



EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION DAY AND JUNETEENTH

CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Thursday, January 1, 2009: Emancipation Proclamation Day
Or Friday, June 19, 2009: Juneteenth**

Editorial Note: Since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and Juneteenth share important historical and cultural connections, we explore them under the same lectionary moment. Some congregations will choose to celebrate each of these moments separately on different days. Others will elect to celebrate only one of these moments. Still other churches will combine the celebrations as we have done and celebrate them on January 1 or June 19th.

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I. History

Marcus Garvey said: “The American Negroes celebrate their emancipation on the first of January of every year.” As a continuation of that important celebration, this cultural resource of The African American Lectionary is presented January 1, 2009.

When thinking about the daybreak of black freedom known as Emancipation, it can be considered as nothing short of awesome in scope. Although written by President Abraham Lincoln at the height of the American Civil War, the transformative power of the Emancipation Proclamation took place without violence by masters or the formerly enslaved. The proclamation represented more than a major step toward the ultimate abolition of slavery in the United States. It actually laid the groundwork for what President Abraham Lincoln would declare elsewhere as a “new birth of freedom.” In a nation where the law of the land and the political leadership that upheld it had allowed the enslavement and brutalization of so many millions of black bodies for more than two and a half centuries, the notion that a single document could help unleash the paradigm shift necessary to reawaken the spirit of liberty was powerful.

The ripple effect of Lincoln’s presidential decree was felt in the North and South. Whereas a sizable number of enslaved African Americans were immediately set free by the proclamation, freedom was not automatically conferred to everyone who was enslaved. Black women, men, and children still

living in bondage below the Mason-Dixon Line had been forced to be the “engine of war” for the Confederacy. As the prevailing work force in the South, enslaved African Americans farmed, prepared food, sewed uniforms, repaired railways, worked in factories, shipping yards, and mines, built fortifications, and served as hospital workers and common laborers.

In his brilliant work Black Reconstruction¹, historian W.E.B. Du Bois notes that the Confederacy was effectively crippled by enslaved blacks who, in their efforts to resist their treatment as chattel property in the South, organized work stoppages, sabotage, and arson in order to undermine the Confederate cause. Furthermore, those few black folks who were able to escape from plantations promptly headed to Union lines where they were held as “contraband of war” until the proclamation took effect. Once the proclamation officially took effect, the freed people were told at midnight that they were at liberty to leave the camps.

Another interesting development could be seen in the Sea Islands off the Georgia coastline which the Union forces secured earlier in the war. Officers delivered the message of proclamation in short fashion to the island’s black population declaring that they were now and forever free. As a result of the islands coming under Union military control, white Southerners fled in droves to the mainland while the blacks remained on the lands where they had previously been enslaved. This event in the 1860s on Sea Island created a living laboratory of sorts by which African Americans could now taste and see the first fruits of their freedom take root on soil that they had tilled and could now control.

In ways large and small, the freed people often took on their hard fought, newfound freedom in a variety of ways. For instance, many of them took on new surnames to sever themselves from the sense of being someone else’s property. During this time, emancipation was quickly translated into education, especially learning to read and write; by most accounts, literacy was considered most urgent for the formerly enslaved, young and old alike, so that they could read the Bible for themselves. Also, following the dawn of African American freedom in the 1860s, newly freed black people decided in large numbers to “vote with their feet” by leaving white mainline churches in order to either join or form independent black congregations and denominations throughout the South. In these and other ways, the death of slavery brought about a new way of life for blacks, no matter how fleeting.

In the years following Lincoln’s death, his grand action of signing the proclamation was lauded and fondly remembered by generations of African Americans. This was most particularly evident in the level of diehard support by African Americans who maintained staunch loyalty and affection towards the Republicans as the “party of Lincoln” for nearly a century after the signing of the proclamation. There is great importance to be found in revisiting the words that helped ignite a spiritual and political reawakening of our people from the shackles—both visible and invisible—of inhumane bondage.

Excerpts of the Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863

By the President of the United States of America:

A Proclamation.

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight

hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

Now, therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days, from the day first above mentioned, order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively, are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth), and which excepted parts, are for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves in said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor

of Almighty God.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.

By the President: ABRAHAM LINCOLN

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

II. Excerpts of Marcus M. Garvey's Emancipation Day Speech, January 1, 1922

A little more than a half century after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, its words continued to help ignite a spiritual and political reawakening. One of the most fiery and charismatic black leaders in history, Marcus M. Garvey (1887-1940), spoke about the document as a way of encouraging black folk and the country to fully live into the law and spirit of the document:

Fifty-nine years ago Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation declaring four million Negroes in this country free. Several years prior to that, Queen Victoria of England signed the Emancipation Proclamation that set at liberty hundreds of thousands of West Indian Negro slaves.

