

Out of Egypt

sermon digest

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Exodus 3:7-12

carolyn dipboye

Lois Vandagriff recently introduced me to a story about the Underground Railroad. Often spoken of as “the Quilt Code,” the story speaks of seamstresses in America’s slave communities making quilts to pass on messages to slaves on the road to freedom. Utilizing scraps of fabric left over from quilts they had fashioned for their owners, the seamstresses used different patterns to communicate instructions to fugitive slaves. A quilt utilizing the wrench pattern, for example, may have been stretched out on a line or placed on a porch railing to say “gather your tools and get ready to go.” The wagon wheel pattern may have warned that the long journey was now at hand. And the bear’s paw pattern may have directed slaves to head north over the Appalachian Mountains, where they would follow the literal footprints of the bear because, in the words of Howard University art historian Raymond Dobard, “Bears always go to water and berries and other natural food sources.”

As often happens with the introduction of new historical interpretations, there are some naysayers who would discount the whole idea even as others embrace it. Teachers have found it helpful in introducing children to the whole concept of the Underground Railroad and draw on it to strike a spark of imagination, creativity, and hands-on participation as they lead their classes to recreate the patterns and think about what they mean.

For those familiar with something of the history and culture of African American slaves, the story of secret messaging in quilts rings a familiar note, for considerable evidence indicates similar messaging in African American spirituals. Sung during the days of slavery and later in Jim Crow America and the Civil Rights Movement, a number of the spirituals have been characterized as “signal” or “mask songs,” which managed to fly under the radar of the dominant white population even as they gave voice to protest and anticipated liberation. Rather than bowing to the status quo, they reflect the slaves’ deep feelings of pain and loss of family and home—“Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” Many of them speak of Jesus’ pain and identify the slaves in their pain as walking in a special companionship with Jesus—“Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley” and “He Never Said a Mumbalin’ Word.” They contained words of deep longing and hope for a better day, which, expressed in terms of biblical imagery and expectation, escaped the notice of their masters. “Steal Away” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” may sound innocent enough and may be discounted as a far removed, nonthreatening hope for the sweet by and by but they definitely sustained the anticipation and may have even signaled a plan that a break for freedom was imminent.

Add to this the sense of accountability that some of the spirituals reflect. Seen through the eyes of the gospel, the plantation master himself had a Master, and that Master was going to render an accounting: “I Got a Home in-a Dat Rock” pictures poor Lazarus basking in the glow of heaven while the Rich Man suffers torment in the fires of hell. “I Got Shoes” celebrates the hope of having shoes in heaven and announces with no small amount of jubilation that one day the restrictions associated with skin color and social station are going to be shed, and “I’m gonna walk *all over* God’s heaven”—certainly good news for Jim Crow America. The spiritual goes on, ominously warning not once, not twice but four times, “Everybody talkin’ bout heaven ain’t goin’ there.” Now, I ask you, to whom could those words of warning possibly be making reference? Who talked a good spiritual game even as they kept a kidnaped people in bondage?

The words of the spirituals and the symbolism of the Quilt Code give expression to the resilience of the human spirit and its anticipation of a free and just day that, despite the bitter circumstances of the current day, refuses to die. The words of the spirituals in particular shine their light on the reality of Africans uprooted from their home and culture and centuries of tragedy and discrimination that followed. The spirituals also do something more. They speak to the very nature of Jewish and Christian identity. Just as we affirm that the story of Jesus is central to the Christian faith, the story of God’s deliverance of the people from Egypt is what Walter Brueggemann calls “the core narrative” of the Jewish faith. The story of freedom’s journey from captivity into promise, it gives answer to the critical question for Jews and thus for us: “Who are you?” To which the answer: We are the people God delivered out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

The story of delivery out of Egypt speaks volumes about who God is. We are intrigued with the story and have been since we first heard it as children. God, appropriately, is at the center of the story;

and we do well to keep that in mind as we encounter the story again and again. That realization, however, should not blind us to the role of human beings, particularly the role human beings played in bringing the abysmal and ruthless situation in Israel to bear.

You may remember him for his coat of many colors and the mistreatment he received at the hands of his brothers. I did, too, until I re-read this week his role in orchestrating immense suffering among his own people and among the broader Egyptian populace as well. Egypt, the breadbasket of seemingly the entire world, luxuriated in a world of plenty. It was ruled, however, by a Pharaoh who had nightmares—nightmares which, helpfully, a Jew named Joseph interpreted for him. Frightened at the prospect of famine, Pharaoh then tapped Joseph to be “food czar.” With relish, Joseph jumped into his new role with all four feet. He formulated policies which first stripped the populace of its money and then its livelihood (its livestock) and then its freedom. He bought up all the land, making it Pharaoh’s, and he enslaved the people “from one end of Egypt to the other” [Genesis 47:21].

Fast forward to the opening of the second book of Torah, the book of Exodus. Landless, enslaved in an economic system where Pharaoh held all the cards, the people staggered under an oppressive system that left the great bulk of the population in want. Their workload was ruthless. Their lives, deemed worthless. They cried out in their misery, not in prayer to God per se, but just in expression of their despair. And God, being who Israel came to know God to be, heard and delivered them. [Read Exodus 3:7-12]. Years of wilderness wandering followed, years when they survived by God’s provision alone, years in which they became a community compelled to live in grace and by grace.

The story of delivery out of Egypt speaks volumes to and about us. Taken as a whole, the story is a story of arrogance and grace. Formulated in the aftermath of a human arrogance borne of anxiety and fear, it depicts the devastation that accompanies a hand-to-mouth ethic that places self above community. Consumed with hoarding and building bigger and bigger barns for itself, it ignores any sense of responsibility in constructing policies or delivering relief to meet the plight of its neighbor. When grace enters the picture, however, the story takes a dramatic turn. In the presence of a God who hears the cry of the neighbor, a human agent (in the story, Moses) is tapped to lead the people toward promise. All this on the basis of two sustaining promises: I will go with you, and you will worship me again on this mountain.

Such grace, such deliverance as that encountered in the Exodus, revokes a response. It details a freedom journey that will mark the beginning of freedom journeys for the people Israel and for the Christian church as well. “Remember, remember,” the people of Israel are reminded again and again. “Remember who you are. As the people God delivered out of bondage, out of the house of Egypt, you shall live in faithfulness both to your God and in respect and justice for your neighbor.” Israel’s very identity as a people originates in the heartbreaking experience of slavery, the long and arduous walk through the wilderness, and centuries of being subjugated by oppressive regimes of bitter domination. The Christian celebration of the grace of God in Christ looks back to the hope that kept Israel before us and recognizing itself in the story, knows itself as a people also gifted and called to be agents of a God who liberates those who suffer. In this, Passover and Eucharist bear not only extensive similarities; they also engage in a very similar commissioning.

We live, Passover and the Eucharist say to us, in the presence of a God of gracious abundance—abundance that reaches out to free us to become agents of grace in the midst of the world and community in which we live. “Those,” Walter Brueggemann tells us, who sign on “depart the system of anxious scarcity become the historymakers in the neighborhood.

These are the ones not exhausted by Sabbath-less production who have enough energy to dream and hope. From dreams and hopes come such neighborly miracles as good health care, good schools, good housing, good care for the earth, and disarmament.”

—Walter Brueggeman, *Journey to the Common Good*, 35

Remembering who God is and who we are, dare we not sign on? Dare we not live from the experience of God’s gracious, delivering love? Dare we not act as if there is indeed enough to go around?