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2-20-22
Living Stories: The Promise Land
Deuteronomy 27:1-3; Joshua 3:5, 14-17

This morning we complete the journey we have been on for the last few weeks – the journey that began with the courageous acts of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah and the birth story of Moses. A journey that took us through Moses' search for his identity and his call to be one to challenge Pharaoh; a journey that took us through Pharaoh's hardened heart, through plagues and through the dry lands of the Red Sea, parted so that Israelites might escape their Egyptian captors. Now after 40 years of wandering through the desert wilderness, the Israelites will cross into this promised land. We will hear first from Moses' final speech to Israelites before his death, and then from his successor Joshua who will lead the people into the Canaan, the promised land of milk and honey.

Deuteronomy 27:1-3

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: "Keep all these commands that I give you today. ²When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. ³Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

Joshua 3:5, 14-17

⁵ Then Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you."

¹⁴ When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. ¹⁵ Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶ the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

I still remember when I first learned of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. I was in fourth grade and my teacher Mrs. Economus had us learn Maryland geography and history by making a travel guide of the state. We had to plan a trip through the whole state, finding something of significance to visit in each county. Luckily there are only 23 counties in Maryland compared to the 83 counties in Michigan!

Harriet Tubman was born on the Brodas Plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland about 90 miles from where I grew up in Bowie, MD. Dorchester County is on the Chesapeake Bay and today is full of charming towns with a lot of antiques and quaint B & B's. But back when I was in elementary school about the only thing one could say about Dorchester County was that it was the home of Harriet Tubman.

As you can read in Marlene's music notes, Harriet Tubman was both a beneficiary of the Underground Railroad and a "conductor" on the railroad – one who led enslaved persons to freedom, including members of her own family. It is with both pride and humility that Tubman spoke of never losing a passenger and that her "train" never went off the tracks. Tubman was dubbed the "Black Moses."

As I did my scenic Maryland tour for that 4th grade class, I became fascinated by the stories of those who were enslaved escaping to freedom by hiding out in homes and schools and churches. I remember being intrigued by the places – the secret rooms, the hollowed out bales of hay, the hidden caves and swamp trees – and by the signs and symbols that were used to send coded messages. This aspect of the Underground Railroad is reflected in the first movement from the *Exodus Suite - Chronicles: "Passacaglia* we heard this morning. The Passacaglia reflects the 19 trips that Tubman was thought to have made and includes the music of three spirituals interwoven. As the Rev. Yolanda Smith relates in her book on the spirituals, "these songs were often used to aid in the escape by announcing secret meetings, identifying gathering places, signaling imminent escapes, and motivating the community for action."¹

The spirituals chosen for this Passacaglia have deep significance. Harriet Tubman used the song *Wade in the Water* to tell escaping slaves to get off the trail and into the water to make sure the dogs the slavecatchers used couldn't sniff out their trail. People walking through water did not leave a scent trail that dogs could follow.² The spiritual *Fare Ye Well*, also known as *In That Great Getting Up Morning*, is a call and response song. Through these communally sung songs, coded words and phrases could be added to reflect upcoming opportunities or warnings. Messages could be easily passed on from one group to another through the calls and responses. You also heard the chords of *Go Down Moses*, a song we sung a two weeks, the quintessential song of freedom – tell old Pharaoh let my people go. This song gave hope to those enslaved in America that the Lord God would remember them, just as the Lord remembered the enslaved in Egypt.

While the coded messages and hidden passageways and secret rooms captivated my 9-year old imagination, it is the communal nature of these journeys that stirs my heart today. We hear it in our scripture this morning and we hear in the anthem that follows this message from the *Exodus Suite* titled *Communion: Rite of Fellowship*, which speaks to shared experiences – the spiritual bonding that occurred through the hardships of the exodus journey – be it of the Israelites or those on the Underground Railroad.

In our passage from Deuteronomy we hear Moses and the elders telling the people how to commemorate their entrance into the Promised Land - the land the Lord God is giving them, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of their ancestors, promised them. Moses tells them to set up some large stones and coat them with plaster and write on them all the words of the law (that is the ten commandments). This command is directed at the community, not at the leaders. It is people who have shared the journey together – the hardships and losses and the triumphs and the joys who will ritualize this sacred moment.

¹ Yolanda Y. Smith. *Reclaiming the Spirituals*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004. p19

² *Pathways to Freedom: Maryland and the Underground Railroad. Secrets, Signs, & Symbols.*
<https://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/music2.cfm>

And when the people finally crossed the Jordan River over to Canaan, now led by Joshua after Moses' death, Joshua reminded the people to make themselves holy – to sanctify themselves – and they carried the ark containing the tablets given to Moses, across the river as they entered the Promised Land. Years of wandering and struggle, years of not knowing what would come next, years of sharing in their common life together – of births and deaths and glorious desert sunrises and sunsets that took their breath away, hugs and tears, hunger, thirst and the gift of sweet water and manna – the bread of life that sustained them. Sharon Willis, the composer of the Exodus Organ Suite shares that the *Communion: Rite of Fellowship* movement reflects the shared experiences of the Underground Railroad passengers as they endured the hardships of the journey and as they broke bread together. The two spirituals *Drinking of the Wine* and *Let Us Break Bread Together* capture the essence of this spiritual communion.