West Indian Negroes celebrate their emancipation on the first day of August of every year. The American Negroes celebrate their emancipation on the first of January of every year. Tonight we are here to celebrate the emancipation of the slaves in this country.

We are the descendants of the men and women who suffered in this country for two hundred and fifty years under that barbarous, that brutal institution known as slavery. You who have not lost trace of your history will recall the fact that over three hundred years ago your fore-bears were taken from the great Continent of Africa and brought here for the purpose of using them as slaves. Without mercy, without any sympathy they worked our fore-bears. They suffered, they bled, they died. But with their sufferings, with their blood, which they shed in their death, they had a hope that one day their posterity would be free, and we are assembled here tonight as the children of their hope...

God never intended that man should enslave his fellow, and the price of such a sin or such a violation of Heaven's law must be paid by everyone. As for me, because of the blessed past, because of the history that I know, so long as there is within me the breath of life and the spirit of God, I shall struggle on and urge others of our race to struggle on to see that justice is done to the black peoples of the world. Yes, we appreciate the sorrows of the past, and we are going to work in the present that the sorrows of our generation shall not be perpetuated in the future. On the contrary, we shall strive that by our labors, succeeding generations of our own shall call us blessed, even as we call the generation of the past blessed today....

If humanity is regarded as made up of the children of God and God loves all humanity (we all know that) then God will be more pleased with that race that protects all humanity than with the race that outrages the children of God.²

III. A Song That Speaks to the Moment

The song, “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free” was composed by jazz pianist and educator Dr. Billy (William) Taylor and Richard C. Lamb, and most famously performed by Nina Simone. Her rendition brought widespread attention to the song; it was subsequently performed by the likes of Solomon Burke and Ray Charles. Penned in 1954, this musical composition enjoyed its greatest popularity during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. More importantly, although the piece has a particular historic origin, its title and core message express several of the fundamental themes of the overall black freedom struggle since the era of slavery, namely the passionate wish of black people to live freely in America with a full sense of dignity and humanity.

I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free

And I wish I knew how
It would feel to be free
I wish that I could break
All the chains holding me
I wish I could say
All the things that I'd like to say
Say 'em loud say 'em clear
For the whole round world to hear
I wish I could share
All the love that's in my heart
Remove every doubt
It keeps us apart
And I wish you could know
What it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
Every man should be free

I wish I could live

Like I'm longin' to live
I wish I could give
What I'm longin' to give
And I wish I could do
All the things I'd like to do
You know they'll still miss part of you
Yes Sir...
And I'm way, way over due

I wish I could be like a bird up in the sky

*Youtube video: I Wish I knew
How It Would Feel to Be Free
By Nina Simone
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFRiVCQ-cvg>*

How sweet it would be
If I found out I could fly
So long to my song
And look down upon the sea
And I sing because I know
I would see you
I sing because I know
I would see you
And I sing because I know
I would see you.³

IV. Cultural Responses to Juneteenth and the Emancipation Proclamation

(A) Juneteenth

I always found it odd that the best known and most highly regarded holiday celebrating the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation was known as Juneteenth. I found it fascinating that the festive commemoration of Lincoln's controversial decree, which was initially issued on September 22, 1862 and officially put in effect on January 1, 1863, would take place in the middle of June.

That was until I learned the truth of the matter. Although numerous states had begun implementing the Emancipation Proclamation (i.e. freeing slaves), many Confederate dominated states were slow to do so, or didn't act on it at all until the arrival of General Gordon Granger and his Union troops on June 19, 1865. Upon taking possession of the Lone Star state from Confederate forces, Granger's troops were authorized by the federal government to guarantee the transition of African Americans throughout the region from slavery to freedom. Granger read a decree which says in part:

The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. ...⁴

For this reason, more than a century following emancipation, the state of Texas served as the primary home of Juneteenth festivals.

Texas is also the only state that officially recognizes Juneteenth as a state holiday.

