

Feb. 10, 2019
Exodus 14:19-31; 15:20-21
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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From Bondage to Freedom

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

I belong to a group called the Clergy Letter Project which designates this to be Evolution Weekend, since it is close to the birthday of Charles Darwin. This group encourages the dialogue between science and religion.

In our Moses series, today brings us to the Exodus, the story of the parting of the sea – a story which invites us into scientific and theological pondering at the deepest levels.

Some of us grew up in the bondage of being told we had to accept the historicity of everything we read in scripture. And we had to believe it in the particular way our pastor or congregation understood it. For many people that meant affirming, as literal fact, Cecile B. DeMille's rendition of the parting of the sea, as depicted in his 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*. He did have a flair for the dramatic.

However, his is just one artistic interpretation of the story. In Hebrew the sea is known as the Sea of Reeds. Rather than the Red Sea itself, it was most likely a shallow body of water farther north.

As people who live near the sea, we can imagine a strong wind and a very low tide making a pathway over land that is usually covered with water.

Those on foot can pass through, but those in carriages get mired in the muck and are overwhelmed by the rapidly returning waters.

However you imagine the passing through the waters, the Hebrews proclaimed that God was at work liberating them from slavery.

Free at last! Free at last!

Thank God almighty we're free at last!

SERMON

In seminary, my Old Testament professor told us that the poetic couplet we heard at the end of today's reading may be the oldest piece of scripture. It is the song of the prophet Miriam, Moses' sister. With tambourine and dance, she cries,

Sing to the Lord,

who has triumphed gloriously!

At its foundation the biblical witness is that God is a God of justice and freedom.

Pharaoh's economic success was built on the backs of slave labor. He didn't want to suffer the economic distress that freeing the Hebrews would bring about. Trying to hold on to his property he chased them down as they fled to freedom. It didn't turn out so well for him.

The early economic success of our country was built on the backs of slave labor. Even though our constitution speaks of establishing justice and securing the blessings of liberty, it was not for all people. Slaves were each counted as 3/5 of a person.

As our country was formed people in power did not want to face the economic distress that freeing the slaves would entail. So, they perpetuated and deepened scientific and theological arguments to justify the racism that they declared was legal and was endemic to the fabric of our nation.

Racial disparities are so much the water in which we swim that we find it hard to even notice them, especially if we are the people benefiting from those disparities. I'm grateful to those of you who responded to Jane Abernethy's invitation to participate in the *21-day Racial Equity Habit-Building Challenge*. I hope you will have a chance to hear some reflections from you when you have completed the challenge.

Issues of racism have been brought to consciousness this week through the political turmoil in Virginia as we have learned that two of the top three officials in the state have participated in black-face parodies in the past.

Whether or not they perceived their behavior as racist at the time, they were swimming in the waters of racism. They were, at least, part of systemic racism - the way a society is structured to give preference and benefit to the dominant cultural group at the expense of another.

A few years ago, in conjunction with two other churches in town and Bowdoin College people read and discussed Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*, which explores issues of mass incarceration of black men in America. She describes how our laws have been structured to especially imprison those in the black community.

That issue became very personal in our midst four weeks ago when Jason Pearson, - from Memphis, Tennessee - was our guest preacher. He stayed after worship for a conversation with those who chose to stay.

At the end of the conversation, I asked him, *What would you like us to know about life in Memphis?* He paused. His shoulders began to hunch, ever so slightly. It was clear that the question was heavy and painful. His response was honest and vulnerable. He told us that as a young man he had spent time in prison. He spoke of the terrible burden that such a record places on himself, his family and so many other people with similar experiences in his community.

In the 1980s during the crack cocaine epidemic in black communities, Congress responded with laws criminalizing people's addictions. In 2000, about 80% of crack cocaine users were black. Today about 80% of the people who die of opioid overdose are white. This time the legislative response is to treat the issue as a public health issue and develop treatment responses, which is what should have been happening all along for everyone.

Racism is such a deeply ingrained reality in our history and our present-day society that we find it hard to talk about. We're not sure what to say. We're not sure what to say to our children.

In the most recent issue of *Christian Century* there is an article *Teaching Children about Racism*, written by a woman (Cindy Wang Brandt) who lives in Taiwan. She begins with the provocative question, *Can children be racists?* as she recounts observing a four-year-old shouting racial slurs and taunts on the playground.

She suggests that because racism is based on racial hierarchy, one way to explain it simply to children is that society isn't fair.

From the first time you see your child narrow his eyes and furrow his brow in reaction to his sister getting the larger piece of cake, your child is ready to address racial inequality.

Earlier I wondered if the four-year-old on the playground shouting racial slurs is racist. The answer is complex. What we know is that a four-year-old is at a critical formation period of learning and development. This is a time for parents and those in the community to begin gently correcting a child's language.

The goal is not to achieve respectability, to awkwardly brush a comment aside with, "Don't say that. That's not nice." The aim, rather, is to teach the child that such language is based on an unjust racial hierarchy. "We don't say this word because this is what people have said in order to treat people unfairly." Get straight to the heart of the issues – that the injustice of

racism harms human bodies in real and oppressive ways.
(Pg. 28-29, Feb. 13, 2019)

We in the United States continue to find ourselves in bondage to the racial disparity of our past and our present. We will not overcome this alone. We will not simply legislate our deliverance. We need a transformation of spirit and heart. We need eyes to see and ears to hear to call of our God to let all people be free.

May God deliver us through the waters of injustice to the land of freedom, so that we too might proclaim,

Sing to the Lord,
Who has triumphed gloriously!