

HARRIET TUBMAN (1820-1913): Interpreter of the Faith
Exodus 7: 14-16; Luke 4:16-21
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Union Church of Cupertino, CA
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There is a strong Biblical presumption that God favors freedom; that no one is born to be enslaved, or to get stuck in a dead end, or to rot behind bars forever. There is a strong Biblical presumption that God wills freedom and that when that freedom is not present, God will work for deliverance.

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. God and Moses led them out.

The Lord, the God of Hebrews, sent me to you to say, "Let my people go..."
- Exodus 7:10

When Jesus was crucified his body was placed in a tomb and the tomb was sealed with a stone and guards were posted to ensure that no one could tamper with the body. Yet God set Christ free.

God wills deliverance.

There is a wonderful freedom story in the Apostle's Creed often recited in Christian Churches... Before we say "On the third day He rose again," we say "He descended to the dead." Knowing God's penchant for freedom I'm sure what Jesus was doing down there was opening the gates... setting free all those Satan thought were his forever.

There is a strong presumption in the Christian faith that God wills deliverance, even for those who have gone to Hell.

But, if the whole truth were told, what God wills is not always what we, the people, want.

Do you remember the stories connected with the exodus from Egypt? The Israelites, escaping, came up to the edge of the Red Sea. Before them was a vast expanse of waters. Behind them was an ever nearing cloud of dust indicating that Pharaoh and his armies were catching up. And they were sore afraid and in that moment fear seemed more important than freedom: "Moses are there no graves in Egypt, that you should bring us out into this desert to die? Let us go back to Egypt. Perhaps Pharaoh will let us live."

But God wills deliverance and Moses had been called to lead to freedom. The prophet struck the Red Sea waters with his staff and the waters parted.

On the other side food was scarce. The people soon became hungry. It did not take long for food to seem more important than freedom: "Yo, Moses! Was there a famine in Egypt that we had to come out here to starve? Let us go back to bondage. At least there was always enough food to eat."

But God wills deliverance and manna was delivered, daily, for forty years in the wilderness.

There is this tension: God wills freedom but we are not always ready or willing to accept the gift.

We are usually willing to be “fancy-free;” as if the gift were for frivolity.

We are usually glad when it’s “free-to-be-me;” as if narcissism has anything to do with God’s intent.

But freedom - when it comes with responsibility - often scares us; which is why I want to remember Harriet Tubman this morning. She was a modern day Moses for whom freedom was a personal passion matched only in her God.

Harriet Tubman was born Harriet Ross in eastern Maryland, 1820. She was a third generation slave. When she was 15 she intentionally stepped in the way of her overseer who was chasing after another slave. The overseer turned on Harriet and beat her on the head with the butt end of his riding crop. The two-pound lead weight fractured Harriet’s skull and she fell into a coma. It took her many months to recover and for the rest of her life she was susceptible to blackouts and wore a turban to hide the scar.

At 24 Harriet married a freed-slave by the name of John Tubman. She remained plantation property but was allowed to sleep at her husband’s cabin. Despite being married Harriet lived with the daily fear that she could be sold and transported deeper into the South. In 1849 when her owner died, the heir began to sell off all the properties. Two of Harriet’s sisters were sold to a chain gang master. Harriet decided to bolt. For some reason she could not trust her husband not to betray her so she told him nothing. She wanted to say good-bye to her parents but it was too dangerous to enter the slave compound at night. So, on the day she planned to be leaving, she walked through the compound on the way to her husband’s cabin singing:

When that old chariot comes, I’m goin’ to leave you.
I’m bound for the Promised Land, I’m goin’ to leave you.

Later, Ben, her father, said he had heard her and knew exactly what she was going to do.

That night Harriet set out. Altogether she walked, ran about 90 miles. At night she followed the rivers and avoided the roads. During the day she’s shelter with freed slaves and Quaker families and German farmers who had created a seaboard link of the Underground Railroad. Once you connected with the Underground Railroad you were passed on to the next place of safety. Finally Harriet stepped across the state line into Pennsylvania:

I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now
that I was free. There was a glory over everything. The sun
came up like gold through the trees and over the fields and
I felt like I was in heaven.

“Free at last! Thank God, I’m free at last!” Then what did Harriet do?

She went back. One year later Harriet Tubman was back in Maryland and this time she led out her sister and her sister’s two children. One year later still she returned to bring out a group of eleven including her brother and his family.

In the ten year period, 1850-1860, Harriet made 19 journeys back and forth across the Mason-Dixon line. She led more than 300 slaves to freedom.

One of Harriet’s more memorable journeys was in 1857 when she hired a wagon and brought out her elderly parents. Her mother insisted on “bringing her feather bed and a hencoop full of chickens.” (Samuel Hopkins Adams, *Grandfather Stories*, pg. 271). All that stuff probably gave them the look of legitimate travelers. Harriet settled her parents in Auburn, N.Y.

Slave owners set a reward for Harriet’s capture. In time that reward grew to \$40,000 but Harriet was never captured, never harmed. Once she was quoted as saying: “On the Underground Railroad I never run my train off the track, I never lose a passenger.” On an occasion when one of her charges grew so afraid that he wanted to turn back, Harriet drew a pistol and told him: “Keep on brother, keep on or die.” He kept on keeping on.

The Civil War put an end to Harriet’s freedom journeys but not to her sense of responsibility. She volunteered for service in the Union Army, first as a scout, then as a spy and finally, as a nurse.

After the war Harriet took up residence in Auburn, NY, and, with the help of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, established the Harriet Tubman Home of Indigent Aged Negroes where she, too, eventually became a resident, dying there on March 10, 1913 at the age of 93.

I haven’t said anything about Harriet’s work in developing schools for freed blacks in the South, or her passion for Women’s Suffrage, or her work for the AME Zion Church all over New York State, but you’ve got the point. For Harriet freedom was a life-long responsibility.

I haven’t said anything about Harriet’s inner faith. Illiterate, she had nevertheless heard the Bible read all her life and knew whole gulps of it by heart. The eighth verse of the 32’nd Psalm was her constant companion:

I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go;
I will guide thee with mine eyes...

When asked where she had found the courage to do what she did Harriet always answered, “It wasn’t courage. It was faith. I’d ask God to direct me and God never failed.”

Paul once said: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” (Galatians 5:1) Harriet Tubman knew that the quality of her freedom depended upon her dedication to setting others free. So too the freedom we enjoy. Will we go back to the places and conditions where we were not free? Go

back to be sure that there are not any other brothers or sisters still trapped there. God wills freedom but it will be our hands, our feet, our resolution, our courage that talks back to Pharaoh and all of his minions: "Let my people go."