

Let My People Go

Exodus 5:1-14 Psalm 22 (Excerpts from Psalms/Now) Matthew 5:13-16

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President Franklin Roosevelt once said, "Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is action in spite of fear."

The people that we shall look at today were not without fear, but in spite of the danger to their very lives they were faithful to God and to their moral compass.

They stepped up to

- follow God's bidding,
- follow what was the right thing to do,
- follow what was morally and biblically right.

Moses had stood by the burning bush listening to the voice of God calling him to a task that would have been beyond the imagination of any human being. God was calling him to liberate a nation that was enslaved by the most powerful government on earth, the nation of Egypt. God was telling Moses to go to the court of Pharaoh and tell him to let them go. Moses could have guessed what the Pharaoh's reaction would have been, but the Pharaoh's reaction was to make the life of the slaves even harder.

The Hebrews had been immigrants to Egypt some 430 years before. Life for all of these generations had varied from tolerable to very good. One of their own people, Joseph, had saved the nation of Egypt from the devastating results of a famine. He had been made the Prime Minister and had married an Egyptian woman.

In the course of time there was a change in Pharaohs and there arose a head of government who did not know the history or had no regard for the history of Joseph. In the course of time Moses was also born and adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh. He grew up in the palace, experiencing the wealth and the privilege, but being cared for by his mother as his nurse and nanny. He had been a boy who grew into a man understanding that although he grew up in the court of Pharaoh he was a Hebrew. It was that understanding that had caused him to intervene and murder the Egyptian overseer who was whipping a Hebrew for not working hard enough at making bricks. It was that incident that caused him to flee for his life into the land of Midian. He had made a life for himself there. He was married; he had children. He was content.

How strange it must have seemed to be going home to the palace. Moses had been the adopted grandson of the Pharaoh. Now he is going there to confront the Pharaoh and try to work out a plan to get the Hebrews out of Egypt and out of captivity. Pharaoh Ramses II does not recognize his adopted grandson, Moses. It has been many years and he is dressed, not in royal garments, but as one of the Hebrews. The Pharaoh is indignant at the request to allow the Hebrews to go into the desert for three days to have a religious festival and worship Yahweh. Egypt has its gods and Ramses has been on the throne long enough to be considered by the Egyptians as also being a god.

Thinking that Moses and Aaron are just slaves who have come to bring a grievance to him, Pharaoh tells them to get back to work. He then turns to one of his overseers and tells him that if the slaves have the

time to go away and worship they are not working hard enough. From that day forward they will have to glean for their straw to make their bricks. No longer will the straw be supplied to them.

Now Moses has everyone angry with him. It would have been easy say, "Well, God, I tried," and walk away and go back to Midian. But Moses now has a passion to complete the mission. And God does not desert him.

With the cooperation of Moses and Aaron God sends the plagues as signs of the power of the Hebrew God. The more plagues that come, the more obstinate becomes the Pharaoh. It is only when the first-born of the children and the animals are killed that the Hebrews are allowed to leave.

As they leave the Hebrews are instructed to ask for the resources of their masters. They are told by the Egyptians to take what they want; just leave. In so doing the Hebrews plunder the riches of Egypt. Egypt will not be the strong and wealthy nation that it was after they depart.

The staff of Moses becomes the rod of God. The waters of the Red Sea are parted and the Hebrews cross over on dry ground. And yes, the Pharaoh changed his mind as they were leaving and sent the army to pursue them and bring them back. The waters of the Red Sea rolled back over the chariots and the army was destroyed.

Thousands of years later, in America, the slaves would sing the song *Oh Mary, Don't You Weep, Don't You Moan; Pharaoh's Army Got Drowned; Oh Mary, Don't You Weep*. It was a song of hope.

There was much weeping and moaning in the time of Harriet Tubman. Harriet was born to enslaved parents in Dorchester County Maryland sometime between 1820 and 1825. Since slaves were simply property their births were not recorded.

Three of her sisters were sold to distant plantations, thereby separating the family. Physical violence was a part of everyday life for slaves. Slaveholders often used any excuse for what they called "discipline." The "discipline" was often harsh and sometimes slaves died as a result. Slaveholders could not be charged with a crime.

