Between Liberation and Freedom

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the 16th Sunday after Pentecost

September 28, 2014

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

I learned this week that Monday marked the 152nd anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln issuing the preliminary emancipation proclamation. I learned something else about it too, that I never knew before.

Far from being a unequivocal statement on the equal rights and dignity of all people, the proclamation was conditional. Lincoln promised to free all slaves *if* the Confederates did not lay down their arms and return to the Union by the end of the year. This implies that if they *had* surrendered, Lincoln may not have issued the final proclamation. Apparently, the document was primarily intended to be an ultimatum to the Confederate armies – a political threat – rather than a spiritually-minded acknowledgment of the necessity of human freedom. If we experience ourselves and our country today acting ambivalently about the full dignity and equality of people of all races, perhaps that is because this ambivalence existed within the very document that first promised such universal dignity and equality on these shores.

We see this ambivalence about race on display all the time. We see it publically -- most recently in that new video of a white on black police shooting in South Carolina. And, if we’re honest I think we see it in more subtle and private ways, too. We all live as a community together on a journey towards greater racial harmony. And we’re not there yet. Lincoln may have ended slavery, but when it comes to our progress on racial equality in this country, it is clear that we have yet to reach the promised land of racial justice and harmony. We remain, together, somewhere in between.

Beginning several weeks ago and continuing for several weeks from now, our Old Testament readings recount a similar story about the long journey from a time of slavery to the one of true freedom. It is the story of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, their oppression under Pharaoh, their liberation from bondage through the Red Sea, followed by a generation or more of wandering in the wilderness before ultimately entering the promised land. Our elementary Sunday schools students are in the midst of a series of three or four lessons on this topic as well – and those of us participating the Fall Adult Learning Forum also are spending time engaging with this central spiritual narrative of the journey from oppression to liberation.

This faith story – which roughly spans the lifetime of Moses, born a slave in Egypt and dying an old man up on a mountain watching his people enter the promised land – is central to Jewish identity; it forms the core narrative celebrated at Passover each spring. And, the journey from oppression to liberation was also a key faith story for the early Christian communities as well. These communities were made up primarily of Jews and others who were familiar with Jewish traditions, so it is hardly surprising that as Christianity established its own central faith stories, the themes mirrored those of the most important Jewish stories. In various generations of history, both Christians and Jews have looked to the story of the Exodus to understand their own circumstances of oppression, to find inspiration in a God who rejects oppression in all forms, and to nourish a deeply personal hope for the possibility of a radically different future.

But here’s the thing about the Exodus story. When the Jews were liberated from slavery in Egypt they didn’t go right into the promised land. First they wandered for a generation or more in the place called the wilderness. In the Book of Exodus, if you try and map out the Hebrew people’s actual journey, it appears they literally make laps around the Sinai peninsula. A lot of ‘em. Though they know where they want to go, and even though they are no longer enslaved, the progress they are making towards their ultimate goal is not linear. God may have led them straight through the Red Sea to liberate them from the immediate circumstance of their oppression – but the next stage of the journey is far more discursive. To get to the point of real freedom, from both the external forces of violence, as well as the internal oppression that the legacy of slavery left within the community, a longer journey was needed.

Every person, at some point in their lives, in some way or another, experiences oppression. And the desire to find freedom from those circumstances is a core part of our identity as children of God. That’s why this faith story about Moses and his people has had such staying power – has in fact sustained an entire religion through centuries of oppression and victimization. Freedom from oppression is a universal longing – whether in terms of one’s politics, one’s identity, or one’s spiritual soul. We long for the freedom to be, to become, and to believe we are the fully realized children of God that we were made to be.

Perhaps you are seeking some kind of deeper freedom in your life right now? In way way do you long to be free? Most of us find ourselves at one time or another facing a circumstance that has become oppressive in some way. Perhaps in a workplace that has become hostile, or an obligation you have that has simply become drudgery, no longer exciting your passions or providing a sense of fulfillment. Perhaps you feel unable to express yourself fully within your community, or within an important relationship? Perhaps this circumstance is actually quite painful to you.

Or, if that’s not happening now, maybe there was a time earlier in your life when you experienced others – or even yourself – denying your full dignity and belovedness? Can you remember that time? Do you recall how you first found liberation? Have you reached the point of true freedom?

As we think about our own journeys towards or yearnings for greater freedom from oppression, we can draw inspiration from our ancestors who wandered for years, generations even, in the wilderness between liberation from suffering and a true life of harmony.

What happens in the wilderness? In that in-between time, after the excitement of being freed from an oppressive situation has worn off, but the joy of re-settlement into a new normal has yet to arrive?

I imagine many of us have spent time in the wilderness – when we’ve managed to leave a bad situation, but are frustrated at the slow pace with which we are rebuilding our lives. Our initial gratitude at having left a place of pain soon wears off. And the grumpiness of being in between kicks in. Like the Hebrews we might be tempted to rail at God – “were there no graves in Egypt, that you brought us here into the wilderness?”. Time in between – in the wilderness -- can seem like we’re running up a hill of sand, working so hard with little visible progress.

But there is a purpose to that time. Some progress isn’t visible – because it’s spiritual progress. As a community, the Hebrew people didn’t just need to find escape from their oppressors, they also needed to find freedom from the oppressive spirit within themselves. They needed time to sort through their feelings of victimization, to reconnect with a core identity other than that of being a victim, to learn again as a people who they really were as beloved children of God.

This experience was painful. The stories from their wilderness time are full of complaint – mostly against Moses and God. Perhaps they couldn’t quite see what God sees – that in order to reach the point of a truly shared freedom, there is much about how they live together that they will need to change as a community. After all, a fully free people can never become oppressors of others. I suspect that is why God runs them around the wilderness for a generation – so that the survival lessons of how to live in circumstances of pain, violence and victimization would have time to be unlearned, because they would no longer be useful.

All this is to say that our wilderness time – our time in between liberation and freedom -- is a gift from God. This is true in the individual wilderness experiences of our lives. And it is true in our national journey through the wilderness towards racial harmony and justice. It may be painful. We may complain. But the journey is given so that we might learn something about how to live with greater freedom – and maybe also how to unlearn some things that were necessary in the past but are no longer useful.

The pathway through the wilderness will never be quick; but the time is valuable. And remember most of all -- that God is not just leading us, but journeying with us towards the promised land of real freedom for us all. Amen.