

*Based on Exodus 1:22-2:10. Youth Mission Trip Reflections*

Christa Joyce, Director of Children and Youth Programs:

Imagine this story: a person whose lineage has long had significant power over his community, someone with both money and prestige, suddenly fears their power is threatened. If they don't get rid of the threat, they'll lose everything that matters. Or so they believe. They'll lose everything they've come to accept is rightfully theirs. Part of their belief system is the story that they are the direct line to god. So filled with fear and these long-standing beliefs, this person decides to kill off the root of their fear. Because if they can eradicate the problem, there's no more issue, no ill-deserved loss of power or resources. Or so they believe.

So now imagine this—another person, part of this story, but armed with love and a vision toward hope, who refuses to succumb to fear. Imagine this person igniting the vision of another possibility for their self and for the small, but essential, cache of people around them. Can you imagine it?

In the story we just heard of how Moses is saved, we are told of a group of people who are largely powerless. They are told their lives are of no value. Moses' mother considers this and says, "Yes, I hear you tell me I'm powerless. And I love this baby boy, so I must see something more." In this moment, she claims a little power.

And because she risks seeing his worth and her own, her daughter says, "Yes, And, I believe he is worth more than death. I, too, will step into this risk." And because she sees their worth, she, too, claims a little power.

And because of this, the Pharaoh's daughter looks upon a situation and instead of replying, "YES, BUT, there are rules and there's no hope outside the power of those rules," she says, "Yes, AND, I, too, see another possibility."

And so it is that a baby is saved, and that a nation is saved, and that a land is renewed.

Friends, this story isn't locked in time. Good and important stories never are.

So, I'll tell you one more story. The first time, SPC youth visited Glenwood Life Center we met a woman named Precious. The Glenwood Life Center is a methadone clinic housed in an area of Baltimore, MD, that has long been living with the effects of having been Red-lined. It's a geography and a people who've been told they have no worth—it didn't warrant funds or fresh food or life.

Precious was a recovering addict, who was working toward being a peer counselor by the time we met her, and who eventually became an administrator for The Glenwood Life Center. One day, she sat looking at a field across from the center and saw what the story had cost it and what it had cost her neighbors surrounding the center. The earth here and the people had come to believe the story, this lie. But Precious saw something else.

She said YES, this space is filled with some awful trash, yes many of us are living a half-life with drugs for comfort, yes there are no proper grocery stores with fresh food close by, yes, I hear the gun shots and the cries of babies left to die on the streets. AND, I see a space where something more might grow. So, she said, I'll plant a marigold, and if it grows, maybe I'll try a garden.

And because she took a risk and said, Yes, And, the community around said Yes, and I see it too. Because they did, this land and these people have begun to see that they are worth life, that renewal is possible, that sustenance for the body, mind, and soul is essential—and that they're worth it. Because of a risk that started with one person seeing a possibility that might have seemed quite small, a whole new story is being written into the fabric of this land, this community, these people.

Stories are essential—they tell us where we've been, who we are, and what we hold. And they can be rewritten at any time.

Each of the youth who attended this year's Missions trip were carried on the story lineage of the work of the youth from years past; by the story of all those who've worked and loved on these Baltimore spaces. Lifted by this lineage, each of them took a risk. They saw these risks, AND they decided to live in possibility. And because they did, I witnessed as God arranged the hearts of these youths around one another, created of them a container filled with laughter, joy, and excitement for the job before them—the job of witnessing how God is already and always at work in the world and taking the risk to be part of that labor. They became part of Precious' story and her vision for a nourished land and people; part also of an AME church's story where a community came together to restore a cemetery and honor the lineage of the enslaved people buried there. I witnessed vulnerability and love from the youth and adults in attendance. I witnessed and felt nourishment for body, soul, and mind. And I witnessed the way God—creator of all paths of love, bearer of seed and fully grown plant, holder of decay as it returns to the earth—is at work in so many ways. I witnessed possibility coming to life.

So, as you listen now to some of their stories, in the words of Pastor Gusti, may you hear a word of hope. And of the vision toward possibility.

Eli Dillow, Youth:

On the second night of our mission trip, after a day of hard work, we sat in a circle talking and reflecting on the day. Part of that reflection was reading a story from the Bible in the beginning of Exodus. In this story the king of Egypt had declared war on all the Israelites. He had enslaved them and had ordered their newborn sons to be drowned in the Nile. Wild right? But reflecting on that story I realized it wasn't too different from what I had learned about and experienced earlier that day.

We had visited Glenwood Life Recovery Center in the morning to help weed the garden. Of course, while we were there, we talked about why there was a recovery center here. We learned about the drugs and opioids that were filling Baltimore's neighborhoods, enslaving its people, and drowning newborn sons and daughters.

