

Sermon
September 17, 2017
Texts: Matthew 18:21-22
Exodus 14:10-31
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We know the Exodus story as a core story of the liberation of God's people from slavery in Egypt. It is one of the most well-known stories in all of the Bible. We, and particularly black communities of faith in the United States have found our story of freedom from oppression in Moses leading the people Israel out of from slavery under Pharaoh.

Harriet Tubman, well known for her work with the underground railroad during the Civil War era was called "Black Moses" because, like Moses, she led people out of slavery.

In these days as we see the hurricane devastation of the U.S. Virgin Islands, we can remember another called "Black Moses," David Hamilton Jackson. Jackson led the struggle for civil rights and labor rights, for the freedom of the press in the Danish West Indies, and finally he worked for the transfer of the islands from Danish rule to become a territory of the U.S. and they became the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1917.

The name Moses has always been associated with those who work to liberate God's people. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. lifted up the story of Moses leading God's people out of oppression and slavery. And there are those today, women and men who are leading, one step at a time as their predecessors have.

Yesterday, as Brenda and I marched with people, young and old, black, brown, and white, we were being led by young activists who have chosen, like many before them, Non-Violence as the means to the end of the violence against them. (There are always a few whose anger is expressed in other ways, but this movement is planned and works to

be non-violent.) We in the St. Louis community cry out for something very clear, something that should be very simple. Black and brown skinned people in our community are beyond asking – instead are demanding one thing very clearly and succinctly. STOP KILLING US. STOP KILLING BLACK AND BROWN PEOPLE.

In fact yesterday, we, hundreds of us, were sitting in a huge circle several people deep all the way around the intersection of Skinker and Delmar. We sat for six minutes in silence except for the calling of name after name of black youth, men, and women who have been killed by police in our country. As the names were called out, protest leaders wrote in large chalk letters in the middle of the intersection: YOU GONNA STOP KILLING US.

I sat there on the curb in the quiet with the names being called out, and it occurred to me that we were encircling not just any intersection, but Skinker and Delmar. Skinker, in St. Louis history was the sundown divide; black people had better not be on the west side of Skinker after dark. And now we know the power of the Delmar Divide, a socio-economic and racial dividing line between north and south sides of the city. At *that* intersection, a young black woman crying out “STOP KILLING US” sounded like “LET MY PEOPLE GO.”

Like the cry of Moses, it is a cry for liberation from the sentence of death because of the color of one’s skin; death at the hands of white police officers, death due to poorer education and related pay inequities, death due to poorer health care. I could go on, but I don’t want to muddy the issue, because just yesterday, at that intersection, protest leaders asked us simply tell anybody we can tell to “STOP KILLING THEM.”

The demand seems so simple, yet we know from the Exodus story and our own long history of racism, that liberation is doesn’t come easily.

In Exodus 5, Moses and Aaron went to Pharoah and Moses said to him, “Thus says the Lord God, “Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the

wilderness.” Pharaoh basically laughs in their face, and says “No! Everybody get back to work” and then makes life even harder for the slaves, beating them, and calling them lazy. When Moses sees that they are being treated worse than ever, he tells God that he should never have tried this. Moses argues back and forth with God, saying I can’t do this. I don’t have the words to influence Pharaoh. (Not to mention that Moses was 80 and Aaron was 83 at the time and just may have wanted somebody else to do this work!)

And then there’s that little “staff throwing contest” between Aaron and all Pharaoh’s magicians in which they all throw down their staffs and they all become snakes. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up all the others. Pharaoh still wouldn’t listen.

So then come the plagues – water turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, dead livestock, boils, thunder and hail, locusts, 3 days of darkness, and then the deaths of their firstborn. And it was only then in the story that Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron in the night and tells them to go and take the people Israel away from Egypt. It looks like Pharaoh has finally been convinced, to let those held in slavery go before this mess kills all of Egypt.

However when Pharaoh was told that the people had fled, he changed his mind. “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?” And so he took his army and went after them. And that’s where our reading today began – With the Israelites seeing Pharaoh’s army coming after them and so they blame Moses – At least if they had stayed in Egypt, even if they were slaves they would live.

