



Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story

**A New Documentary from
Martin Doblmeier and Journey Films**

Coming to Public Television February 2019

Journey Films announces production of a new film for Public Television on acclaimed African-American theologian, preacher, writer, and civil rights pioneer **Howard Thurman**. Thurman was the first African-American leader to meet Mahatma Gandhi in India and among the first to espouse his vision of religiously based non-violence in America. Thurman also co-founded one of the first intentionally interracial, intercultural churches in the United States and helped shape the Civil Rights Movement through his spiritual influence on Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, Vernon Jordan and many others.

Cited as one of the foremost preachers in America by *Life* and *Ebony* magazines, Thurman may be best remembered today as the author of over twenty books on religion and spirituality, including the groundbreaking 1949 volume *Jesus and the Disinherited*. In that book Thurman challenged the sin of religious segregation in America and claimed that “the religion of Jesus” also was the natural religion of the oppressed. Although criticized in his own time, Thurman’s emphasis on personal religious experience and expression over doctrinal statements or denominational affiliation prefigured today’s generation of spiritual seekers and religious non-affiliates.

Written and directed by Martin Doblmeier (*BONHOEFFER*, *CHAPLAINS*, *The Power of Forgiveness*, *The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*), *Backs Against the Wall* presents an intimate view of the man Civil Rights icon and Congressman John Lewis calls “the patron saint” of the Movement. Likewise, for Jesse Jackson, Thurman was indispensable in helping to provide “the philosophical framework of how to struggle.”

Backs Against the Wall draws on in-depth interviews with Civil Rights leaders Lewis, Jackson, and Vernon Jordan, as well as preeminent Thurman scholars Luther Smith, Walter Earl Fluker, Alton B. Pollard, III, and author Barbara Brown Taylor. The film follows Thurman from his earliest years in the Jim Crow South to his experience as a Black theology student closely watched by the Ku Klux Klan. It explores his transformative meeting with Gandhi in 1936 and his questioning of religious segregation in America. Also discussed are the traditional interpretations of Jesus in *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), and Thurman’s later role as spiritual guide to King, Jackson, Jordan and others. Throughout it all, the film

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asks the resonant question Thurman asked, so relevant to our own time: “What does the religion of Jesus have to say to those whose backs are against the wall?”

Backs Against the Wall will begin airing nationally on Public Television stations in February 2019 for Black History Month. Comprehensive educational materials and study guides related to Thurman’s work on topics of race, religion, and spirituality will be available at www.journeyfilms.com. Special screening events are now being planned for early 2019.

For more information contact Producer Deryl Davis at deryl@journeyfilms.com or 703.519.8200 or visit www.journeyfilms.com.

Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story is a presentation of Maryland Public Television. Major funding by The Lilly Endowment.