



**“Let My People Go”
Exodus 3:1-14, 5:1-9
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
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I have no idea who first coined the phrase “Prophetic Spirituality,” but it captures a crucial element of what it means to be a committed follower of Jesus. When I use the word “Prophetic” I’m not suggesting a supernatural power that allows someone to forecast the future precisely as it will unfold. And, trust me, my use of “Spirituality” has nothing to do with astrology, channeling, or new age thinking.

Prophetic Spirituality is deeply rooted in Scripture. The word “Prophetic” refers to the Old Testament prophets and Jesus, each of whom served as a mouthpiece for God. Prophets taught how God expects us to live and they warned of dire consequences when people fail to treat others as they want to be treated. The prophets expressed God’s compassion for those who suffer, God’s anger at injustice, God’s demand for truth, and God’s longing for peace.

The word “Spirituality” is a slippery term that gets bandied about in numerous ways and is difficult to nail down with precision. It has to do with a focus on God, especially through worship, prayer, scripture and reflecting on the divine. To repeat what I said last week: To say that our faith is prophetic is to say that it is actively engaged in resisting evil, righting wrongs, and spreading love. To say that our faith is spiritual is to say that it is grounded in worship, prayer, and reflecting on God’s message. My hope is that over the weeks of this series, we will capture a rich, full meaning of Prophetic Spirituality, and by embracing it, we will go to the next level in our relationship with God.

Moses. Today our focus is Moses and the story you know of God calling him to liberate the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. But, first, remember when Moses was born, the Pharaoh had become paranoid about the growing Hebrew population in Egypt. Out of fear, he ordered the midwives to kill all male babies born to Hebrew women. The midwives resisted and refused to comply.

When Moses was born, his mother nursed him for three months. Afraid that her son would be discovered, she placed him in a basket at the edge of the Nile. The daughter of Pharaoh discovered the infant and took him as her own. Moses won the lottery! Growing up in Pharaoh’s household, he lacked nothing.

However, as the little prince grew older, he witnessed the enormous gulf between the way he lived and the inhumane conditions under which the Hebrew people toiled. As it began to gnaw at his soul, I suspect he averted his eyes so that he did not have to face the hideous nature of slavery. When he could no longer ignore it, I suspect he did what many do, he began to contrive rationalizations.

“Well, someone has to do the work, why not the Hebrews?”

“Slavery is part of the natural order.”

“The Hebrew people are an inferior race. They’re not as intelligent as Egyptians.”

“Slavery benefits the Hebrews because they are incapable of running their own lives. They’re better off having someone else do it for them.”

“It would be impossible to abolish slavery. The economy would collapse.”

“Being a slave is better than starving to death.”

His justifications seemed to build an impenetrable argument. However, overtime, cracks began to appear in his logic. Then, one day, all of his rationales collapsed in a filthy heap when he witnessed an Egyptian unmercifully beating a Hebrew. Moses could not stomach such brutality. He pounced on the Egyptian, and in his fury, killed him. He hastily buried the taskmaster in the sand and hoped no one would discover what he had done. But the next day word was spreading and Moses knew it would soon reach the ears of Pharaoh. Moses made a run for it.

He traveled many miles and eventually settled in the land of Midian. In time, he married the daughter of the priest of Midian and settled into a comfortable existence tending the sheep of his father-in-law. But one day his serene setting was disturbed by an intruder. The intruder was God. Our passage says: the angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.”

Perhaps it was literally a blazing bush from which Moses heard God’s voice. Perhaps, the flames were a dramatic touch added to the story by a later generation. Perhaps it was a poetic reference to the horrendous images of slavery that blazed in Moses’ mind and seared his conscience.

However it happened, Moses heard God’s call. Alone on the hills tending sheep with plenty of quiet time for reflection, Moses discerned God beckoning him to embark on a sacred, but precarious, mission. According to our text, God said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.”

Biblical scholars have noted that there are so many parallels between Moses and Jesus that the Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses. At the time of Moses, the Pharaoh declared that all male Hebrew infants be killed. At the time of Jesus, King Herod declared that all Hebrew infants be killed. Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Moses delivered the law from a mountain. Jesus delivered the new law in the form of the Beatitudes from a mountain.

