

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the second Sunday in Lent 2021: "take up your cross"

The name Harriet Tubman is probably familiar to you. She was one of the primary architects of the underground railroad that, in pre-civil war America led countless enslaved peoples to freedom in the northern states, Canada, and in a few cases even Mexico.

Since her lifetime, Tubman has often been referred to as the Moses of her people. This is an appropriate comparison. Tubman certainly heard a divine calling much as Moses did, and in response she led others on the often harrowing journey from slavery to freedom, returning scores of times to territory where she was considered a wanted fugitive.

But the comparison doesn't end there. It's way too easy to romanticize both Moses and Harriet Tubman, but neither was a warm and fuzzy character. Moses was a fierce warrior and a sometimes harsh leader. And, very importantly, the greatest resistance he encountered in his work of leading the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom often came not from the outside but from within the house of Israel. It was often his own people who tried and tested him the most! This is an inconvenient detail in the story of the Exodus that we often try to deliberately forget. And I should add that the Israelites weren't crazy to try and test Moses. The freedom to which he had led them was not cushy. It was in some ways harder than what they had in Egypt, but it was nonetheless real freedom, and hence of inestimable value.

It was much the same way with Tubman. Most people know that in her latter years she never went anywhere without a pistol, but not as many people know or acknowledge one of the main

reasons she had for doing this. Of course she wanted to be ready to defend herself against outside assault, but she was also arming herself against rebellion from within her own camp.

She knew full well how dangerous and delicate the mission of the underground railroad was. She knew that even a single case of someone losing heart and turning back could mean destruction to the whole movement and everyone involved in it. So she told those whom she meant to guide to freedom in no uncertain terms that once they started there would be no turning back. She herself would ensure that if necessary.

And then we come to today's Gospel, where Jesus tells the crowd that if any want to become his followers, they must deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him. Let us be utterly clear here. Jesus was not speaking metaphorically. The cross had a very literal meaning that no one in Jesus' time would misunderstand. "I can offer you true and lasting freedom that excels all your minds can imagine," Jesus is saying, "but to claim it you must be willing to embrace the prospect of losing absolutely everything, up to and including your life. There shall be no turning back." I can guarantee you that the greatest resistance to this message came, and still comes, not from the outside forces of empire but from within the freedom-seekers themselves.

Moses. Harriet Tubman. Jesus. In their own way, they are all telling us the same thing. God is offering human beings perfect freedom, but let's make no mistake about what that means. We must be willing to let go permanently of every last souvenir of our imprisonment and never look back.

Now at first it's probably not obvious what the problem here is. I mean, letting go of all hints of imprisonment and marching to freedom sounds great, right?

But, let's be honest for a moment. Some of those souvenirs of imprisonment are pretty deceptive. They actually seem on the surface to be comforting and familiar. In fact, we may find ourselves so attached to them that without them life feels disorienting and downright scary. There are times when imprisonment can actually look better than freedom, so even now, we ourselves may be the biggest obstacle in the journey to the freedom God offers.

But maybe, in a beautiful twist of irony, all of this is actually amazingly good news, at least potentially, for the moment in which we find ourselves.

Isn't it true that there have been some problems in our midst for quite some time that, in spite of incredible efforts on the part of many, have just seemed impossible to solve, and in some cases have even gotten worse?

Take, for example, the problem of persistent inequities across lines of race in this country. In the aftermath of the Civil War, three constitutional amendments were adopted that supposedly ended slavery and guaranteed citizenship, with all of its attendant rights and privileges, to people of all races. Those measures produced very limited success. In the second half of the 20th century numerous pieces of legislation passed to try to rectify the problem. These too produced only limited success. In other words, attempts at finding true freedom from the prison of racial tensions and inequities have been unsuccessful within the system

we have, and perhaps the system isn't even capable of providing success in this venture.

And it's not just this issue. Look at the way we care for our bodies. Isn't it true that, in spite of so many apparent advances, conditions such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, autism, and so many others have increased rather than decreased in our society over the last several decades? Innovation after innovation has been attempted, but the situation remains much the same, perhaps even worse, than it was a generation or two ago. Quality of life has certainly deteriorated, and there is now even evidence that quantity is on the decline. In other words, attempts at finding true freedom from the prison of poor individual and community health have been unsuccessful within the system we have, and perhaps the system isn't even capable of providing success in this venture.

Doesn't that actually make this an incredible moment? The very systems of I just described seem more vulnerable than ever, but what if instead of being a scary thing this is actually a wonderful thing? Harriet Tubman, Moses, and Jesus all tell and show us that marching to the freedom to which God calls us means turning our backs forever on what imprisons us, on what doesn't work. So if we now find ourselves in a time when systems that don't accomplish the good work we need them to are crumbling, that is actually a great gift.

That doesn't mean it isn't also a scary gift. Crossing the Red Sea to leave Egypt, embarking on the underground railroad, or taking up our cross and following Jesus can be very daunting. It's important to keep our eyes focused in hope on what lies ahead

and we leave what lies behind. Fortunately there are some great places on which we can turn our gaze.

Just the week before last I was on a webinar that focused on a project on the south side of Chicago called Imani Village. This is an initiative of a consortium of area churches. It is an intentional community that is, in terms of meeting basic human needs of body, mind, and spirit, quite self-contained. There are many housing units, each built of renewable materials and entirely sustainable in the environmental sense. There is land, right in the middle of the city, dedicated to growing non-toxic food and tended by the residents of the village. There is a health center that provides and promotes practices that foster holistic, long-term health. There is a locally led worship center. And all of this is located in one of America's most notorious urban ghettos, a place where stereotype would have many people assuming that the community lacks both the will and the resources to build such a thing.

Imani village is not a government program, and it does not rely on any government programs. It is not a corporate program, and it does not rely on any corporate programs. It is simply what happens when local people and local churches decide that they've been in chains long enough and are ready to embrace the freedom of the children of God.

This I believe is the model for where our lives need to go at this point. I don't believe that right now is a moment where we've had

to endure a temporary strange season but then everything will go back to normal. I believe that this is a moment like Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea or like Harriet Tubman's invitation to participate in the underground railway. While the old systems are crumbling, God is inviting us and all of humanity to new freedom. The path to it isn't easy, but the prize is priceless. What is asked of us is that we let go of the crumbling systems and head into an unknown wilderness where things are done in a new and completely unfamiliar way. But we can trust that there, in that strange and new place, we will find the health and the freedom that our hearts desire above all else.