such courage. Time was growing short, so I rushed to Psalm 23. The call and response began anew.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

“Damn right!”

“He makes me lie down in green pastures.”

“Green as shit!”

“He restores my soul.”

“I feel it, God!”

“...he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

“The one and only name!”

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

“We’re here, Jeff!”

“I will fear no evil.”

“I ain’t fearing shit.”

“Thou art with me.”

“I really feel it.”

After a brief back and forth, I pronounced absolution. Then, as I fumbled to get the oil ready, I skipped a few words by accident. Kenny laughed.

“Kenny Smith, you are a beloved child of God. Go to that place where you have always known that you are from. Do not delay. Love is waiting to manifest in you the fullness of love. May the smell of this oil guide you to the fullness of who you were created to be. The oil of God...the promise of the life to come. Kenny, you are free...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...all beauty is now yours forever, my friend. Go in power.”

The aroma of frankincense filled the room, and I rubbed the oil from my hands on the sheet Kenny was lying on, hoping the smell would stick around for a bit. One of the guards moved his hand in a circular hurrying motion.

I read a passage that I’ve read at all of the executions I’ve witnessed: the Gospel of John, chapter 8, verses 1 through 11. It’s the story of an adulteress thrown at the feet of Jesus by government authorities intent on stoning her. Jesus got down in the dirt with the woman and declared one of the most famous lines in all of scripture: “You who are without sin cast the first stone!”

After a few more ministrations, I gave Kenny completely to God. The guards sent me to wait outside while they outfitted Kenny with the nitrogen mask. I looked into his cell while I waited, at the rustled

sheets and the shower where traces of water remained. Trying to think more of presence than absence, I kept walking. The hallway was cold. Whether I was getting too much or too little oxygen, I don't know. I just know that I was feeling strange. Swaying as I walked, I didn't know if I was going to make it to the door. The oxygen monitor at the end of the hallway still read 25.4.

When the guard opened the execution chamber door and I saw the mask for the first time, I gasped. It was a rudimentary firefighter's mask with a tube that led to the control center on the other side of the wall behind it. Straps attached to the gurney pulled the mask tight to Kenny's face. I could see the skin around the mask's rim grotesquely bunched. Kenny's skin was bright red with irritation everywhere. Sensing my horror, Kenny looked up and said, "We got this."

Through the window behind me, I could see various state officials filling up the room. I knew they were there, and they couldn't help but know I was too. I was directly in their line of sight. Even if it was a brief glance, I wanted to make sure they understood that I knew what they were about to do.

Knowing that the execution was about to start, my family popped into my mind. Each of their faces lingered. Terror shot up my spine. Nitrogen is nothing to play with. "Am I about to die?" I wondered. I didn't know.

In a low, gravelly voice, the warden read a bunch of words and said a bunch of names to let everybody know that he was just doing his job and that he had to kill Kenny. The thing is, he didn't. Nobody in that room had to do anything.

"Do you have any final words?" the warden asked. In the moments Kenny and I had together earlier, he told me that he wanted to make a statement that reverberated far beyond the chamber. Loudly, he

declared in that unmistakable folksy drawl, “Tonight, Alabama causes humanity to take a step backwards. I’m leaving with love, peace, and light. Thank you for supporting me. Love all of you.”

It was my turn to approach the end of the gurney. I wanted so badly to save him. I knew the prayer that both of us needed. We’d prayed it together before: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” I repeated it softly three times. After I spoke the words each time, I made the sign of the cross on Kenny’s shins (the only part of his body I could reach).

I knew as soon as I stepped away, the nitrogen would start to flow. Can you imagine standing there and knowing that as soon as you move, someone you love is going to die? I walked away from Kenny for the last time.

There was a hiss that grew louder and louder. Kenny knew it was coming. I could see it in his face, like somebody waiting to take a punch. The look on his face grew more and more intense with every passing second, and his color changed rapidly. Veins flexed. Every muscle in his body tensed.

When we were already well past the few seconds we were told it would take, I began to wonder what was happening. Kenny was clearly trying to breathe. Shouldn’t he be unconscious already? He wasn’t. He looked as if his head was going to pop off. The gurney wasn’t supposed to move, but it started to sway. Kenny heaved back and forth. The restraints weren’t enough to keep him still. Veins spiderwebbed in every direction all over his body. It looked like millions of ants were running under his skin.

