



EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION DAY AND JUNETEENTH

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**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.

Yolanda Pierce, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Elmer G. Homrighausen Associate Professor of African American Religion and Literature,
Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ

Lection - Exodus 15: 20-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.20) Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. (v.21) And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Emancipation Proclamation Day

What a wonderful way to begin this extraordinary new year—talking about freedom. On January 1, 1863, as the nation approached its third year of the bloody and horrific Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation declaring freedom for "all persons held as slaves." While this was a bold declaration in sentiment, it did not actually free all enslaved persons from bondage because it applied only to states that had seceded from the Union, thus leaving slavery legal in the border states and in those parts of the Confederacy already under Northern control.

However, the impact of the spirit of the Emancipation Proclamation cannot be denied; it brought the cause of the emancipation of enslaved people to the very heart of this war. Every battle waged after January 1, 1863 struck a blow to the inhumane institution of slavery and advanced the cause of immediate emancipation. Lincoln's declaration also legitimized the service of black

men into the Union Army and Navy, thus allowing the enslaved to be full participants in the struggle for their own freedom. By the end of the war, almost 200,000 African American soldiers and sailors had fought for the Union and for freedom.

It wasn't until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, on December 18, 1865, that slavery was truly abolished. However, the Emancipation Proclamation stands as a great document of human freedom, reminding us that words are powerful tools in striking a blow to injustice, inequality, and oppression everywhere.

Juneteenth

On June 19, 1865, two thousand federal troops arrived in Galveston, Texas to take possession of the state from the Confederacy and enforce the emancipation of enslaved persons living there. Although the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued two years earlier, actual bodily freedom was slow in coming to the lives of the majority of enslaved men and women living in former Confederate strongholds. For a full two and a half years after Lincoln's famous address, African American men and women in places such as Texas continued to live under the confines of chattel slavery, some of them completely unaware that they were no longer legally under the oppressor's yoke.

Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, is the commemoration of this June 19, 1865 freedom event in Texas. And while the celebration of this day originated in Texas, it is now celebrated throughout the United States and in several countries. Usually commemorated in both public and private celebrations, Juneteenth is a festive remembrance of freedom. Whether at a church picnic or a dance festival in the park, Juneteenth has a celebratory flavor as an entire people look back and wonder "how they got over." For African Americans, more importantly, this day represents the continuing legacy of resistance to oppression and our survival and endurance in the face of genocide due to God's sustaining power and deliverance.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Exodus 15:20-21

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In the Akan language of Ghana, "*sankofa*" is a term that translates to "go back and take." *Sankofa* symbolizes the action of taking from the past that which is good, and bringing it into the present in order to make positive changes for the future. As we enter a new year, we must retrieve from our past that which was important to our continued survival and our success – even as we approach the future with a new vision. While the African American past is a painful legacy, there is much joy there, as well. Our foremothers and forefathers were able to pass on a love for community, a love for God, and a love for all people, despite their enslavement. What a good way to begin a year—passing on the things which are most important.

As we celebrate emancipation and deliverance, we must do so with a full recognition of the costs of that freedom. In reverence, we cannot forget the sixty million and more who died during the transatlantic slave voyage and the many centuries of slavery. We must remember those who endured second class citizenship under Jim Crow. We must not forget that the battle for freedom is ever waging. In the spirit of the Emancipation Proclamation and in the spirit of Juneteenth, we

must declare words of freedom for all who are in bondage, of every creed, color, nation, and persuasion. Chattel slavery in the United States is over, but slavery continues to exist all over the globe, as in Sudan or in the exploitation of migrant workers. When the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, we are called to proclaim liberty to the captive and release to the prisoners (Isaiah 61:1b). Are we doing all that we can to ensure that all people are free? What a good way to begin the year—fighting for freedom for others.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In this song of Moses and Miriam, the children of Israel celebrate the fact that the Lord has just led them through the Red Sea and has utterly destroyed many of the pursuing Egyptians. They are free. Safely delivered from their bondage, the people break out into a song of praise, accompanied with dancing and the playing of musical instruments. This spontaneous act of worship, and its spirit of thanksgiving, reflects the gratitude of the children of Israel for their safe passage from slavery to freedom.

“The prophet Miriam.” While known primarily for her role as the sister of Moses and Aaron, Miriam is designated with the title of “prophet” in this song. Miriam is the first woman to be called a prophet, affirming God’s promise that God’s spirit would be poured out on all flesh, male *and* female (Joel 2:28). God sets all people free. The Word of God also makes clear that Miriam, *along* with Moses and Aaron, is to be a spiritual and political leader for the children of Israel (Micah 6:4). God’s deliverance even sets us free from patriarchal bondage. In this portion of the praise song, she takes an active leadership role; as a skilled musician, she conducts the women in both singing and tambourine playing. She leads the joyful praise in song, dance, and music, because of what the Lord has done. God has delivered.

“With tambourines and with dancing.” The joy felt at the defeat of the enemy and the end of bondage could scarcely be contained. The people worshipped with their whole bodies and with their whole beings. Even in bondage, the children of Israel crafted works of art, implied by the fact that their tambourines (timbrels or tabrets) are immediately available to them as they begin to celebrate their deliverance. The many generations of oppression had not destroyed their creative impulse, so the women danced, sang, and beat their instruments because of their delivering God. As King David would one day dance, so, too, do the Israelites dance in reverence at the victorious power of their delivering God (2 Samuel 6:14). What a wonderful way to begin a year—dancing before the Lord because of deliverance.

“Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.” The voices of the Israelites rose together in celebration and in remembrance. The extent of their celebration is in direct proportion to their deliverance. As God has triumphed gloriously, the children of Israel sing gloriously. Most likely, the song that was sung was one that had been created during the days of bondage. Slavery could not steal the songs in their hearts. This is also evident throughout black history, past and present. By speaking those things that were not, as though they were, the Israelites give witness to the power of faith in God for an entire people. The songs of freedom, created during slavery, reached glorious heights of praise when sung by a free people. Enslavement did not have the final say. God did.

“Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” The defeat of the enemy of the Israelites was definitive and complete. The enemy and their means of retreat, their horses, have been cast into the sea. When God performs a work, God does it thoroughly and completely. The Israelites, safely crossing the Red Sea, watch their enemies drown with the full realization that it is God’s power that protects and sustains them.

Celebration

Despite being pressed by the weight of slavery on every side, we celebrate that our spirits were not crushed. Even in those moments when we have been perplexed by the religious justification of our enslavement, we celebrate that we have never despaired of God’s loving care towards us. God delivers when no one else does. Although we have been persecuted by the slaver’s whip and the lyncher’s rope, we celebrate the fact that God has never abandoned us. We celebrate with joy that despite attempts to strike us down individually and collectively, we have never been destroyed. We celebrate that God is with us and that God is revealed through us. (2 Corinthians 4:8-11) Praise God, we begin this year celebrating the favor of God.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: See Miriam and the women beating tambourines and dancing; see the horses and riders thrown into the sea;

Sounds: Hear the tambourines and the dancing feet; hear Miriam sing; hear the sea splashing;

Smells: The salty smell of the sea; and

Textures: The smooth calf-skin feel of the tambourine covers.

III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

“I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves...”

-- Harriet Tubman