During the last two weeks my mind has been much occupied with the lack of indictments of police in the killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City. The details of the Michael Brown shooting by police officer, Darren Wilson, are murky. Accounts differ. But all the witnesses agree on one thing. Michael Brown was unarmed and had his hands up in the air when the police officer fatally shot him. Brown was stopped for jaywalking. The details of the Eric Garner case seem a little clearer because they were caught on video. Garner was down on the ground being held by three police officers. One of them had him in a choke hold around his neck. Garner can be heard gasping, “I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe,” as the officer choked him to death. He was stopped for allegedly selling single cigarettes.

Other cases have emerged in recent months – the shooting death of a man with a bb gun in his hand in a Walmart store in Ohio that sells bb guns. New technology is enabling victims of police brutality to post videos of incidents. The results have been stunning. We have been operating under the assumption that affirmative action and other gains of the civil rights movement of the 60’s have resulted in a more even playing field. We even have a black president! But we have been kidding ourselves. And these incidents and the public response to them has revealed the ugly, violent, racist underbelly of our culture. It’s shocking. And disturbing. At least it is, to those of us who are not brown-skinned. While I think African-Americans have been glad for the rising awareness of this issue, it’s not news to them. They live it. Every day.
In her book, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander talks about the mass incarceration of black people as the new Jim Crow. Jim Crow was a system of laws that kept African-Americans segregated, uneducated, disenfranchised, denied public services, unable to vote, and systematically ensured that they were a permanent underclass in our society. Since the civil rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s, Jim Crow laws were abolished. But new ways of oppression have emerged.

In the 1980’s, a time when both crime rates and drug use were down, the White House declared a “War on Drugs.” This “war” made increasingly stiffer penalties for minor drug offenses. And black Americans were disproportionately targeted for arrests and received harsher punishments. In the less than 30 years since the War on Drugs was declared, the prison population rose from 300,000 to more than 2 million. The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world – higher than China, Russia, or Iran. We imprison a higher percentage of our black population than South Africa did during apartheid.

This has resulted in a racist stereotype of African-Americans. If, in previous centuries in our country, we could justify slavery or Jim Crow because African-Americans were savages, were less than human; we now justify unequal treatment of African-Americans by our criminal justice and legal systems because they are considered thugs and gangbangers. And because blacks are labelled as thugs and gangbangers, they are considered expendable.¹ One recent study found that “white people overestimate crime committed by people of color, and associate people of color with criminality.”² Labelling people in order to oppress is a common tactic. In Rwanda, the Hutus called the Tutsi’s “cockroaches.” In Nazi Germany, the Jews were called “rats.” This dehumanization allowed them to commit genocide. If someone is considered an animal, it’s

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much easier to justify violence against them. A black man is killed by police every 2-3 days, at about the same rate as the rate of lynchings at the height of Jim Crow.\textsuperscript{3}

When the public reacted negatively to the burning and looting in Ferguson after the non-indictment, I kept thinking of Jeremiah 6:14, “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” Many people commented that Martin Luther King, Jr. would have been disappointed by the violence. Here is what Martin Luther King, Jr. once said about rioting, “I would be the first to say that I am still committed to militant, powerful, massive non-violence as the most potent weapon in grappling with the problem from a direct action point of view. I’m absolutely convinced that a riot merely intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving the guilt… But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard.”\textsuperscript{4} The people who riot are acting out of a sense of powerlessness and rage against a system of social control enforced by violence and intimidation.

At the time of Jesus’ birth, the Jewish people were waiting for, hoping for, longing for a Messiah. This anointed priest king would lead them in taking back their land and restoring their kingdom which had been under occupation for centuries and was currently under Roman occupation. The Romans allowed the Jews a certain amount of freedom – the freedom to practice their own religion although there was also pressure to worship Caesar, the freedom to own property and earn money, although they were heavily taxed. Roman citizens were given power

\textsuperscript{3} Michelle Alexander in a speech at Ohio Dominican University, September 22, 2014.  
\textsuperscript{4} Martin Luther King, Jr. in a speech at Grosse Pointe High School, March 14, 1968.
and privilege and Jews lived as second-class citizens in their own country. Abuse of Jewish citizens by Roman soldiers was customary. And political protest was punished severely and publicly by hanging offenders naked on a cross outside the city gate until they were dead – after which their remains were left hanging for the animals and birds to consume their flesh. It was a punishment designed to be painful, humiliating, and intimidating.