His face. My God, his face. The gurney was attached to the mask to hold it in place, but the force of Kenny’s movement mashed his face against the clear front of the mask. I kept wondering if his bulging

eyeballs were going to shoot right through. Saliva, mucus, and a host of other substances shot out his mouth and started drizzling down the inside of the mask. Back and forth, Kenny kept heaving. It was now going on minutes, and Kenny was very much still conscious. I could see the horror in his eyes. I will never forget.

Taking off my glasses, I sobbed. I'd never felt so far away from God. I prayed that Kenny would know how much I loved him. I prayed that he would forgive me for not jumping on the gurney and ripping off the mask. I was doing the best that I could. We all have decisions to make. I hope no one ever again has to deal with the lack of options that I had in that chamber. Life was never a choice. I prayed repeatedly, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." It didn't feel like anybody anywhere was listening.

After nearly ten minutes, Kenny's convulsions gave way to deep breathing, which then gave way to shallow breathing. There wasn't a point where I knew I saw Kenny take his last breath, but the guards rushed to close the curtains after close to twenty-three minutes. In fact, it seemed like they sprinted over to hide what they'd just done. I didn't think that Kenny was dead. I saw slight movements in his chest. It didn't matter. Unlike most other states, Alabama does not pronounce a time of death in the chamber. Meaning, nobody who witnessed this execution was able to leave and affirmatively state that Kenny was actually dead.

The guards came forward to escort me out of the prison.

From the beginning, Kenny had made it very clear that he wanted me to tell the world what happened, so I ran across the parking lot and jumped in my car. I raced down the desolate entrance road to Holman, past the vans filled with all the witnesses. When I made it to the corner entrance to the prison grounds, I jumped out of the car and ran to the tent. There waiting was Isabel Rosales from CNN. Leaning into the

lights, I told the world of the horrors I'd just seen. I haven't stopped since.

18. In Sparing Tremane Wood, We Wouldn't Endorse Evil, but Refuse to be Consumed by It

The Oklahoman • November 10, 2025

Before Governor Stitt of Oklahoma granted Tremane Hood clemency, Hood wrote this op-ed asking for mercy. Hood does not deny what Tremane Wood has done. Instead, he argues that how we respond to the worst among us reveals who we are. Mercy, he insists, is not weakness; it is the loudest and most defiant choice available.

On death row, Tremane Wood's cell was a factory of defiance. Phones were hidden in the walls. Chargers were tucked in books. Wires were snaked through vents. He built a web of crime that reached far past the razor wire. Money moved through apps. Drugs moved through hands. Influence spread through fear. Violence was ordered against those who refused to comply. Every report from the Oklahoma Department of Corrections reads like another brick in the wall of condemnation. For years, as a spiritual advisor to death row inmates in Oklahoma, I've heard it whispered that Tremane Wood is the most frightening man in the building. At the clemency hearing last week, Attorney General Gentner Drummond did nothing to dispel such claims. However, terror is not the entire story, nor does it have to be the end of the story.

With Wood's execution fast approaching, Governor Stitt will be asked to spare the life of Tremane Wood. Of course, the Governor gets the last word. Most will want the last word to be death, and maybe that is the most logical thing to want. But, I prefer mercy.

Mercy is not a faint and fragile thing. It is loud. It is defiant. It refuses the neat lines of vengeance. It refuses to let the machinery of punishment have the final say. It pushes back against the whispers that tell us some lives are not worth saving. It challenges the stories we tell ourselves to justify cruelty. As much as we can't stand the thought, Wood is a reflection of all of us. Indeed, he is the sum of all the times that we've stood by as poverty, violence, and neglect destroy the lives of our neighbors. We build prisons and forget that we're responsible for the people that we put there.

Tremaine Wood is obviously capable of great evil. He has hurt many people, broken rules, and cultivated fear. None of it should be denied. But acknowledging the darkness in his actions does not require us to mirror it in our response. We cannot let his cruelty dictate our own. If we respond to violence with more violence, if we let fear determine justice, we become what we condemn. That is a path that leaves no one better, no one redeemed, and no one safe, not even those who claim to enforce the punishment.

