

## **LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS**

### **GENESIS BE & REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: BUILDING COLLECTIVE FREEDOM WITH A POET & PREACHER**

LAURA FLANDERS: Peace activist, artist, poet, Genesis Be is busy. She has a book out titled "People, Not Things: Love Poems and Paintings for Humanity." And she recently curated the Freedom Rising Art Show in Brooklyn, New York, featuring work by incarcerated artists currently held by the Georgia Department of Corrections. She is the Artist in Residence at Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan and participated in the church's annual conference, "Freedom Rising", which focused on the '24 elections, threats to democracy, and collective empowerment. And with freedom being a contested topic always and certainly right now, freedom from what? For what? For whom? It was my great pleasure to sit down with Genesis Be recently in the studios of CUNY TV in New York. With us was Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis, the Senior Minister for Public Theology and Transformation there at Middle. The church's two word slogan is "Just love." Genesis painted in studio for her and for us too. It was a first. And I invited Jacqui to co-host. In a time of division, how do we create a sense of collective freedom? For that, we turn to a poet and a preacher. Well, it is such a pleasure to have both of you here. Jacqui, thank you for joining me again, Jacqui Lewis.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: Glad to see you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis, the pastor of Middle Collegiate Church, Genesis Be, you've just finished curating an art show, you've had a book out, there's a film coming out about you in the fall. This has been a busy year for you.

GENESIS BE: Yeah, thank you for having me today.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's a pleasure.

GENESIS BE: I've been a long time supporter, so I just say I appreciate you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, you too. Last time we spoke, you were engaged in the struggle to get the confederate flag out of the state flag of Mississippi.

GENESIS BE: Sure, sure.

LAURA FLANDERS: A victory of sorts.

GENESIS BE: A victory, a collaborative victory.

LAURA FLANDERS: Talk about that, what's happened?

GENESIS BE: Yeah, I mean, during the George Floyd protests, I can't really mention that triumph without mentioning the spirit of George Floyd, and all the collaborators who worked on that issue. You know, I just came in kind of on the tail end, it's like Carlos Moore, Judge Carlos Moore, Ingenué Ellis, Danielle Holmes, Leah Campbell, Mississippi Rising Coalition, like the names that you might not see plastered all over the media. But wow, like what an honor to work alongside these folks and to bring down the Mississippi State flag and bring up one that is beautiful and unifying. You know, that like all mississippians can be like, "Yeah, that's my flag."

LAURA FLANDERS: You two have an interesting relationship, your organization, your work have been in dialogue and in collaboration. Talk about collaboration for a long time. How do you describe what you've been doing together with Genesis?

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: Genesis is my mentor. She's a wonderful human being who our mutual friend, Susan Davis brought Genesis to Middle Church when she was a younger one than she is now. And I think we adopted each other. This is my spirit daughter. I've been watching her grow, her multimedia artist self emerge, but also she's been curating some art at Middle Church in different respects, but most especially this year, in a Freedom Rising conference. She collaborated to pull together a two months art display at one of our sister companies, Art Haus, one of our young adults owns to put Freedom Rising in the space of art. So art that she'll say more about, from folks who are incarcerated, who are dreaming of freedom. As we think about freedom rising, and not only the visual art, but also a night of artists singing and performing all in service of the way art creates the world we want. And points our way to freedom.

LAURA FLANDERS: You wanna talk a bit about your collaborators in that show?

GENESIS BE: Absolutely. So at Brooklyn Art Haus opened their doors to Middle Church and I for the Freedom Rising Art exhibit. And Jackie asked me if I could curate something of like, I said, "Can I do what I want?" Because I've had this idea for a long time to just do an exhibit featuring all currently incarcerated artists. And I partnered with an organization in Georgia called Heart Bound Ministries. And they've been doing this real work and direct impact for a while. And wow, the production that they already have, like the catalog that they already had, I had a chance to kind of sift through and choose the pieces, and these artists are just exceptional. Like, I was humbled, I was like, "Man, you're way better than me." And I was just so blown away by the sheer talent. I said, "I would love to show this in New York and confront the public with the humanity of these exceptional artists", and just get them thinking deeper around the prison system, mass incarceration and how it's so easy for us to kind of out of sight, out of mind people

and put 'em in cages really, put 'em away outside of society, lump everybody together as a unit, a monolith, not individual human beings who are worthy of dignity.