Both Moses and Jesus revealed God as a loving Creator who is deeply troubled by suffering and injustice. When people are in pain, God’s heart aches. When people suffer injustice, God rages. Both Moses and Jesus reveal God as a liberator of the oppressed.

Prophetic Spirituality, the kind of spirituality that Jesus and the prophets embraced, prompts us to feel compassion for those who suffer injustice. But we do not simply mourn for victims. Prophetic Spirituality ignites a passionate determination to do something – to chart a path that seeks liberty, dignity, and equality.

Most of the time, the majority of us ride peacefully along with the status quo. We are outraged each time there is another mass shooting or a sexual predator is exposed or immigrants are locked in cages or an ugly incident targets someone on the basis of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. Yet, most of the time, the

agitation does not last because we turn our attention elsewhere to avoid the discomfort. Perhaps we think there is nothing we can do so why let it upset us. Perhaps we want to avoid the hassle of throwing ourselves into something that appears to defy resolution. Perhaps we fear altering the comfortable groove into which we have settled. However, there are times when we cannot easily delete an awareness from our minds. Something distressing burrows into our conscience and we cannot simply let it be. We feel compelled to act.

That prick of our conscience – that agitation in our soul to respond to injustice – is a call from God. We constantly face options. God presents us with the best possibilities given our situation and urges us to respond in a way that promotes the common good. That urging – like a whisper deep in our soul or an emerging image in our mind – becomes less muffled the more we embrace Prophetic Spirituality. The more we picture the world as the beautiful, life-affirming place God envisions it can be, the more we feel compelled to work toward that vision.

The Presbyterian Church has a mixed history of being a prophetic voice on slavery. In 1818, more than 40 years before the Civil War, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church adopted the following resolution: *We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature;[and] as utterly inconsistent with the law of God.* Further, that Assembly called on all Christians “as speedily as possible to erase this blot on our holy religion.”¹

However, many pastors were ridiculed and driven from their congregations for preaching against owning slaves. Numerous Presbyterians continued to own men, women and children until the end of the Civil War.

Sadly, the legacy of slavery continues to haunt our nation to this day. Like a stone thrown into a pond, events in the past send out ripples that impact our present and future. This is certainly true of slavery in America. Although the Civil War was fought more than 150 years ago to end slavery, other cruel measures such as refusing mortgages, voter suppression, and mass incarceration, have been used to prevent African Americans from enjoying the same rights as people who are white.

I have shared with you before that I grew up in Tulsa, and one of the classes I was required to take in high school was Oklahoma history. Yet, I did not learn until decades later about one of the deadliest racial attacks in U.S. history that took place a few miles from my high school. There was not a single mention of it in my class or our textbook.

Did you know that “Between the 1870s and World War I, African Americans established more than 100 all black towns in the west with the goal of achieving economic independence? One of the most successful was a district in Tulsa known as Greenwood...It had 30 restaurants and 45 groceries and meat markets. There were dry goods stores, banks, dental offices, and a photography studio. When World War I ended, black soldiers returned from the war with high expectations for racial progress. But in city after city, white mobs targeted black citizens and their businesses. On May 30th, 1921, a white mob descended on Greenwood.”²

No one knows how many blacks were murdered. Estimates range from 100 to 300. More than 1,400 homes and businesses were destroyed. In total, more than 35 square blocks were demolished, rendering 10,000 people homeless. Not one person was ever convicted of this racial violence.

Today, the gap in wealth between whites and blacks is one of “the most glaring legacies of American slavery.”³ Slavery ended when the Civil War concluded in 1865. Over the next five years, the Reconstruction Amendments established rights that gave African Americans equal protection under the law and the right to vote. In January of 1865, General William Sherman tried to right many of the wrongs of slavery by reallocating some of the land that had been owned by slave owners to black families in 40 acre plots. But, “when Lincoln was assassinated, Vice President Andrew Johnson rescinded Sherman’s order by pardoning white plantation owners and returning the

land to them. Johnson declared, “This is a country for white men, and by God, as long as I am President, it shall be a government for white men.”⁴

Other measures were taken to restrain the progress of African Americans. There were lynchings, including one here in Delaware in 1903. The person most responsible for propelling this murder that was meant to terrorize blacks was a popular Christian pastor here in Wilmington.

