

7.13.25 Sermon Transcript – Harriet Tubman

This morning, we just heard the scripture passage from Exodus 3 and the calling of Moses when he comes across the burning bush. We sang the song of the story of the Exodus, of God's liberation, of God's people in Egypt. In this chapter we hear God saying, "I have seen the misery of my people. I've heard them crying. Go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out." In the Scripture and in the song, we hear this call of liberation, and it's not this sort of abstract, spiritualized idea of liberation. It's about actual bodies, about actual chains, about actual empires. And in this moment, God is not neutral. In that moment, that God chooses sides, and he chooses the side of those who are experiencing oppression, enslavement, and injustice. God is a God of liberation.

Many, many centuries later, Harriet Tubman followed the same kind of call. She heard that same call that Moses had received, to "Go and to bring my people out of bondage." Harriet Tubman was known as the Moses of her people. Now, she wasn't born with the name Harriet Tubman. Her name at birth was Araminta Ross. She was born in Maryland around 1822. Her mother's name was Harriet. And later on, after she escaped to freedom and she married, she took the last name of her husband, Tubman, and took on the first name of her mother – that's how she went from being Araminta Ross to Harriet Tubman. But she was born into slavery and as a child, like most slaves, she endured brutal treatment, and she bore the scars of beatings. When she was a teenager, she had a traumatic head injury when an overseer was throwing something heavy towards another slave and hit Harriet in the head instead and it left her with lifelong neurological symptoms. She would have vivid visions and dreams. She suffered from narcolepsy after that point, and seizures.

It wasn't until she was 27 years old that she was finally able to make her escape, and she started out on that journey with her brothers. Her brothers eventually turned back, but Harriet went on alone. For over 90 miles, she traveled at night and through swamps and forest in order to cross over into Pennsylvania. And there were many points along that time when she was not sure if she was going to make it, especially once her brothers had turned back home and she was on this journey alone. But she said later when she crossed into free territory, "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. Now I was free. There was such a glory over everything. I felt like I was in heaven." So Harriet made her way to freedom – escaped her enslavement, but it didn't end with just her liberation, because Harriet heard the call, just like Moses did, "Go back and help free my people from their bondage." Over the course of about the next decade, Harriet made 13 missions. There are some accounts that say she made more than that, and that she freed hundreds of people. Really, she probably helped free around 70 enslaved people directly, but indirectly had an impact on many, many more people. She never lost a single person on any of those missions to help bring them into freedom.

Now, Harriet was the kind of person that you really didn't mess with. I mean, she was not some meek and mild person. She went on, even after working on the Underground Railroad, to become a nurse, a cook, a scout, a spy for the Union Army. She became, in

1863, the first woman to lead an armed military operation in the United States. She risked her life. She risked her very self in order to heed the call that God had given to Moses and that God had given to her to “Go and set my people free.” Now, as I said before we sang that first hymn, “Go Down Moses” was one of the songs that she would use to help communicate with those who were seeking to escape slavery. It's not a coincidence that the songs of liberation of God's people in the Exodus were the songs that were also used to communicate hope and possibility for those who were seeking to be freed from their literal bondage. Harriet kept returning again and again. She kept going back through the forest, through the swamp, through danger, to lead others to freedom. And ultimately, this was rooted in her faith in a God of liberation. The same God who had led her, who had called her, was now calling her to lead others in the same way. She put her trust in the God of liberation.

She was also a clever person, and there were many moments along the way as she was helping to guide people to freedom where there was danger. There's one story about how one time as she was escorting people through a town, Harriet spotted a former master, or maybe it was an overseer nearby. And so in order to avoid detection, she grabbed a live chicken and tucked it under her arm and let it flap wildly to create a diversion. When the man looked her way, she could act like she was just a distracted and flustered vendor, and her disguise worked. She wasn't recognized. She used whatever she had available, whatever resources, whatever wit she had in front of her in order to help get her and her people through. She had a level of ingenuity to her, of creativity in seeking liberation.