LAURA FLANDERS: What was the feeling there at the show as you saw it open?

GENESIS BE: I was proud of the artists. I was so proud to show their work because it is, I keep coming back to this word, exceptional. The talent and the skill level, the details, the love, the imagination, the memories that they have, their dreams for the future are all captured in these pieces. And I think that there was a lot of feelings from the public, mixed feelings when you're confronted, you know, and they, I think that art and propaganda can be used to dehumanize people and it has in the past, like Birth of a Nation, you know, bringing black people to a monolith of justifying why they should be hurt, assaulted, incarcerated. But if that's true about art and propaganda, it can also be used to humanize, it can also be used for freedom and liberation. The public has to give permission for an institution to exist and see a necessity for it. An institution like the mass incarceration, which is egregious in this country. So this was just my small contribution to confront the public with the humanity of these artists.

LAURA FLANDERS: So that brings me back to your work where you start with a blank canvas and you end up with a beautiful painting and you've taken a bunch of risks and been yourself in the process. We had a chance to see you in action here in the studio just a little while ago. What was that like for you and what were you painting?

GENESIS BE: That was the first time I've actually painted like in front of people, and to show my signature barrier strokes and see how they're completed and the movement of that always left to right, the fragmentation that I feel, the barriers that I feel, the conflict that I try to everyday liberate myself from these barriers, that I can see you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you always paint to your own poetry? Listening to your poetry?

GENESIS BE: Either my poetry or my music, they speak to each other and like, there's a lot of movement in my emotion. So there's movement in poetry and music as well. So it helps me like dial in.

LAURA FLANDERS: You also talk about in your poetry, this beautiful new poetry book "People, Not Things". One of the points you make in poem after poem is that we are under pressure. You say there's an art to free thinking. Talk a little bit about how you imagine freedom. How do you even approach it? Because this is a word that has been used for liberation and against us in a sense.

GENESIS BE: Absolutely.

LAURA FLANDERS: And in these times we have debates happening on our campuses around freedom. And yet that idea of freedom of speech and freedom to organize, freedom to convene, freedom to gather. At least some of those freedoms are enshrined in our constitution. So you just had a conference "Freedom Rising". You're obviously grappling with this question of freedom, who's and how?

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: Absolutely we are. This was our 18th Justice Conference, Laura, you've been around for lots of that at Middle Church. I just wanted to come up to thank them personally for just radical truth telling. What was so amazing about this here is without a space actually to call our own, because of our December, 2020 fire, we were really able to have folks come on a sojourn to New York, a fully digital conference, but also in person, and we had about 300 people in person and another 100 online. I think people who were really dreaming about freedom, freedom to be free, liberated to be free. The word freedom is hijacked often by folks. Freedom from having to change, freedom from having to admit the humanity of others, freedom from having to widen the tent, freedom from having to let go of their sense of exceptionalism. And this conference was really to say, "You move the world." Those of us who understand that there's a dream we can be dreaming, that is a big dream where everyone is welcome, where all the lives matter, where incarceration isn't the answer to infractions, where we redeem our family, our systems. This was a gathering of like-minded folks sharing a dream of all of us belonging and all of us saving this democracy, interfaith, intergenerational. It was a very powerful, evocative event.

LAURA FLANDERS: Hmm. How do you think about freedom Genesis?

GENESIS BE: I say my art liberates my ego from the prison of identity.

LAURA FLANDERS: Explain more about that.