For more than a century following the Civil War, states enacted Jim Crow laws that were intended to suppress progress by African Americans and to keep black institutions separate and unequal.

In our day, there is another measure being used to impede African Americans from enjoying the same rights as whites: mass incarceration. Our country “has the highest rate of incarceration of any nation on Earth: We represent 4 percent of the planet’s population but 22 percent of the world’s imprisoned. In the early 1970s, our prisons held fewer than 300,000 people; since then, that number has grown to more than 2.2 million, with another 4.5 million on probation or parole. Due to mandatory sentencing and ‘three strikes’ laws, (Delawarean Bryan Stevenson) has represented black men who were sentenced to life without parole for stealing a bicycle and for possessing marijuana. This practice of mass incarceration and excessive punishment is part of the legacy of slavery.”⁵

Our selfish nature tempts us to shield ourselves from the pain of others, to look for an advantage over others, and to divide the world in terms of us versus them. Jesus and the prophets make it clear that our lives count for little if we fail to lift a burden, alleviate suffering, and speak out against injustice.

Prophetic spirituality prompts us to examine our current situation in light of God’s dream for the world, and to lean hard into God’s vision. And rather than begging God to clean up the messes we create, Prophetic Spirituality infuses us with the determination and the daring to tackle things that are difficult so that we may become partners with God in healing the world.

NOTES

1. James Moorehead, “Presbyterians and Slavery,” slavery.princeton.edu/stories/presbyterians-and-slavery.
2. PBS, “Greenwood and the Tulsa Race Riots,” February 27, 2019.
3. Trymaine Lee, “A vast wealth gap, driven by segregation, redlining, evictions and exclusion, separates black and white America,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019.
4. Ibid.
5. Bryan Stevenson, “Slavery gave America a fear of black people and a taste for violent punishment. Both still define our criminal justice system,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Grace, in whom we live and move and have our being – you have beckoned us to this holy ground and welcomed us into your presence. We give thanks for your Spirit moving among us, opening our hearts and minds to encounter you in new ways. Help us to hear your Still Small Voice whispering into the silence ... Speak Lord, for your servants are listening.

We are listening for your voice to disrupt the din of this world, and to call forth order out of chaos. God, sometimes we feel so powerless in the face of turmoil and pain and strife. We do not know how best to respond when storms wreak havoc, or when neighbors turn against neighbors. Yet, we trust that you are present in the midst of brokenness, bringing comfort to those who suffer and empowering others to work for justice and peace. We remember those in war-torn lands and communities rent by conflict, for whom justice seems a distant memory and peace, a faraway dream ... We pray for those in regions affected by Hurricane Dorian, who now face the challenge of rebuilding, even as they are weighed down by grief ... We lift up those near and far who suffer –

openly or in silence– with abuse, addiction, illness, or loss ... Loving God, breathe your healing Spirit upon all in need of your comfort, that they might know your peace and experience your wholeness.

In every age, you have called ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Draw us, we pray, into your redemptive work. Holy God, we confess that we are not always eager to respond to your call. Too often we prove to be timid disciples; we are quick to utter excuses and slow to exclaim, “Here I Am!” Like Moses, many of us think too little of ourselves rather than trusting your Spirit to sustain us in our callings. Yet – despite our doubt – you *do* sustain us, O God of Life. For you go with us to every place we are sent. Help us place our trust in you – not in our own gifts or abilities – and grant us courage to take risks for the sake of the Gospel. Give us faithful hearts and prophetic voices, we pray, that we may use them for your glory until all creation knows the abundance of your love and grace.

We pray in the name of the one who calls us to ministry – Jesus the Christ – who taught us how to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.