Choosing mercy does not erase the harm Wood has caused. It does not pretend that the pain inflicted is inconsequential. But it insists that our response is governed not by the urge to destroy, but by the capacity to hold life as sacred, even when that life has caused great suffering.

To execute Wood now would be to close the mirror on our own failures, to look away from what we might do differently. The defiance of mercy forces us to see more clearly. It forces us to confront our own complicity while refusing to answer cruelty with cruelty. In sparing Tremaine Wood, we do not endorse evil; we just refuse to be consumed by it. We affirm that even the most broken among us remain human, and that humanity is worth protecting above all.

There will be those who declare mercy for Tremane Wood to be surrender. I could not disagree more. In fact, I think it would be the greatest moral victory of Governor Stitt's tenure yet.

19. The Monster: The Archetype of Evil and the Death Penalty

Patheos • April 17, 2026

In what is possibly his most philosophically ambitious work, Hood examines the myth of the “monster” and how it fuels the machinations of capital punishment. By seeing certain people as inhuman, he argues, we are able to justify the state killing them. Hood also touches on theological arguments for the death penalty and cuts down the opposition with one sentence: “If the devil is real, then the certainty with which we identify monsters may itself be a form of deception.” This piece is the theoretical underpinning on which the rest of this collection hinges.

There is a sound in the dark. You don’t know what it is. Your body knows before you do—the breath held, the muscles tightening, the sudden acute awareness of your own heartbeat. Your mind catches up a second later and begins its work of explanation, but the explanation comes after the fact. The fear was already there, already complete, already certain that something was wrong. That certainty is not the product of reason. It is older than reason. It lives in a place where language hasn’t reached yet, where what you feel is not a thought but a recognition: something is here that should not be here.

This is where the monster begins. Not in mythology, not in folklore, not in the horror film—but in the body, at three in the morning, in the moment before you know what made the sound. The monster is a nervous system event. It happens before we think. And the terrible, largely unexamined truth is that we have built a legal system on top of it and called it justice.

The death penalty presents itself as the most solemn and deliberate act a civilized state can perform—the careful conclusion of a rational process, a measured response to the most extreme crimes. But beneath the protocols and the procedures, beneath the witnesses and the documentation and the clinical machinery of execution, something pre-rational is operating. Something that does not belong to the courtroom at all. It belongs to the dark, to the sound we couldn't name, to the ancient and inarticulate certainty that some things cannot be allowed to exist among us.

When we execute someone, we are not merely punishing. We are slaying a monster. And we have been doing it so long and so ritually that we have forgotten that is what we are doing.

What a Monster Is

A monster is not simply something dangerous. Storms are dangerous. Illness is dangerous. We do not call them monsters in the deep sense. A monster is something that troubles the categories by which we organize the world. It is something that looks almost human—or once was human—but has crossed a threshold we cannot name precisely yet feel acutely. The monster stands at the border between the human and the inhuman and its horror comes precisely from that position. It should not exist. Its existence is an offense against the order of things.

Every culture has produced monsters, and they are not random. They cluster around the same anxieties: what lies beyond the community's edge, what might lurk inside a familiar face, and the deepest anxiety of all—what we ourselves might become. The monster is always partly a mirror. We construct it from the fragments of ourselves we most need to disown.

This is why the monster must be destroyed. It is not enough to cage it, because the cage implies the monster is still a something, still a

participant in the world. The monster's existence is the threat. As long as it lives, the boundary between human and inhuman remains permeable. Destruction is not punishment. Destruction is restoration—it seals the boundary, cleanses the contamination, and allows the community to believe again in its own coherence.

How the Archetype of Monster Enters the Courtroom

Capital cases are not decided in a vacuum. They are decided by human beings who carry within them everything human beings carry—including the deep cognitive and emotional grammar of the monster story. And the legal apparatus, for all its procedural scaffolding, does not neutralize this grammar. It channels it.

Consider the language used to describe defendants in capital cases. They are almost never described in terms of their biography, their psychology, their situation. They are described in terms of their acts, and those acts are described in language that invokes the archetype almost ritually: predator, monster, pure evil, an animal, beyond redemption. These are not casual word choices. They are the vocabulary of a specific and ancient operation—the operation of placing a person outside the category of the human, of moving them across the threshold so that what is done to them no longer counts as something done to one of us.