Moses tells them not to be afraid, to stand firm. Now Moses tells them that the Lord will fight for them – they just need to stand still. But the Lord says to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to get moving – go forward.” When they step out to move forward, Moses raises his staff and the Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds divides and they go through, and God comes in a cloud behind in them so that there is no fighting between the Egyptians and the Israelites, and then Moses brings his staff down and the sea folds back in and Pharaoh’s army dies.

The story comes to a conclusion in verse 31 saying “ Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. And then it launches into the “Song of Moses” which begins - “I sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

It’s interesting that we tell the story to kids – because it’s exciting. We sing funky camp songs about it – you know – “Pharoah, Pharoah, O baby Let my people go. With that verse about Pharoah’s army doing the dead-man’s float” - But this is not funny.

Whether we hear it as a literal, historical story or a legend of liberation, it paints an image of God who stands with the oppressed. In this story, God’s liberation of the oppressed involves wiping out the army of Pharaoh. Aimee Niles in her blog “A Plain Account” says “This is a story of justice. Egypt is a brutal regime built on the backs of slaves. Pharaoh cares more about maintaining his power and comfort than about recognizing and honoring the humanity of the Israelites. His heart is hardened over and over again until his thirst leads to destruction.”

The road to liberation in this story differs from the image we see in Jesus the Christ. In the Jesus story, God’s liberation of the oppressed involves loving them and standing with them, advocating for them even to his own death on the cross, followed by the resurrection witness that this Love cannot not be stopped. Jesus calls those who follow him to take up the cross of God’s world transforming love.

Both stories tell us the TRUTH that liberation is hard; it does not come easily. Those in power do not easily let go of power and control. After all that had happened, the question that Pharaoh asks is – “What have we done – letting those who serve us leave?”

So what does liberation require? Can it happen without violence? That’s the question of the centuries! Still today there are different philosophies about that and people make different decisions.

Cameron B.R. Howard (Luther Seminary) reminds us that at the time of this text, God was understood as a family/tribal/national God who fought on behalf of *that* particular god’s people; that was common in ancient mythologies. A God who chooses a side and

destroys their enemies. That's different from the God of all peoples and nations that we come to know in Jesus the Christ. And yet, truth be told, we in our culture of different Christian expressions and different faith expressions still talk as if God leads us into war for our just cause. We pray for God to help us win the big game.

A critical question: "If we believe God is on our side then what does that allow us to say about our enemies?" It allows us to say that God is **not** in them and not **with** them! Yet in Jesus Christ, we know that is not true. And **that** is the critical point; the point on which our faith turns. *God is working to bring all of us to Godself! God loves all of us! We are all held in God's grace.* And if that is true then we can and will be transformed by God's love. We do not know when that will happen, or even if it will be in our lifetimes.

We can live closer and closer to Jesus' compelling call to forgive – more times than we can count. Jesus draws us into an understanding of the God of all nations. Jesus draws us to the understanding that ultimately only Love conquers hate.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. sought liberation through non-violent means. William Watley summarized King's Non-violent ethic.

1. Non-violence should never be confused with passivity since it involves active resistance. It is hard spiritual work, because one resists with love rather than hate.
2. The goal of non-violent action is redemption and reconciliation.
3. The opponent is the symbol of greater evil. Evildoers are victims of evil in which they participate. The real tension is between justice and injustice.
4. Non-violence that leads to suffering has redemptive meaning.
5. The Love ethic has to be at the center of one's life if the non-violent approach to evil is to be effective. – still knowing that such love is an ideal beyond our grasp.
6. And finally King held the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice.

We can be redeemed. God is working in wild and mysterious ways. This last week I read the story of a man who was going house to house to rescue people in the aftermath of one of the hurricanes. He was black. He came to the house of an older white couple.

They had to make decisions about the few things they would be able to bring with them in his truck. As they came out of the house, the man was holding onto his confederate flag. He seemed embarrassed and apologized that he didn't want to leave it behind. He said he would put it in the back of the truck, because he didn't want his rescuer to have to have it inside the cab of his truck. The man rescuing him said "just put it in the truck." The older man's wife was saying 'why couldn't you have just left it?'

Maybe he later thought about why he held onto it and what it now means for him. We don't know what redemption might have taken place that day.

Or what redemption is at work in the world when a young black woman stands in the center of the intersection of Skinker and Delmar and speaks the words as they are written on the street. You Gonna Stop Killing Us. Or was that "Let My People Go!"