

For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

February 28, 2021 Second Sunday in Lent

Verses from Psalm 51, Galatians 5 and Exodus 12; Mark 8:34-36

to see the readings go to this service on our website under

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Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Second Sunday in Lent and Freedom Sunday. Lent recalls the wilderness journey to freedom that Moses led. Lent follows Jesus finding liberation from ego in the wilderness and the ultimate freedom from death at Easter. Lent asks us to undergo a similar journey of losing life to gain life so that we may emerge like Jesus, full of the Spirit's power for serving and saving the world.

Lent makes us aware that we are like very hungry caterpillars. We seek satisfaction from material things, but we are still hungry. Lent's wisdom says that they can never satisfy us completely because our hunger is spiritual, not material. Lent invites us to spin a cocoon of transformation by giving our spiritual life more time. The more we turn our lives to the Spirit, the more the caterpillar of our old self melts away and a deeper, truer self takes form. In the end we emerge as a beautiful butterfly at one with the wind and flowers, and we spend our days helping life flourish.

The six themes of Lent are Spirit, Freedom and Faith; and Struggle, Truth and Oneness. The Spirit flows through both caterpillar and butterfly. It moves us to free ourselves and free the world around us to gain greater life. We need faith to let go of what we have been and choose transformation into a new story and way of being. It takes struggle to break through the hard cocoon into the truth of who we were created to be. The ultimate truth we discover is our oneness with all that the Spirit flows through, the wind and flowers and entire universe.

Today we recognize the importance of freedom in this wilderness journey of transformation.

Let us worship together....

[The sermon begins on the next page.]

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Paul said, “For freedom Christ has set us free!”

Jesus frees us to follow the Holy Spirit and use our gifts and entire lives to establish the realm of God’s freedom, mercy and love on earth.

Paul anticipated the problem that freedom can also be used for narrow self-interest and greed. We see today the racial, economic and environmental injustice and devastation of life on earth that come from that abuse.

Paul wrote, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” That is the only sustainable way to live, we have learned the hard way.

For freedom Moses has set us free, too. Remember that Moses had fled to the wilderness where he was free and safe when God came to him in the burning bush. God told him to use his freedom by going back to liberate his people. For freedom Moses set them free—he gave them a set of laws dedicated to individual freedom and setting all slaves and indentured servants free every Jubilee Year.

Lent urges us to be both liberated and liberating. One of the greatest saints and models of this spirit was Harriet Tubman, who was called Moses for leading slaves safely out of the American south.

Michael Nagler is a leading scholar on nonviolence and its spiritual dimension. Nagler writes, “When Harriet Tubman woke up one morning in nineteenth-century Maryland and said to herself, I am not a slave, it changed history.”

This is the first form of freedom that leads to all others, the freedom that Jesus called us to when he said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake...will save it.”

It takes enormous courage and strength to deny our identity, even when that identity has shackled us and stunted our growth and forced us to conform to the wishes of others. Tubman was putting her life in danger when she told herself that new story, but at the same

time she saved her life. She discovered the spiritual truth that we enslave ourselves when we accept a false story about us and willingly wear the chains it inflicts.

The Declaration of Independence says people “are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.” This is human nature, but throwing off what oppresses us is human nature, too, as we awaken to our truth and yearn to be free.

We each go through it many times as we evolve through the developmental stages of infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood. We willingly lose the life we have outgrown for the sake of the Spirit that is driving us to become more mature.

This process does not stop. The Christian contemplative master, Thomas Keating, was still growing and deepening in his 90s. I’ve heard some of the wisest elders in our church say they are doing the same.

We may reach a comfortable plateau, but we can expect the Spirit of life to challenge our complacency before long. And if we are aware of what is happening in our world, we know that it needs us to wake up like Harriet Tubman and say we are more than this, we are better than this, and break free.

Tubman’s inner awakening and courageous flight to freedom were inspiring enough, but her understanding of Jesus would not let her stop there. She believed that for freedom Christ had set her free, so she spent the rest of her life dedicating all her gifts and resources to the freedom of others.

She made thirteen trips back to the south, risking her life every time. She brought three hundred slaves to freedom, she served on the front line in the Civil War, and she spent her old age in poverty because she shared everything she had with impoverished former slaves.

The Rev. Dr. Eric Williams is Curator of Religion at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. He is interviewed in the documentary, *Harriet Tubman: They Called Her Moses*. He says, “This kind of radical solidarity, this kind of desire for others to be liberated, for others to be able to experience freedom, and putting forth the effort, and risking your own life, your own safety, your own health, so that someone else could be free, I think that Christianity needs...more of that today.”

Michael Nagler says this “radical solidarity” is the new story humanity needs to embrace. We need to outgrow the highly destructive old story “that we are separate from one another and the rest of life..., bound to seek fulfillment in the physical world, independently of—if not in opposition to—the fulfillment of others.”

The last three themes of Lent that we will explore are Struggle, Truth and Oneness. The story of Harriet Tubman shows her progress through them. Oneness is the goal—to love all creation as God loves it, experiencing it as one with our own self.

We cannot make that journey unless we free ourselves to do so. Harriet Tubman showed slaves the way to freedom, and she shows us the way today.

So what is it that oppresses you or holds you back from being all that you were created to be?

What is it that keeps you from being one of the heroes of the liberation movement that we need on earth right now, leading others to freedom from violence and injustice?

Let us pray in silence, allowing the Spirit that moved Moses and Jesus and Paul and Harriet Tubman and millions of others before us to move us now...