

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on the Institution of the Egyptian Passover

Last Sunday, in our meditation on God's call to Moses to liberate his people, we began with a story of two White Presbyterian clergymen in the autumn of 1845 embroiled in debate over the sinfulness of slavery.

Imagine, then, in the exact same pre-Civil War period, the prophetic witness of a third Presbyterian pastor serving God and the church from the perspective of one who has fled that same slavery.

With righteous disgust toward the debate sweeping through White Presbyterianism, the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, Pastor of the historically Black Liberty Street Presbyterian Church in Troy, New York, delivers a call to repentance at the National Negro Convention in Buffalo.

This is not a call for the slave-owners to change their way of life. That part is emphatically assumed. Garnet's call is, instead, for the enslaved, themselves, to change.

"It is sinful in the extreme" Garnet contends in his speech, for slaves to continue to submit to their masters. His siblings in chains are morally obligated, Garnet argues, by the God of the Bible, to "use every means ... moral, intellectual, and physical," to resist and then overthrow the institution of slavery.

Just like Moses.

Using the book of Exodus as a guide, Garnet urges those who remain enslaved to go to their masters and demand the right to be free. Like Moses does with Pharaoh.

Use logic, Garnet says. Be reasonable, he affirms. Appeal to your masters' own love of freedom, in a nation founded on the notion of freedom. Appeal to your masters' shared Christian faith. Appeal to Moses. Appeal to Exodus.

And then, Garnet says, no matter how your masters respond, stop working unless they pay you. Not as a revolt. But as a matter of moral integrity.

As sensible as this sounds to modern ears, Garnet is not naive. Two hundred twenty seven years have passed, Garnet admits, since "the first of our injured race were brought to the shores of America." Slaveowners – who call themselves Christians! – have had ample opportunity to set the captive free. They have failed.

Therefore, the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet concludes, if, in the face of your reasonable request for freedom and your moral cessation of labor until freedom comes, if after all that, he says, "the heartless tyrants" who enslave you, "then commence the work of death ... they, not you, will be responsible for the consequences."

They, not you, will be responsible for the consequences.

Even if – especially if – those consequences turn out violent.

These words haunt us friends. Not just because they ring far too true for our racial reckoning today, with images of those consequences on the front page of today's Washington Post. These words also haunt us because your pastor served a parish in Troy, New York not that long ago.

It just so happens that through a series of closing and merging Presbyterian communities these past 170 years, many of the descendants of Rev. Garnet's flock ended up in MY congregation. I consider Henry Highland Garnet to be a predecessor in ministry. Just as much as Moses Hoge or Randy Tremba or Patricia Donahoe.

Which means that all of us today, with me as your pastor, are bound together in Christ with those descendants. Their faces are our now faces. Their stories are now our stories. Their ache of anger over overt and subtle racism affecting every part of their lives must now become our ache.

The ache of the granddaughter of a sweet 80 year old matriarch, for example. Worried about her nana's well-being. Who called the police to check in on her. The first words out of the matriarch's mouth when the police arrived were a very gentle, grandmotherly, honestly concerned, "Please, Don't shoot me."

The ache of yet another police shooting of yet another unarmed African American man in a neighborhood intentionally abandoned by the city's desire for "development." Where yours truly rushed to the scene with two other White clergy colleagues with the desire to "calm tensions in the community" before they turned into riots.

At the time, we thought this is what a good pastor does; what a good "integrated" congregation does: Stand, in the name of Christ, with the Black youth of the neighborhood. In the tradition of Moses. With the God of Liberation. Share their righteous rage in an effort to keep them from rioting. Put our White bodies in their midst to keep the police from escalating against them.

At the time, we thought this is what a good pastor does; what a good "integrated" congregation does. It may yet be.

But the truth is, today, in hearing our predecessor's words to the National Negro Convention in Buffalo and witnessing the aftermath of George Floyd's murder this summer, we are compelled to wonder if the well-meaning efforts to "calm tensions," if the calls for "peaceful protests," really are in keeping with God's work of liberation in the world. At least in the biblical sense.

Henry Highland Garnet, who reads the story of the Exodus as a fellow slave fleeing to freedom, understands, in a way many of us cannot, that one Pharaoh's genocide toward the first-born children of the Israelites will boomerang on Egyptian generations to come. He understands, in a way many of us cannot, that sometimes – too many times – Pharaonic power loosens its grip only when it is forced to hear the cries of Egyptian mothers screaming over the loss of their own beloved children.

Jesus, who is no stranger to Pharaonic forces of evil, says it far better than I: if we live by the sword, we will die by the sword. If we live by systemic racism, we will die by revolt against that racism.

We cannot pretend Pharaonic violence is "out there." It is everywhere. Including "in here." And it kills.

There is one thing, though, we can understand today about the biblical Exodus that Henry Highland Garnet could not. For the simple fact that the tools of modern biblical scholarship were not yet available.

We know today, through modern biblical scholarship, that these particular words of Exodus 12 are not, in fact, historical. They are more like a docudrama. Produced centuries after the fact. With words of violence and ritual legislation placed in God's mouth by much later theologians.

Today we can argue, with solid scholarship to back us up, and a fervent heart-felt prayer we are right, that *God* is not the one who is so violent in this story. We are.

The point of the story of Exodus, in light of modern biblical scholarship, we fervently pray, is this: God sides with the politically powerless. Poverty and oppression are not the last word. God *is still at work* on behalf of a different future: the Beloved Community, the Peaceable Kingdom, the Great Shalom Jesus came to proclaim.

The question for us is how badly we want to be part of that future. How badly do we want to sit at the table of Jesus, who has experienced and overcome his own form of Pharaonic violence? How badly do we want to taste the heavenly banquet Jesus has prepared, where all has been healed and all has been forgiven and all has been made well? Are we willing to do the work of getting ready for that table?

The good news, dear friends, is that the table of Promise and Plenty is still waiting! With Henry Highland Garnet and Moses Hoge and a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on. And we really can be part of it. If we want it badly enough.

Come.

Let us keep the feast.

Amen.

Note: The full text of Henry Highland Garnet's speech to the National Negro Convention, 1843, Buffalo, NY is available at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2937t.html>