GENESIS BE: So if I can't liberate my ego from the labels and identity that I impose on myself and that society opposes on me, the identity that I see in you and that I see in you, if I can't break down and unpack and deprogram myself from the barriers that come with those identities, then I can't show up in the world and see you as a complex human being worthy of dignity first and foremost. I'm just going to see you like, "Oh, at first she's a white lady, some white lady from London." That shouldn't be my go-to. We're programmed to see the differences first versus like, I'm going to walk out of my house today and because I've liberated myself today 'cause I have to do it every day. Every person I engage with, whether it's my Uber driver or a funder or my family, I need to see them as a complex human being worthy of dignity, first and foremost, and to me, that's my personal freedom, that's how I can show up in the world. And however the world perceives me, I have to understand not to take on the attributes of whatever identity you see me.

Like this is just my avatar. I'm an infinite spirit who's very powerful and very humble, but extremely powerful. But this is the human experience and avatar that I'm in. This isn't who I am, just from what you see.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: One of the things that I've been really working hard on since the fire, I would say the fire, I would say the fire liberated me, Laura. I mean, the thing we found in the fire was a desperate sense of the urgency of now, like the thing is gone, the brick is gone, the fires took that away, but it didn't take away our love. You know, the story of our friends taking care of folks even while we're grieving our own fire. But also people found us in the fire and we found new partners in the fire. And I think maybe because of the fire and both of my parents being dead, I just feel unbounded. I feel my tongue is liberated, my attitude is liberated. I feel a desperate need to speak truth to power, to find folks who are aligned around a yes for all of us.

LAURA FLANDERS: We are in one of the most divided times I've ever seen us. Whether you're talking the election. Gaza, Israel. I mean, how are you dealing with that? I'm finding it hard to even keep people at the same dinner party.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: I don't think it's magic, but I think it's truth. I think honesty begets honesty. I think if we're vulnerable and say, "I'm confused, I'm afraid, I don't like this . This is what I really think", the truth really does set us free. In other words, the candid expression of my opinion and making space for the candid expression of your opinion is how Middle is staying together right now. It works to say we don't agree on these things, but we agree on love as a path. We believe that everyone should have enough, we believe that all paths lead to sustainability, we believe the earth should be okay. So we're finding that shared set of dynamics that keep us together even as we worship in a synagogue where our Jewish hosts don't necessarily agree with how we feel about the conflict in Gaza.

GENESIS BE: And yeah, I think we have to be real, we have to be truthful, we have to look at history, we have to confront ourselves with the hard truth. Nothing will happen until the truth. If there is exploitation involved, if there's profit in dehumanizing people and incarcerating people, if there's land grabs, if human behavior is strictly moved, the power structure moves by how much profit can be made, and that's not addressed. I don't know what we're talking about.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that takes me back to Mississippi. People often talk about genocide couldn't happen here. Could it happen here? And you think, "Well, what do you think happened here for the 100s of years of chattel slavery?" And we began with that change in the flag, and your documentary, the documentary that's coming out featuring you, Genesis Be is called "Mississippi Turning." Do you wanna talk a bit more about what's in the film, what you're excited about, how people will be able to get it soon?

GENESIS BE: So executively produced by Irshad Manji, Aunjanue Ellis, the amazing actress and activist, and Breakout, Chris Wilson and Michael Farber. And Adam Grannick is the one who named it "Mississippi Turning". They followed me during my collaborative fight to try to raise awareness, not only nationally on national tours, but doing civil discourse sessions in Mississippi with millennials who were neo confederate or white millennials who didn't identify as neo confederate and the descendant of the unique slave, the descendants of civil rights activists like myself to really humanize the issue and like, "Let's really talk about this. 'Cause what were you taught in your household? 'Cause I wasn't taught this." And also when you read the cornerstone speech of the Confederacy, they say very blatantly what their main truth is, the inferiority of black people. So I think that civil discourse is an opportunity to poke holes in bigotry through scrutiny. I say that in the poem. You know, so it kind of follows my journey, and yeah, the flag came down in 2021 after flying a 120 plus years, and it kind of shows how I got into it six years prior or five years prior, up until the day it came down. And yeah, it's incredible. "Mississippi Turning", it should be dropping in the fall of this year.

LAURA FLANDERS: The question I ask at the end of every one of these conversations is what do you think is the story the future will tell at this moment?