The violence that Harriet suffered early in life caused permanent physical injuries. Later in life she would recount how on one morning she was lashed five times before breakfast. On a particular day she was sent into town to pick up supplies. While there she encountered a slave who had left the plantation without permission. The man's overseer insisted that Harriet help restrain the slave while he was "disciplined." When she refused, he threw a two-pound weight at her that struck her in the head. As a result, for the rest of her life she endured headaches and seizures.

The Underground Railway would be her means of escape. The Underground Railway was a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States in the late seventeen hundreds until the eighteen hundreds. It was used primarily by the enslaved to escape to Canada. One estimate suggests that over the years some 100,000 enslaved people escaped through the network.

The rescue of slaves was clandestine, mostly at night, and since the railroad had come into existence, much of the terminology was adapted to this effort. The Society of Quakers is credited with beginning the system.

The Underground Railroad developed its own terminology.

- People who helped enslaved people find the railroad were “agents.”
- Guides were known as “conductors.”
- Hiding places were “stations” or “way stations.”
- People escaping slavery were known as “passengers” or “cargo.”
- Enslaved people would obtain a “ticket.”
- Similar to common gospel lore, the “wheel would keep on turning.”
- Financial benefactors of the Railroad were known as “stockholders.”

Harriet escaped from slavery through the Underground Railway in 1849, fleeing to Philadelphia. A notice published in the *Cambridge Democrat* offered a \$300 reward for her return. She is quoted as saying, “When I found I had crossed the line (into Pennsylvania), I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt I was in Heaven.”

Rather than remaining in safety, she stepped forth in courage, risking her very life to give freedom to others through using the Underground Railroad. Harriet became a conductor on the railroad. Over the course of eleven years she made some 19 trips into the South and brought out 300 slaves to freedom. During this time she moved her base of operations to Auburn, New York so that she would be closer to Canada. She would later say that she never lost a passenger. She carried with her a pistol and sleeping powders – a pistol to prevent anyone from leaving the group and thereby disclosing their route, and sleeping powders to keep babies from crying.

Harriet was known to her passengers as Moses.

When the Civil War began, she offered her services to the Union Army and in 1862 she went to South Carolina to provide badly needed nursing care for black soldiers and newly liberated slaves. Working with General David Hunter, she also began spying and scouting missions behind Confederate lines. In June of 1863, she accompanied Colonel James Montgomery in an assault on several plantations rescuing more than 700 slaves. She raised money to help former slaves with food, shelter, and education.

With the end of the War, Tubman returned to Auburn and married a Civil War veteran. Although her service in the Union Army was well known, it was only after much difficulty that she received a nurse’s pension from the government.

Her years after the Civil War were not idle. She worked for voting rights for women with the same determination that she had worked for abolition. She established the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged on a property adjacent to her home in Auburn. It was a place of comfort for widows to live out their days.

Harriet Tubman died at her Auburn home on March 10, 1913, surrounded by family and friends. She was buried with full military honors in the Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn, New York.

In 1974, more than 60 years after her death, the Department of Interior designated her former home in Auburn as a national historic landmark. In 1978 the U.S. Postal Service inaugurated the Black Heritage Series with a stamp honoring Harriet Tubman.

There is work yet to be done.

- Who among today's generation;
- who among we who worship God today;
- who among those in the Church;
- who among us here in Union University Church

will summon up the courage to help right the wrongs in today's world?

Too many in our country still enjoy privileges that they do not want for others. Voting rights for all people has again become a central issue. Women and children are still caught up in human trafficking for the financial profit of their handlers. It is another form of slavery.

Too many in our country still look with suspicion on others who are not like themselves

- In skin tone,
- In culture,
- In economic status.

Too many still see immigrants as a threat to their own economic welfare. I remind us that unless we are Native American we are all immigrants or the descendents of immigrants.

We, as a congregation, *are* about to do something, and there will be an opportunity for every one of us to participate in some way. Very soon there will be some 300 Afghanistan refugee families arriving in the Rochester and Buffalo areas. Our Lenten mission will be to provide needed resources to these families, most of whom left Afghanistan only with the clothes on their backs.

What a wonderful opportunity to be the hands and feet and heart and mind of Christ! Stay tuned!
Amen.