Once the threshold is crossed, destruction becomes not just permissible but required. The monster cannot be rehabilitated because rehabilitation implies the possibility of return and the monster's defining feature is that it has gone somewhere from which return is impossible. The monster cannot be understood too deeply because deep understanding threatens the clarity of the boundary—it begins to reveal the human in the inhuman, the familiar in the strange, the self in the other. The monster must remain opaque. Its opacity is what justifies its elimination.

This is why evidence of a defendant's childhood trauma, mental illness, or circumstance of deprivation is so often experienced in capital trials not as humanizing but as threatening. It threatens the archetype. It introduces ambiguity where the archetype requires clarity. Jurors who have been primed to see a monster find such evidence emotionally dissonant—not because they are cruel, but because the story they are operating within has no place for it. The monster does not have a backstory. The monster simply is.

The Ritual Beneath the Procedure

The death penalty has always had the character of ritual more than punishment. Public executions were not merely deterrents or acts of retribution—they were civic ceremonies, occasions for collective catharsis, moments in which the community physically expelled what it had judged to be beyond the pale of humanity. The crowd that gathered was not simply curious. It was participating in something. It was confirming by its collective presence that the world had been set right.

We have privatized and medicalized this ritual—moved it behind walls, replaced the gallows with the gurney, surrounded it with observers and official documentation—but the ritual logic persists. The careful protocols of a modern execution are not signs that we have left the ritual behind. They are signs that we are conducting it with great seriousness, that we are performing it properly. The solemnity of an execution is not merely legal gravitas. It is the solemnity of a ceremony that a community has always felt to be important in a way that exceeds explanation.

Why does it exceed explanation? Because it is operating beneath the explanations we give. When people are asked why they support the death penalty, they give reasons—it deters crime, it provides closure for victims' families, some crimes simply deserve it. These reasons are real,

but they do not fully account for the force of the conviction behind them. The force comes from something pre-rational, something that the reasons are retrofitted to justify. The force comes from that ancient feeling—the sound in the dark, the body’s certainty before the mind arrives—that some things cannot be allowed to exist among us.

The Politics of Who Becomes a Monster

The monster archetype does not fall randomly. It has always been shaped by the power structures of the societies that produce it. In a stratified society, the archetype tends to attach to those who are already marginalized, already rendered strange, already placed at the edge of the community’s self-definition. To be poor, Black, foreign, mentally ill, socially isolated—to be any of these things is to be closer to the threshold the monster inhabits. Not because any of these things makes a person more dangerous, but because the archetype requires a figure who is already partially outside, and existing social hierarchies pre-designate certain people for that position.

This is why the death penalty has been applied with such staggering unevenness across lines of race and class. It is not simply bias in the legal system, though that bias is real. It is something deeper: the archetype latches onto those the culture has already learned to perceive as other. The mental work of constructing a monster is easier when the raw material is a person the community has already been conditioned not to fully see.

This means that the death penalty is not merely an instrument of legal terror. It is an instrument of social sorting. It tells us, over and over, who belongs inside the human community and who has stepped far enough outside so that destruction is the appropriate response. Every execution is an implicit statement about the shape of that community—about who counts as human enough to be protected and who has crossed into the dark.

What Deconstruction Requires

To deconstruct the monster archetype is not to deny that terrible things happen, or that evil is real. It is to insist that we are catastrophically bad at identifying where evil ends and a person begins—and that the legal machinery of capital punishment is among the worst instruments ever devised for making that distinction.

If evil is a genuine force that can corrupt and inhabit human beings, then a person can be under its influence without being defined by it in their essence. The tradition that takes evil most seriously—that insists the devil is real, that harm is not merely psychological or sociological but spiritual—also insists on the possibility of redemption even for the gravest sinners. To declare a person beyond redemption and execute them is to make a claim about their soul that no human institution has the standing to make. It is to confuse the sin with the sinner, the corruption with the corrupted. It is, in the deepest sense, a theological error wearing the clothes of jurisprudence.

There is a darker irony still. If the devil is real, then the certainty with which we identify monsters may itself be a form of deception. History is littered with people executed as monsters—by inquisitions, by states, by mobs—who were not. The monster archetype, deployed by human fear and confirmed by social power, has killed the innocent with the same ritual solemnity it has killed the guilty. A real devil would find it extraordinarily useful.