We also visited the Mount Zion American Methodist Episcopal Church in Glen Arm, Maryland. There they were celebrating a restoration project that would fix up their neglected graveyard. All across the country projects like this are popping up, because many African American graveyards have been neglected and ignored over the years. Racism, discrimination, and our powerful kings – in the form of politicians and land developers—have deemed them unworthy of being remembered.

And the story goes on. Back in Egypt a little Hebrew boy was born, and his mother was not willing to give him up. So, she took a risk and left him in a basket on the banks of the Nile. This boy would become Moses, but not yet. For another woman would have to come along and take a risk. This time it was an Egyptian and the king's daughter to boot. She saw the child crying in the grass and sent a servant over to fetch him. Upon opening the basket and discovering that he was an Israelite she was faced with a decision. Follow the law and chuck the boy back into the river or take a risk and remember that he was human too. She went with the second option and kept him.

Glenwood Life had also chosen to risk remembering. One who was particularly dedicated to it was Precious. Many of you know Precious better than me. She was a former patient at the recovery center who after recovering from her addiction refused to forget about the others still struggling. She dedicated the rest of her life to help them remember their self-worth by building a garden so they could farm their own food.

Mount Zion Church also took the risk of remembering. We talked to many people who had travelled from far away to remember their ancestors – some of whom were former slaves – buried in the cemetery. They wished to restore the cemetery so more community members could find their roots and history. And as Dr. LaRoche, a speaker at the event, said, "Every monument there is a celebration of a precious life that may have been cast aside."

We to must take a risk of remembering. We cannot let these experiences be forgotten. We must take up the example of Glenwood Life and Mount Zion and remember our community, what it has sacrificed, and what it has given us. And we must continue to witness and name each life as precious and worthy as Precious did, as Mount Zion did, and as the king's daughter did.

William Gibbs, Youth:

At first I was nervous to go on the Missions Trip; as it would be my first time away from home and going to a new place. Thanks to Ms. Christa, she invited me a second time when the original trip was postponed. I am very glad she did and that I got to go.

I had so much fun helping in the Garden. I enjoyed getting to visit the church on Saturday and see their graveyard with all the many stories it holds. It was a very moving experience to learn about the people at the Life Counseling Clinic. I am so lucky to have had the opportunity to go.

The first thing we did on Saturday was to help prepare Precious' garden for this year. While we were there, I learned that across the street from us was an Opioid Treatment Center for people addicted to Heroin. It made me feel both sad, to see so many people who needed help from such an addictive drug, but I also felt so happy to see so many people getting the help they need.

After we worked on the garden we went over to a church a ways off from the main part of Baltimore where we got to walk through a cemetery. Here I heard people sharing moments of their lives and singing a bit. It was so nice to hear all the stories shared by some of the people at this church and then to walk through and see the many graves; some of which were small, some large, but all of which held the stories of equally important people.

This was a profound experience. I'm so glad I got to share it with such an amazing group of people. I had a great time sharing this journey with them and look forward to us getting together again; in times of fun and for times of service.

Sophia Tuzzio, Youth:

The weekend we went on the mission trip was nice. It was my first trip, so I was happy it was one of the warmer trips the youth group had taken. On Friday we got to the Center where we were staying, and it was in this building that was almost hidden.

After putting our stuff away, we met the two ladies that helped us during the weekend. They told us what we would be doing and told us that the garden we would be working in was started by a woman named Precious. They said that Precious had passed away just a few days before we arrived. I think being able to work in the garden that Precious was so proud of and had started was why it was one of my favorite things we did over the weekend.

After talking to them we all went down to where we were staying and played a game called Loaded Questions. The game was an awesome bonding game for all of us and we played for the rest of the night.

The next day we drove to the garden. At the garden we split into three different groups to work and I was lucky enough to be in the native plant garden where we worked with Richard the most. In my group we pulled weeds and got to hear all about Richard's stories.

While eating lunch I learned about the red zones. Red zones were the areas in the city that banks did not give money to during the great depression.

After eating we went to a church that was cleaning up their cemetery. Many people spoke about what the clean-up meant to them. After all the speakers finished, we helped clean up chairs and then left.

We went back to the center and some of us made dinner. After eating we had a bunch of games of Jenga and foosball going on. We all ended up playing Loaded Questions again and played a few games of hide n seek.

On Sunday we packed up and drove to a church. They were very welcoming and had a very interesting service. After we ate lunch and headed home. The whole weekend was very fun and educational. I am looking forward to the next trip.