GENESIS BE: They're going to say they refuse to accept the truth and be accountable. Everyone turned away from accountability. And the young people were failed. And they're going to look back and probably really look at us like, "What? What were y'all doing? What were y'all thinking? You have this technology, you had a technological revolution, industrial revolution, but we didn't have a spiritual evolution because you know, in the future I believe we're going to be transcended to a more spiritual heightened place where we are going to see each other as complex human beings and if anyone's trying to exploit or fear monger, they're going to be shunned. They're not going to be propped up into positions of power so that they can make as much profit as possible. That's going to be the antiquated part that the future's going to look at.

LAURA FLANDERS: I like it. So they're going to say, "What the heck took them so long?"

GENESIS BE: Yeah, they're going to look at us like we're cavemen, or neanderthal, spiritually.

LAURA FLANDERS: What do you think, Jacqui, spiritually?

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: I hope 2035, somebody is reading Genesis's poetry, and thinking, "I've liberated myself from my ego and the identities that are bound up in it. And because I've done that, I can look at all the human beings around me and I can see that we're inextricably connected one to the other, and that we can't thrive and we can't survive unless we do it together, and we've made new systems and new ways of being."

GENESIS BE: And nature and the environment too. Beautiful.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: That's right, that's right.

GENESIS BE: That's beautifully said. Not only the humanity, but in our relation to this stuff.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: The Earth, exactly.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm reminded of a friend of mine who, a theater person who says, "The only way home is through", like the only way you're going to get off this stage is through this stage. There's been all sorts of campaigns against identity politics and talking about identity. So I just wanna put a pin on it, that we have got to go through this process of lifting up all our multiple identities in order to get to the place where we can say, "They don't matter." Right?

GENESIS BE: I didn't say they don't matter.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: Yeah.

GENESIS BE: I would never say that. I think they do matter, yeah. Yes, because I think it's beautiful to have pride in your identity and your culture, especially if it has been previously suppressed and not visible. Like I think that's important. Identity can be a prison if I'm not careful. If I'm not careful, rather than celebrating the beauty of my identities, I am being bound, my behavior in the world is being bound by the assumptions of certain identities, right? So that's what I mean, it's not necessarily a prison, but it can be. So if I am seeing you and there's all these bars in front of me, we talk about a prison and, and one bar is like, "Okay, I'm younger, or I am black, or I am biracial, or I am queer and this person is straight." Like these are all the bars, versus seeing you as a complex human being and knowing that that's what I am as well. First and foremost in operating from that place when I move through the world, right? So it's like differences are beautiful and the different cultures are beautiful. We should learn from different cultures. Be curious, see the beauty in it, be inspired by it, not exploit, not fear, not try to profit off of different cultures and the differences, you know. But this is where we are as a society, we exploit and fear. So I'm saying rather than that, let's liberate from this prison. This prison of identity.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: Can I add to that?

LAURA FLANDERS: Sure.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: I think my favorite definition of love is the non possessive delight in the unique particularity of the other. The non possessive, non-competitive, non deriding, put

all those things in there. The non, I'm not afraid the fearless delight. In the unique, particularity. I think that, that's the what I dream of, I dream of all of our particularities, our funkiness, our crankiness, our queerness, our straightness, our blackness, our whiteness, our fear, our insecurities, our ability, all of those things are traits in which to delight in one another. And if we don't make them tropes and if we don't make them stigmas, and if we don't make them caricatures, then it's like, "Ooh, look at you being you with your wonderful self." And as I move in the world, as a person becoming, I also should delight in my own particular stuff. And that makes me less afraid of yours. So a journey toward my own, like my quirk. Then I can love you. Exactly. And like then I'm not afraid of you because I'm all right.

LAURA FLANDERS: So a trait, not a trick or a trap?

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: A trait, not a, ooh, that's good.

LAURA FLANDERS: And all a treat.

GENESIS BE: I like that. I really like that. I'm going to sit with that.

LAURA FLANDERS: This has been great. Thank you so much. You are watching "Laura Flanders and Friends". Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious and thanks for joining us.

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