

*Come Now and Set Us Free*

Exodus 3:1-12

August 20th of this year was the 400th anniversary of slavery in the United States. On August 20, 1619, the first slaves from Africa arrived on American soil, at Port Comfort, Virginia. They'd been stolen by Portuguese pirates, who had hijacked a slave ship on its way from Africa to England. No doubt the number of persons stowed in the cargo hold was higher when the boat set sail, but by the time it docked in Virginia, the boat held 20 black-skinned persons, bound by chains. They were unloaded and sold into slavery for life. The practice of selling and trading human beings as property worked so well, and was so profitable, that the practice continued in this country for almost 250 years.

In August, the *New York Times*' 1619 Project set out to tell stories of the people whose ancestors were brought here as slaves, and who have been Americans ever since. I recommend it to you if you didn't read it this last summer. The stories it told were things I'd never heard before, and they shifted something for me, opened my eyes in a different way. Did you know, for example, that the first person to die in the American Revolution was a runaway slave? Crispus Attucks became a fugitive so that he could fight for country he believed in, and a freedom his people wouldn't share for another hundred years. These are important stories—not just to African-Americans, but to all Americans. Here's another one.

In 1862, right in the middle of the Civil War, President Lincoln invited five free black men to the White House for a meeting. These men were free, but they were not American citizens because the Supreme Court had decided that no black person could be an American citizen. The war wasn't going well for the Union. There weren't enough white volunteers to fight, and Britain was threatening to intervene for the Confederacy. The president was thinking about emancipating all the slaves in the southern states. That would free them to join the Union Army and fight against their former masters. But Lincoln—like many people—worried about what was going to happen after the war. Would the former slaves rise up and be a rebellious, dangerous presence in the re-United States?

And so he offered these men a deal. He had already gotten Congress, he said, to appropriate the funds to ship all black people, once the war was over and they were freed, to another country. Maybe back to Africa. The Southern rebellion wouldn't have happened but for slavery, Lincoln reminded them; when this is done, it would be better for your people and for ours, to be separated.

Those men politely refused the deal. They said 'no' to the President of the United States. They stood on a declaration that said "This is our home, and this is our country too. In this soil lie the bones of our parents and grandparents. Here we were born, and here we will die."

When the war ended three years later, the liberated slaves did not seek vengeance, as white Americans had feared. Instead, former slaves planted themselves in their communities,

particularly in the South. They ran for state and local government offices. They worked for—and succeeded in establishing—the first public schools in this country.

Those men who visited the White House had a vision of living free in this country, even when Abraham Lincoln lost heart. They held that vision even though four million people of their race were living in slavery. Slavery approved by a government that claimed to live by the highest ideals of human life but could not see the vision of equality that those black leaders saw, and that I'm sure God saw.

For the 250 years of slavery, one story held American slaves together and gave them hope. It's the story that begins with the words we read this morning. The story of the Exodus, the story of another people who had been slaves, in Egypt. Their God wanted them to be free, and God found—even though it seemed impossible—a way for them to escape and get to freedom. American slaves told the stories of the Exodus—the midnight escape, the crossing of the Red Sea—again and again—to one another, to their children, their grandchildren. They sang songs about it. They knew that freedom story was for them. They believed—they hoped—God would act in the same way again.

Because God has always been about freedom.

Those verses we read this morning were about the first time Moses noticed God...in a fire that looked like it had spontaneously combusted in a cactus in the middle of the desert. (I wonder how many times God had tried to get Moses' attention less dramatically before that.) After they established their identities, Moses' and God's conversation went something like this: God said, 'My people are oppressed, enslaved, in Egypt. I've heard their cries. I see their pain. And now, I am going to rescue them from this injustice. I'm going to take them out of that land and bring them to another place, a good land, a place where they can be free. So get going. I need you to help me.' Moses said, 'I can't do that.' God said, 'Yes you can.'

I imagine you've heard that story before, because the Exodus story is a big one in our Judeo/Christian tradition. Just like it became the identity story for slaves in America, it was the identity story for Jesus' people, the direct descendants of those Egyptian slaves. God did indeed lead them to freedom. For a long time they lived free, until a parade of more powerful armies and empires came along. By Jesus' time, they were a small conquered and colonized people again. They hoped again for freedom.

There's a part of the Exodus story that we tell less often than that part about Moses and the burning bush. It comes just before those verses we read this morning. It goes like this: 'A long time passed, hundreds of years; and the Israelites were still groaning under the weight of their work. They cried out, and their cry to be rescued from slavery rose up to God. God heard their cry of grief, and God remembered. God remembered the covenant—the promises—he had made with their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked at the Israelites, and God understood.' And so God went to work looking for a Moses, to lead them to freedom. (Exodus 3:23-25)

Because God has always been about freedom.

God is still about freedom. Today too, because there is still un-freedom everywhere around us. Sometimes it's a system or government that imposes it: an economy where people work three jobs to afford housing and health care. Families seeking asylum, trapped in tent slums just across the Mexican border. Undocumented Americans who leave their homes for work and school every day afraid that today they will be followed and picked up and deported. Black children—boys—have to learn how not to speak and how never to move their hands when they are pulled over by the police.

But sometimes it's just our lives that make us un-free. Maybe something in your body makes it impossible to live the life you know is yours. Or you're bound by your responsibility to care for someone you love. Maybe you're trapped by a set of financial obligations that snuck up on you. Or you're caught—in an unhealthy relationship, or a habit that you have tried so many times to break, or an anxiety that spins inside of you every night. We can be slaves to our own lives. A few weeks ago an Uber driver in Los Angeles told me that he had moved to the U.S. from Iran to re-start a business that couldn't succeed there because of economic sanctions. Business is definitely possible here, he said, but what has shocked and disappointed him in this country is the quality of life. 'People here work like they're slaves,' he said. 'They work all the time. What good is succeeding in business if you can't enjoy life?'

'A long time passed, and the people were still groaning under the weight of their lives. They cried out, and their cry to be rescued from slavery rose up to God. God heard their cry of grief, and God remembered. God remembered the covenant—the promises—he had made with their ancestors. God looked at the people, and God understood.' It happened. It happened again. It will happen again.

We begin today the season of Advent, this season of waiting for God to come again. This God who has always been about freedom, who always wants her creation to live free. This God who makes courageous leaders out of ordinary people. This God who sometimes taps us on the shoulder or sets fire to plants and says, "Hope is a verb. Get going."

This is the God who came to us on Christmas. This is the God who will come to us again.