

# **“Courage and Truth”**

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Exodus 3:7-8

In these verses from the famous story of Moses and the burning bush, God hears the cries of the enslaved Hebrew people in Egypt, longing for freedom. Despite Moses pleading that he was not qualified to lead God’s people out of bondage, God instructs him to go and confront Pharaoh and demand their freedom. After each of the subsequent plagues and signs, Moses would return to their oppressor and again demand that he let the people go.

Harriet Tubman was born a slave in Maryland in 1820. She never learned to read or to write. When she was about 12 years old, she reportedly refused to help an overseer punish another enslaved person, and she suffered a severe head injury when he threw an iron weight that struck her; she subsequently suffered seizures throughout her life. For the remainder of her life, she had dreams and visions about leading enslaved African Americans to freedom.

In 1844, she married her husband, and then in 1849, on the strength of rumors that she was about to be sold, fled to Philadelphia through the Underground Railroad – organized by a group of free blacks, and white Christian abolitionists who helped slaves escape to the north. She left behind her husband (who refused to leave), parents, and siblings.

In 1850, as the nation continued to debate a national response to the slavery issue in the years leading up to the Civil War, Congress passed the second Fugitive Slave Act. Thus, with the signature of a pen, she went from a free woman to a wanted woman.

In December of 1850, Tubman courageously made her way to Baltimore, Maryland and led a niece and her niece’s two children to freedom. That journey was the first of at least 13 increasingly dangerous forays into Maryland during which, over the next 8 years, Harriet led more than 70 enslaved people along the Underground Railroad to Canada.

The railroad’s most famous conductor, Tubman became known as the “Moses of her people.” Symbolically, the north became considered the Promised Land. From 1851 to 1857, she lived in Canada, but made her way back to the south, using secret codes and paths to bring more people to safety. It has been said that she never lost a fugitive she was leading to freedom.

About 1858, she bought a small farm near Auburn, New York where she brought her aging parents and lived herself. That same year, she assisted abolitionist John Brown in a raid on Harper's Ferry. From 1862 to 1865 she served as a scout, as well as nurse and laundress, for Union forces in South Carolina during the Civil War, leading an armed expedition to free more than 700 slaves. Tubman said she could have freed more if they knew they were slaves.

Following the Civil War, Tubman returned to Auburn, working with Susan B. Anthony to support the Woman's Suffrage Movement. She took in orphans and older adults, a practice that eventuated in the Harriet Tubman home for Aged and Indigent Negroes. Tubman was a patient of the home from 1911, staying in a building known as John Brown Hall, until her death in 1913, at the age of 92. She was buried with military honors.

As I mentioned last Sunday, I grew up in Kentucky; a state that, like Maryland, played a conflicted role in the history of slavery in the years leading up to and during the Civil War. The Underground Railroad ran through communities there: a childhood friend of mine even lived in a home with tunnels leading from the basement to an outbuilding and one of the churches where I worked still has trap doors in the parlor to a cellar that hid runaways.

Like many others in her time, Harriet Tubman boldly risked her personal safety and legal consequences in her many trips back to the south to help lead others to reach the Promised Land. Despite family disruption, changing laws, and an increasingly violent backlash, "the Moses of her people" continued to take trip after trip on the Underground Railroad, never forgetting the dreams in which God spoke to her, urging her to lead more slaves to freedom.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Exodus story continues to be a central narrative for those who live in bondage. No matter the source of oppression, human or civil rights abuse, addiction, physical or mental affliction, we believe that God's people are meant to find and enjoy freedom; and that as long as anyone is in chains, no one is truly free.

And so, we continue to find inspiration in the stories of individuals like Harriet Tubman who – while they, themselves, may gain freedom from bondage – will not rest until everyone makes their way to the Promised Land. The legacy of the Underground Railroad is one of community organizing: creating a network of conspirators against injustice; an active plea to subvert policies and social systems that keep people chained in Egypt.

In the Exodus story, we are reminded that God's people – after entering the wilderness – sometimes looked back with longing to what was left behind in the place of bondage that they had escaped. It was familiar, while what lay ahead for them was uncertain. This may be why God continued to remind them what they were heading towards: a good and broad land, one flowing with milk and honey; a place that was already inhabited by other peoples, where there they had built homes and planted vineyards and established communities.

So, when Tubman laments that she could have brought more of her people to freedom if they had known they were slaves, I believe she was speaking to the fears that all of us have about the unknown which lies ahead. We live in a rapidly changing world: a nation, for example, that in the coming decades will become majority non-white; an economy which is being transformed by automation and artificial intelligence and de-stabilized by trade wars; a climate that grows more volatile and dangerous, a health system that is, for many people, nearly impossible to navigate or afford; a society which is failing embrace or accept difference in identity.

Where are all these changes leading? Mostly, we cannot know. But our faith traditions teach us that no matter the uncertainty that lies ahead, God hears the cries of those who are in bondage and will remain with us through the wilderness passage. In the meantime, like those conductors and helpers along the Underground Railroad, we are called to be co-conspirators on the pathway to freedom. We are meant to speak out against injustice in any of its forms, to stand up for anyone being held under the thumb of oppression, to reach into the margins and hidden corners of our communities to help lead others into that good and broad land that we believe lies ahead for any and all of God's children.

Granted, we may not support some of the policies or like some of the decision-makers who are implementing them. When, after less than a year of freedom, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made Harriet Tubman an outlaw, she – as we say about other women who have advocated for justice – persisted. The dreams – which were the result of physical trauma she endures, that she interpreted to be God speaking to her – prompted her to continue to go back, again and again, to bring about the divine plan of freedom for all.

Not everyone, of course, is called to be a Moses. But, as God's people, we can draw upon the same strength of persistence in our own personal and collective pursuits of peace, freedom, and justice. For you, that might mean keeping plastics out of the landfill, or contacting elected officials, or volunteering at a community

agency, or helping out a neighbor. It may come in the form of prayers or protests, financial gifts or vocational choices.

And it may, at least in part, be through your participation in a church community. There is, as the former Surgeon General calls it, a loneliness epidemic in our nation. One reason for this is the lack of what is known as “third spaces” in our current society – those places where people gather to find safety and build relationships in our communities. As Harriet Tubman devoted the later years of her life to establishing a home for infirmed and indigent former slaves, we, in our congregations, can create places where people can have all different kinds of needs met. Instead of more churches closing, we welcome and connect, encourage and support people to escape the bondage of isolation with messages and acts of hope.

As we are learning in this summer sermon series, Holy Disruptors appear in different varieties. Some are privileged, powerful, and learned. Others come from humble and ordinary beginnings. Some experience dramatic visions and personal transformations, others work quietly and diligently behind the scenes to express their faith and impact on the world around them.

In all ages and places, God hears the cries of the oppressed and enables God’s people to join into the mission of justice and freedom. Even in the wilderness and chaos of a broken world, there is a Promised Land that lies ahead. Thanks be to God. Amen.