Harriet Tubman's faith and her courage were born of this deep spiritual conviction of who God was and who God's children were. She believed that God had chosen her for this work and she trusted in God's divine guidance through all of it. She was a deeply Christian woman in all of her actions, and she lived this theology of liberation in her daily life. Her life said what Moses's life said. God hears the cry of the oppressed. The Exodus story is a central, perhaps the central defining narrative, of the people of Israel as they're coming to learn what it means to be the covenant people of God. Their identity is rooted in a God of liberation. They, themselves, are a people who are meant to experience liberation, but even more than that, they are a people meant to help pave the way to liberation for others. Harriet understood that at her core. and she lived it out at her core.

When we look at the life of Harriet, I think we are all reminded that God calls each of us to practice liberation, to look at the world around us and to identify those who are being held in bondage, and like Harriet, to heed the call when God says, “Go to Pharaoh and lead my people out. Go to Pharaoh and say, ‘let my people go.’” Today, we face all kinds of Pharaohs, of those things or those people who represent systems of power. and oppression. So often in our own country, it's cloaked in patriotism and piety. Yesterday downstairs in the dining room, we had an all-day workshop called Disrupting Empire: Resisting Christian Nationalism Through Nonviolence. And during that time, we thought about the questions, how did we get to this place where we are today, where so many different people groups are being harmed, are being oppressed, and how do we as people

of faith respond to that call? What are practical ways that we can do that? Ultimately, that call is rooted in this call that God gave to Moses and that God gave to Harriet, to go to the Pharaohs and demand, "Let my people go," and to be people willing to walk the road of liberation and help others to walk the road to liberation. Now, that is dangerous. For Harriet, this was incredibly dangerous work. Every time she went back, she was under the threat of being recaptured, re-enslaved, killed. This work was a threat on her very life and existence. If she had wanted to, she could have just stayed in the north without ever having to fear being retaken into captivity, into slavery. She could have had years of safety and freedom without ever having to risk herself again. And for one that might even be enough, but for Harriet, it was not enough. She knew that she could not truly experience freedom if her people, if her family, if her friends, if her community, were still in bondage.

If Harriet Tubman were here standing with us today we know that she would not be standing with the Pharaohs of our society. She would be standing with the oppressed. She'd be organizing, she'd be praying, she'd be resisting. She'd be asking us, "Who do you serve? Do you serve Pharaoh or do you serve our liberator God?" And so I think there's several things that we can learn from Harriet Tubman today. I think the first thing that we can learn from her is that liberation is God's work, but it is also our work. She didn't wait for permission. She knew that God's justice couldn't wait, and so she kept going back. We need to know that we can't wait either. We learn from her that courage is not the absence of fear. I am sure that she was afraid every time she went back, every time she was on that road. But courage is not the absence of fear, but the presence of faith. She faced danger every time, but she once said, "I always told God, I'm going to hold steady on you and you've got to see me through." She trusted that in this work, God would indeed see her through. Three, I think Harriet Tubman reminds us that faith in a liberator God resists empire, resists Pharaoh and does not serve it. Harriet's faith was not in a nation, but it was in a God who breaks open chains. She reminds us that we must reject any version of Christianity that props up injustice or claims God for the purposes of empire. And finally, I think she reminds us that freedom is collective. It's not just personal. She didn't rest when she was free. She returned for others because she knew that justice would not truly be realized until all are free. My well-being is bound up in your well-being. My flourishing is tied up in your flourishing. She knew this truth.

And so today, as we've heard this story and we're reminded of Harriet Tubman and her work, we can still hear God saying, "I've seen the misery of my people." And God is still calling us here today, "Go. Go now." And God walks with us through history, through scripture, through the Spirit. He walked with Harriet. He walks with us. Today, I invite us to hear the voice of the liberator God. I invite us to say yes to the call that comes forth from the burning bush. Let us confront the Pharaohs of today and proclaim with courage and clarity on behalf of all who are oppressed, all who are marginalized, all who are cast aside, all who are suffering, "Let my people go." May we have the courage. May we have the faith. May we have the compassion at hearts, willing to face whatever we may, in the name of the liberator God. Amen.