In 1913, in commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, there were particularly large celebrations in African American communities in Texan towns and cities. Regrettably, this special day has lost much of its inherent significance due to the general neglect of history that is so prevalent amongst many Americans regardless of race. Each year, with the onset of summertime, Rev. Dr. Michael A. Bell of Greater St. Stephen First Church of Fort Worth, Texas would often comment that Juneteenth was "the official start of the Negro Barbeque Season." Although he intended the remark in a half-joking fashion, his words indicated a sad fact: for all the blood, sweat, and tears that our enslaved ancestors shed for too many years in order to dream of the

chance to be free, we now live in a day and time when the very notion of what it means to be “free” can be taken for granted. Lest we forget, following is more information about Juneteenth which was provided by Sharon Fuller, who also prepared the worship resource for this lectionary moment.

What is Juneteenth?

June 19th is perhaps the oldest holiday celebrated by African Americans; it is the grandfather of all such observances. Juneteenth is a cultural observance. June 19, 1865 marks the date that *all* slaves in the United States were officially made “free.”

Who developed Juneteenth?

Freed slaves in the state of Texas created and developed the June 19th celebration in 1866. Legend has it that the name Juneteenth was derived from a little Negro girl who could not pronounce “June 19.” She said “Juneteenth” and the name caught on and was used throughout the state of the Texas.

When is Juneteenth observed?

Juneteenth is officially observed on June 19; however, the celebration may last one to seven days. On this lectionary, it is slated for celebration for January 1 and has been joined with Emancipation Proclamation Day for two reasons. First, the Emancipation Proclamation was given effect on **January 1, 1863**. Second, during the earliest Juneteenth celebrations the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation took center stage. Our goal is to give historical coverage to both events, understanding that Juneteenth is now almost always celebrated in June.

Where is Juneteenth observed?

This American holiday is celebrated primarily by African Americans and was originally celebrated by freed slaves located in the state of Texas. Juneteenth is now celebrated by many throughout the world.

Why is Juneteenth observed?

Juneteenth is observed to acknowledge that *all* slaves within the continental United States were freed at a certain point. This celebration acknowledged the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation while also acknowledging that the slaves of the state of Texas did not receive the news until almost 2½ years after the official signing and announcement was given. Large celebrations began in 1866.

African Americans in the state of Texas treat this day like the Fourth of July and the celebrations contain similar events. In the 1800s, the celebrations included a deeply religious tone: prayer service, speakers with inspirational messages, and preaching, after which the **reading of the Emancipation Proclamation was followed by stories from former slaves**. Barbeque, red soda water, desserts, and watermelon were served and enjoyed by all. Various games were played while rodeos and dances became serious contests for participants and the crowds alike.

(B) Cynicism about the Emancipation Proclamation

As the years went on and life in America continued to be deeply unfair towards African Americans, a profound cynicism towards both Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation grew in many circles. In fact, several leading African American intellectuals, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Julius Lester, and Martin Luther King Jr. among others, essentially described the Emancipation Proclamation as worthless in its overall impact upon race relations in the United

States.

Perhaps the most rigorous reproach of Lincoln's famous decree by a black scholar was Lerone Bennett's treatise, Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream.⁵ In that book, Mr. Bennett asserted that Lincoln was a white supremacist who issued the Emancipation Proclamation in lieu of the genuine racial reforms which radical abolitionists-both black and white-forcefully advanced in the midst of the American Civil War. In response to such charges, numerous white Lincoln scholars and experts on the Civil War/Reconstruction era were compelled to defend the power of the Proclamation. Allen C. Guelzo, for example, argued that Lincoln was America's "last Enlightenment politician" and, as such, was dedicated to removing slavery strictly within the bounds of the law.⁶ Ironically, Guelzo also noted that professional historians' lack of substantial attention to the document was due to the fact that it had been the subject of so few major scholarly studies.

Nevertheless, the great truth of the Emancipation Proclamation is that, whether it was deemed all powerful or pitifully impotent, the very existence of the document lit a spark of hope for millions of women, men, and children who never thought their long night of toil, torture, and torment would ever end. The words of that simple political instrument were transformed into a clarion call to the enslaved that they truly served the God of the oppressed "who sat high and looked low" and took a hand in changing the tide of human history in their favor. As such, the proclamation has always had an infinitely greater psychological and spiritual impact than political importance.