While the enslaved Americans seeking their freedom may not have wandered for 40 years, their journeys were nonetheless long and perilous. One of the joys of moving to a different part of the country is learning a new history. I am grateful to Shirley Rumminger for telling me about the importance of the underground railroad in Michigan. Having lived much of my life on the east coast, I didn't appreciate the reach of the railroad into the Great Lakes region. The underground railroad brought enslaved persons from southern Ohio and Kentucky up through Indiana and northern Ohio to enter Michigan. Some of the enslaved went onto Canada through Port Huron or Detroit. Some chose to stay in Michigan.³

I can't imagine the hardships faced as those seeking freedom traveled northward, usually at night, with only the clothes on their backs and shoes that certainly weren't designed for ice and snow. And when they reached freedom, they celebrated by rejoicing in gratitude. You will hear that jubilation in the Postlude Marlene will play this morning. It is based on the spiritual *I Got a Robe* – a song whose verses could be improvised and expanded as the Spirit moved. *I've got a robe, you've got a robe, All of God's children got a robe. When I get to heaven goin' to put on my robe, goin' to shout all over God's heaven, heaven, heaven.*⁴ Each verse proclaims the joy that not only do I now have a robe and shoes and wings and a crown and harp, but you do as well and all God's children do. All God's children are going to be singing and dancing and praying together in that promised land of freedom, a place we call heaven. All God's children – in community.

I have been thinking a lot about the power of community this week. Maybe it is watching the Olympics and hearing story after story about the families, friends, neighbors, teammates, coaches, and even strangers who have come together to support athletes' dreams of getting to the promised land of the Olympics. A highlight for me is watching teammates who are competing against each share hugs of joy for individual successes and share hugs and words of support after a fall – sharing the journey together.

One of the challenges churches across our country are facing is how we faithfully live our call to community after more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been numerous newspaper articles, blogs, and social media commentary about just what churches need to do. While the opinions are highly varied, they all share an emphasis on the value of being in community. Moses knew this. Joshua knew this. Jesus and Paul modeled it for us in

³ https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/mhc_mitten_underground-railroad_308417_7.pdf

⁴ Lyrics from Hymnary.org https://hymnary.org/text/ive_got_a_robe_youve_got_a_robe

the Last Supper and the founding of the early churches. Social support matters. Researchers in the field of social neuroscience have demonstrated over and over again just how much our brains need social interactions to not just thrive, but even to simply survive.

As I seek to navigate with you all the next chapter in our life together, I have been reading a lot about resilience – the trait that allows us to keep going and have hope amidst stress and trauma. Resilience was a trait so needed by the Israelites seeking the Promised Land after being freed from slavery in Egypt; a trait so needed by the enslaved Americans seeking freedom of a promised land through the Underground Railroad; and a trait we all need as we continue to navigate a world with the COVID-19 virus.

This week I read an example of the power of social support to build resilience. The authors, Drs. Steve Southwick and Dennis Charney, write about the Tap Code – an ingenious method of communication developed by US prisoners held during the Vietnam War in the Hanoi Hilton. After months of solitary confinement, Admiral Robert Shumaker was desperate for human contact. Every day he spent hours lying on the soggy floor, peering through a crack at the bottom of cell door, hoping and praying to see a fellow prisoner. Eventually Shumaker got three cellmates. They knew it would only be a matter of time before they were isolated. During that short time together they developed a method of communication based on taps on the wall – with each letter represented by a sequence of taps– a simplified Morse Code. The tap code was taught to each new prisoner and messages were passed from cell to cell. If someone was in solitary confinement without a common wall, they used a system of coughs, clearing the throats and hacks. They even developed a system using blinks. The POWs reported that this rudimentary ability to communicate with each other kept them alive and gave them hope because they knew they were not alone. Psychiatrists Southwick and Charney note that “We all benefit by knowing that someone cares about our welfare and will support us if we fall... Forming relationships may not be important when times are good, when we tend to take our family and friends for granted. However, close relationships build strength and help protect us during times of stress and danger. Far from signifying weakness, interdependence with others can provide a foundation for resilience.”⁵

Interdependence with others is not just a foundation of resilience, it is a foundation of our faith. The Underground Railroad was an interdependent network of strangers who each formed a link in the chain, all were necessary for the success of the march to freedom. We are called as a people to a life of interdependence; we are called to weave out individual threads in a beautiful tapestry of care for each other. We are called to mourn with each other and celebrate with each other, maybe even doing a dance for joy in the aisles during the Postlude! May it be so. Join me in prayer.

⁵ From: Steven M. Southwick & Dennis S. Charney. *Resilience. The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*. Cambridge University Press; 2012. pp 100-103.