Deconstruction asks us to sit with the discomfort that the monster story exists to relieve. When we declare someone a monster, we contain the horror. We explain it. We place it outside ourselves, outside the human, in a category that can be destroyed and disposed of. We go back to sleep.

But that sound in the dark—the one the body answered before the mind arrived—was never really about the person in the cell. It was about us. About what we carry. About what we are capable of and cannot bear to look at directly. The monster we make and kill is not the source of that fear. It is our attempt to externalize it, to give it a body, to drive it out of the community and out of ourselves through an act of sanctioned violence we have dressed in the language of law.

The sound remains. It will always remain. No execution has ever silenced it, because no execution has ever addressed what it actually is—the knowledge, felt in the body before the mind can refuse it, that the darkness is not out there.

It is in here. It has always been in here. And the only honest response to that knowledge is not to find a monster to destroy, but to reckon, seriously and without flinching, with what we are.

That reckoning is what justice might actually look like.

20. The Abolitionist God

Execution Intervention Project Substack • May 3, 2026

A sermon is a fitting way to close out this collection of twenty writings to celebrate twenty years since Hood's ordination. In it, Hood takes us to the evening before Jesus's own execution, to a passage in the Gospel of John that is well-known in the Christian community. Yet in his characteristically courageous and provocative way, Hood turns the meaning of the passage on its head: it is not a quaint consolation to folks who are suffering, but a powerful rejoinder to a State that demands blood. This piece single-handedly illustrates why Hood continues on the path of abolition—and is a strong motivator for those of us in the movement to keep going.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?...I am the way, the truth and the life...Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”

— Jesus, the night before his execution, John 14:1-12

I have read this passage out loud eleven times to eleven men in the hours before the state killed them. Eleven men. I know what it sounds like to say *do not let your hearts be troubled* in a room with a clock on the wall counting down to a scheduled death. I know what it sounds like because I have done it. And I am telling you that I have not yet found a passage of scripture that holds up under that weight the way John 14 does. Every one of those men is gone now. Every one of them heard these words from me before they died. And every one of them is

the reason I cannot, will not, ever again preach this text as anything less than what it is: a frontal assault on the power of the state to kill.

You have to understand where Jesus was when he said it. He was not in a sanctuary. He was not on a retreat. He was at a dinner table with his closest friends, and in less than twelve hours, the Roman Empire was going to arrest him, try him in the middle of the night, march him through the streets, and nail him to a cross until he suffocated. That is not a metaphor. That is what crucifixion was. It was Rome's death penalty. It was a public execution carried out by the state to terrorize the population. And Jesus knew it was coming. His friends in that room knew it was coming. The soldiers were already being assembled. The cross was already being cut. One of the men at the table, Judas, had already slipped out the door into the dark to go turn him in. Everybody knew what kind of night this was.

And it was *into that room*—that specific room, thick with that specific terror—that Jesus opened his mouth and said: do not let your hearts be troubled.

That is not a greeting card. That is not a pillow embroidered for your grandmother's couch. That is a man on the eve of his own state execution looking the empire dead in the face and saying, *You do not get the last word*. You can build the cross. You can hammer the nails. You can post the soldiers. You can sign the death warrant. You can fill the syringe and wheel in the gurney and light the lights at midnight in Texas, in Oklahoma, in Alabama, in Arkansas—you *do not get the last word*. That is the gospel. That is the rock we are standing on this morning. And every preacher who has ever shrunk this verse down to private comfort, to a soothing word for an anxious heart, has stolen it from the people it was originally meant for: the condemned.

Then he said something else. He said, "*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.*" Many rooms. Room enough. Now the empire

wants this verse small. The empire wants it to be about a private little afterlife—*don't worry about this world, there's a mansion waiting in heaven*—so that you will be quiet about the killing that goes on right now, in this country, in our name. But Jesus said it the night before his execution to a room full of people terrified of execution. He was not changing the subject. He was answering the subject. He was saying: the house of God is bigger than the death house. The house of God has room for the executed and the executioner, the condemned and the condemning—and *every one of them* God can still reach. Every one of them God still claims. Every one of them belongs to a story longer and larger than the State of Arkansas can write with a needle.