It’s no surprise, then, that many Jews were looking for a savior that would lead them in a military victory against the Romans. A messiah that would not only restore their nation and bring justice and peace, but also one who would judge and punish their oppressors. We have been studying the Gospel of Mark and Jesus keeps revealing that he is the messiah and then telling the disciples and others not to tell anyone. (It’s called the “messianic secret” in Mark.) Why did Jesus do this? Some scholars think it’s because Jesus knew exactly what would happen as soon as his claim to be the messiah became public. A claim to being messiah meant a claim to the kingship, which was a threat both to Caesar and to Herod. In Roman-occupied Judea, it meant certain death. Even though Jesus warns them, the disciples don’t really understand this. Salvation will come to them in a way that is hard to comprehend – even today.

The Jews were waiting for a savior to liberate them. But Jesus was not the savior they expected. Liberation was born in the form of a tiny baby. And that tiny baby grew up to be the Prince of Peace who shared in human vulnerability, suffering and death. And, through his death and resurrection, his kingdom of justice and peace was extended to all people and all of creation.

Jesus’ followers in the first century understood the kingdom of God to be present now in some ways but to be coming more fully in the future when Jesus would return. And they expected that to happen in their lifetime – before the apostles died. So it became a crisis of faith for the community when the first generation of Christians were dying and Jesus had not yet
returned. Did they misunderstand? Why had Jesus not yet come back to usher in the new age, the new kingdom? This was a problem. The Second Letter of Peter addresses these questions and upholds the tradition of the apostles.

According to the writer of the letter, God’s sense of time is not like ours – a thousand of our days are like one to God. And God’s justice is not like our justice. God’s delay in bringing about the kingdom of God is because of God’s desire for all people to repent and get on board. It is actually God’s generous mercy that causes God to wait. It’s God’s mercy for the oppressors. God wants to include everyone. The advent, the coming, of God’s reign is sure. But we do not know when it will arrive.

So, what should we do while we are waiting? We have this tremendous sense of urgency, this tremendous desire for justice. We feel like we need to move. We feel like we need to move NOW. The writer of Second Peter urges followers of Jesus to be patient as God is patient. We should have faith in God’s promises and remember our purpose as God’s people. We are to live holy lives in order to be ready – lives consistent with the reign of God. We should live as if the reign of God is NOW.

As members of a predominantly white congregation, what can we do about racial injustice as we are waiting? Many of us are already engaged in the practice of active waiting through listening, learning, accompanying, and witnessing. You could get to know your neighbor better. You might worship at Second Baptist occasionally – you can worship there at 8 a.m. and still make our 9:30 a.m. service. Too hard, you say? Think about racial injustice and how hard that is, and you might re-think that. Maybe it’s not too hard. You could attend the conversation on race on January 28 with Second Baptist, First Presbyterian, and our congregation. You could find out more about On Earth Peace anti-racism transformation team – maybe even become a
team member. You could take a Sankofa journey – a bus trip that partners white and black individuals as they journey through places in the south with significant history in the struggle for civil rights. You could read current books and articles written by African-Americans to learn more about racism as they experience it. You could talk about racism at the dinner table with friends and family. You could speak out about racial injustice. You could participate in peaceful protest. I am sure there are many more ways that we could actively wait in anticipation of God’s reign of justice and peace for all people. These are just a few ideas. I’m sure you have ideas of your own.

What we can’t do, if we are living holy lives in anticipation of God’s reign, this season of Advent, is to pretend that systemic racism and police brutality don’t exist in our culture. Baptist pastor Jeff Hood recently wrote, “I keep thinking about Eric Garner saying, ‘I can’t breathe.’ It made me think – that’s what Jesus is saying in this culture. Jesus is fundamentally connected to the marginalized and right now Jesus is saying, ‘I can’t breathe.’ I think the church should be saying the same things – that we can’t breathe in this culture and we have to change this culture in order for us to have breath and exist in this society.” May it be so. Amen.

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5 “’Right Now Jesus is Saying: I Can’t Breathe’ Religious Leaders React to Non-Indictment in Garner Case.” The Huffington Post, http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/6264266