V. Stories and Illustrations

In his autobiography, Up from Slavery, African American educator Booker T. Washington discussed the immediate impact and reaction that emancipation had upon the slave community to which he belonged. In his memoirs, Washington remembered that fateful day in early 1865 when he was a nine year-old boy:

As the great day drew nearer, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. It was bolder, had more ring, and lasted later into the night [and] most of the verses of the plantation songs had some reference to freedom. Some man who seemed to be a stranger (a United States officer, I presume) made a little speech and then read a rather long paper - the Emancipation Proclamation, I think. After the reading we were told that we were all free, and could go when and where we pleased. My mother, who was standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us what it all meant, that this was the day for which she had been so long praying, but fearing that she would never live to see.⁷

Washington's recollections imply that many formerly enslaved persons were deeply uncertain about their future in this new era of freedom. Understandably, hearing that one was finally free had a profound effect on how women, men, and children who had been born and raised into a world defined by slavery regarded themselves and their surroundings. The patterns of black southern life changed drastically in the former Confederacy as the freed people lived into their newly gained liberty. According to historian Tera Hunter, there was a phenomenon of special note wherein African American women took every opportunity to move away from laboring in the fields of their former

masters in order to spend their time and energy caring for themselves and their families. Many black folks left the plantations and farms where they had been enslaved and headed toward nearby towns and cities where, as one freedman recounted, “freedom was free-er.” Being no longer fettered by the evil yoke of slavery, thousands of black southerners walked the highways and byways of the American South in the hopes of reuniting with long-lost family members, legalizing marital vows, or simply being mobile enough “to ‘joy their freedom.”⁸

Furthermore, as word of emancipation spread across the land, it evoked a wide array of other responses. First and foremost, Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation garnered nearly 200,000 black troops for the Union army (75 percent were formerly enslaved black men) from 1862 until the war’s end in 1865. This essentially transformed the Northern forces into a veritable army of liberation in the eyes of countless black folks in both the North and the South. Throughout the South, there were other more intense responses to the demise of American slavery. For instance, upon hearing the news of their freedom, the newly emancipated African Americans of Choctaw County, Mississippi proceeded to capture and whip Nat Best, their former slave master, in retribution for his past inhumanity towards them. Meanwhile, a parade with a black-draped coffin bearing a banner saying “Slavery is Dead” in Charleston, South Carolina, drew a crowd in excess of 10,000 onlookers. Finally, in the Free African Church in Richmond, Virginia, the news of liberation was greeted by over 1,500 women, men, and children who gathered in the church sanctuary to sing hymns and give praises to God for their victory over inhuman bondage.

VI. Making this a Memorable Learning Moment

The following information is provided to assist Preachers, Christian Education leaders and worship leaders in making Emancipation Proclamation and Juneteenth memorable for their congregations.

- Traditionally, Juneteenth is celebrated as a large, all-day feast in a park or a similar venue. The customary cuisine for Juneteenth includes traditional “soul food” served in a pot luck fashion. Whereas the menu tends to vary depending on the regional fare, the meal typically associated with the Juneteenth celebration includes barbecue, fried chicken, greens, cakes, pies, cornbread, red soda, ice cream, and watermelon. Juneteenth would be a significant moment in the calendar year to be certain to highlight the historical origins of African American foods so that present and future generations might better understand the nature of black people’s attachment to what we eat and why. This would be a great project for youth and seniors to do together. Youth could use their technological skills to produce graphics and images of food, and seniors could provide text giving explanations about foods and history. **A cookbook could even be produced and sold to raise money for youth scholarships.**
- In addition to musical performances and other festivities, Juneteenth celebrations often include a public reading of the Emancipation Proclamation as well as excerpts of various ex-slave narratives. These oratorical exercises serve as a historical reminder that, as descendents of the enslaved, we have been proclaimed free indeed. A meaningful way of expanding this practice could be done by interspersing those texts about American enslavement alongside readings

from the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible to show connections between the story of blacks and the story of Moses and the Israelites. This is another opportunity to have youth participate and learn their history. The church can have youth recite lines from the Emancipation Proclamation as well as other significant documents.

- Many African American families also use this opportunity to retrace their ancestry either formally through genealogical research or informally in terms of planning family reunions to coincide with Juneteenth celebrations nationwide. The idea of retracing one's ancestry is also a great idea to use to make your congregations celebration of Emancipation and Juneteenth more meaningful.
- During Juneteenth, celebrants often sing songs drawn from the African American musical tradition such as *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, *Wade in the Water*, and *Lift Every Voice and Sing* as well as reciting poetry from the African-American literary canon by authors such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Maya Angelou among others.

VII. Audio Visual Aids

To help listeners remember the morning sermon and the message of the text(s) one may want to put in the bulletin/order of service, or use on screens in the church:

- Images of the Emancipation Proclamation text;
- Images of notable African Americans of the Civil War era such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Henry McNeal Turner, and members of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry and;
- The Pan-African color scheme of red, black, and green which have often been adopted and worked into decorations for Emancipation Day and Juneteenth celebrations.

Sources to Learn more about The Emancipation Proclamation and Juneteenth

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