And if that is true, then who are we? Who are we to take a human being made in the image of God, strap them to a table, and end them? Who are we to declare a final verdict that even God refuses to declare? The death penalty is the empire pretending to be God. And we are here this morning to tell the empire: You are not God. You will never be God. Sit down.

Then he said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life."* Beloved, this is not a slogan. This is a confrontation. Caesar—the emperor of Rome, the man who claimed authority over life and death across the known world—Caesar said, *I am the way*. Caesar said, *I am the truth*. Caesar said, *I am the life—and I am the death, and I decide which one you get*. And Jesus, on the night before Caesar killed him, said, *No. I am*. "The way" is the way of the executed who refused to hate. "The truth" is the truth of a Galilean carpenter, lynched by an empire and vindicated by God. And "the life" is not something the state can give and the state can take. "The life" is what comes out of the tomb on the third day with a message for every Pilate, every Herod, every governor, and every warden in every century: *You do not get to decide who lives*.

I have to be honest with you. People are still being killed. I cannot stand here and pretend otherwise. I will not dishonor my eleven by pretending. There are people on death row right now whose names we should know. There are dates on the calendar. There are families this week getting the call. And yet I am telling you the death penalty is ending. The number of states carrying it out is shrinking. Juries are refusing. Young people look at it and say, *Not in my name*. The lie is wearing thin. We are not in defeat. We are in transition. And that is exactly where the disciples were in that upper room—the execution had not happened yet and it had also not been overcome yet and Jesus stood in the middle of that *not yet* and said, Measure by the destination, not the danger.

And then—the line that gets us out of that room and into the streets. Verse twelve. “*The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.*” Greater works. Now what could possibly be greater than what Jesus did? He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He raised the dead. What could be greater than that? Hear me. Jesus healed individuals one at a time. The greater work is healing the institutions that produced the wounded in the first place. There is a story in the gospel of John where a mob is about to stone a woman to death, and Jesus stops the execution. He stopped one stoning. The greater work is shutting down the whole machinery of state killing. Jesus told that same woman, *Neither do I condemn you*. The greater work is a justice system that cannot condemn—cannot condemn—anyone to die. That is the work he handed us. And he did not say, *You might*. He said, *You will*.

So to everyone on the row this day: God has not forgotten you. God will make all things right.

The God of Jesus Christ specializes in people the state has given up on. Jesus *was* one of those people. Calvary, the hill where they killed him,

is a death row. The cross is a gurney. Resurrection is what God thinks about execution. And to anyone tired of marching, tired of vigils, tired of watching another date come and go, hear the man on the night before his execution one more time: “*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*” Not because the trouble isn’t real. But because the empire is not God. The needle or the nitrogen is not the end. The verdict is not final. The grave is not the destination. And the one who said “*greater works than these*” is still speaking. We have a chamber to close. We have a gospel of universal love, inclusion, and redemption to preach. We have greater works to do.

In the name of the executed and risen Christ, amen.

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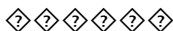
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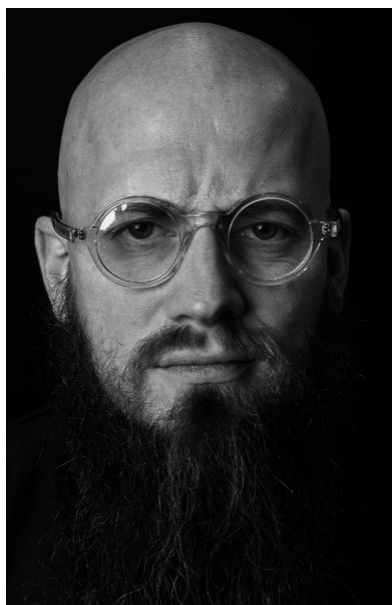


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About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood is a theologian and spiritual advisor to death row inmates nationwide. He has accompanied over a dozen men to their executions and was the first spiritual advisor to be present for a nitrogen hypoxia execution. Rev. Hood has been profiled widely, including in the Rolling Stone documentary *The Spiritual Advisor*. He is the Founder of the Execution Intervention Project.

Read more at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jeffhood/>.

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