

*Based on Exodus 15:1b-11. An Ancient Liturgy of Freedom*

*Note: One hundred sixty-one years ago, on September 17, 1862, the bloodiest day in American history unfolded on the Battlefield of Antietam, turning the sanctuary of Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church into a Confederate hospital, and leading to the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed those who were enslaved within the very walls of SPC that day.*

*The SPC History Project has uncovered the first names of eighteen enslaved people who were members of SPC beginning in 1824 and who are listed in our Roll of Members. We are not - yet - able to hear their own voices describing - in their own words - their prayers in this place on the day of Antietam, or any other day.*

*Through the power of the Spirit of Freedom, we pray for ears to hear now what they would have us know of their story as we #SayTheirNames and invoke, with their permission, the communion of their spirits: Samuel, Harriet, Joseph, Richard, Courtney, Jerry, Harriet, Jacob, Elias, Horace, Judith, Hannah, Ailsey, Susan, Nancy, Sophia, Mary, Jesse.*

As our Lesson today from Exodus unfolds, the voice of God has spoken through Moses: let my people go! Pharaoh's hardened heart has endured ten plagues, finally breaking with the death of the first born children of Egypt. Passover has come and gone; the Hebrews have left in a hurry. Then Pharaoh turns hard-hearted again, chasing them now through the Red Sea.

A miracle occurs - at least if you are Hebrew: the waters return, covering Pharaoh's army. Then the prophet Miriam takes a tambourine in her hand and all the women go out after her with tambourines and with dancing. Miriam sings, "The Song of the Sea," which most biblical scholars consider to be the most ancient recorded piece of liturgy not only in the Bible but in all of religious history.

Like many of you, I cringe at the language of violence that permeates this liturgy. God is a warrior, in this telling, who has no problem *smiting Pharaoh's first born dead* and drowning the enemy in a flash of fury. We are right, so much of the time, to cross it out and close the book and construct a more compassionate image of our Creator when we come across such bad theology.

But not today.

There is a reason the liner notes in the Presbyterian Hymnal for our opening hymn [the spiritual "Go Down, Moses"] tell us *nothing in Hebrew Scripture resonated more deeply with the experience of African Americans in North America than Israel's slavery in Egypt.*

Talk about violence! Forced labor and forced childbearing (including from sexual assault), all in the context of spiritual abuse in the name of Jesus to justify the violence. Given what we know of the horror of slavery, we twenty first century souls can sympathize, I hope, with the escaped slave turned Presbyterian minister Henry

Highland Garnet who, in 1843, promoted armed rebellion as the most effective way to end slavery, citing the God of Exodus as his moral compass.

Here in Shepherdstown, on the other hand, including in this congregation, slavery was both supported and defended. Historian Kevin Pawlak tells us, *In response to the [John Brown] raid [in nearby Harpers Ferry], Shepherdstown sent both of its militia companies to help suppress it. ... Following the raid ... Shepherdstown authorized the establishment of a third militia company to keep such a rebellion from happening here.*

Closer to home, the front side entrance of our own beloved sanctuary was created as a slave entrance, and was used by both enslaved and free Black populations, who were required to sit in the balcony. In the mid-1800s SPC aggressively opposed the anti-slavery statements of the national church, and in 1861, the congregation joined the break-off Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America.

These are hard truths of our history we may prefer to whitewash or just plain ignore, and sometimes for very good reasons. As a Pastor with concern for multi-racial communities, I have no wish in lifting up this history to reinscribe trauma toward Black, Indigenous and other People of Color in this congregation or beyond.

At the same time, as our newest Supreme Court Justice, Ketanji Brown Jackson, said just this past Friday, as the keynote speaker for the 60th anniversary remembrance of the Birmingham church bombing that killed four young girls and injured others, *if we're going to continue to move forward as a nation we cannot allow concerns about discomfort to displace knowledge, truth or history. ... Yes, our past is filled with too much violence, too much hatred, too much prejudice. But can we really say that we are not confronting those same evils now?*

There is, to be sure, a direct line between the cries for freedom from within these very walls one hundred sixty-one years ago today and the cries for freedom of John Tolliver as he was lynched in 1874 in this region and the cries for freedom of Wayne Jones as he was killed by police in Martinsburg just a few years ago.

The voice of God through Moses still cries out for freedom. And the heart of Pharaonic power in our midst still stays, too often, hardened.

But we are not without hope!

Even in the hardened heart of Pharaoh's court, both then and now, our Scriptures bear witness to a vision of *collective* liberation. We can choose a different way! Pharaoh's own daughter becomes an accomplice to Miriam's courage. And, although the biblical record does not reveal it, biblical anthropologists tell us the historical journeys of Hebrew liberation from Egypt most likely included Egyptians inspired by their vision of shared freedom in a land of promise and plenty.

Let me say that again: biblical anthropologists believe there were actually *Egyptians* who were so inspired by the vision of collective liberation cultivated by the Hebrews in their midst that these Egyptians actually left their homeland behind in order to join the Hebrews on their journey toward a land of promise and plenty.

But here is the catch: *they had to be willing to be led by the formerly enslaved!*

We, too, must be willing to be led by the formerly enslaved as we remember Antietam today, as we lament the loss of life, as we honor the spirit of hospitality that tended the wounded in this place (even though they fought for the wrong side of that war,) as we work for a future of true justice and lasting peace.

We start by resurrecting the Black Voices of Antietam, in this congregation and beyond, as best we can, in light of the ancient liturgical wisdom of Miriam from our Lesson today. Miriam, the Hebrew version of the Latin name Mary, was also given to one of those enslaved members of SPC who worshipped here before and after Antietam, praying from the pews in the balcony, baptized into the communion of saints, beautiful and whole in the eyes of our God, deeply connected to our soul.

On the other side of Antietam, the bloodiest day in American history, with 3600 dead falling in the first hour of battle (one man per second), for SPC's Mary a miracle occurs! A Union victory - or at least a draw. A Proclamation of Emancipation, at least for those in the Confederacy. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, now guaranteeing freedom for all. The end of war. The beginning of Reconstruction, not yet thwarted by the Ku Klux Klan. On the other side of Antietam, for SPC's Mary, a miracle occurs!

We have no way to know for sure how SPC's Mary responded to this miracle. But the biblical Miriam might offer some clues, at least to explore through our spiritual imagination. What if, on the other side of the miracle, SPC's Mary picks up a tambourine in solidarity with the biblical Miriam, leading Samuel, Harriet, Joseph, Richard, Courtney, Jerry, Harriet, Jacob, Elias, Horace, Judith, Hannah, Ailsey, Susan, Nancy, Sophia, and Jesse in singing to the God who has been their strength, their might, and their salvation, who has heard their cries and overthrown their hardhearted adversaries?

And what if, in the fullness of time, from the communion of saints, SPC's Mary is now healed enough and whole enough and courageous enough to extend a hand of redemptive liberation to us, in our Yellow Ribbon Ritual, with an offer to lead *us* through these same baptismal waters of liberation, singing and dancing toward our mutual God whose very name means Freedom?

Let the church who is willing to follow her lead say, Amen!