

Gettin' to the Promised Land: Salt and Light for the Journey

Deuteronomy 7:11-17 (“The Message”): *God wasn’t attracted to you and didn’t choose you because you were big and important—the fact is, there was almost nothing to you. He did it out of sheer love, keeping the promise he made to your ancestors. God stepped in and mightily bought you back out of that world of slavery, freed you from the iron grip of Pharaoh, King of Egypt. Know this: God, your God, is God indeed, a God you can depend upon. He keeps his covenant of loyal love with those who love him and observe his commandments for a thousand generations. ...*

Matthew 5:13-16 (“The Message”): *Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on the light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.*

[In call-and-response style with the congregation:]

“God is Good! ... All the Time!

“All the Time! ... God is Good!

“God may not show up when we want Him! ... But God is ALWAYS ON TIME!

“Love is stronger than hate ... and love always wins!”

My brothers and sisters in Christ, if you can say those things—even when times are tough and even when you feel that God has been silent way too long; if you can say them and really mean them—even just a little; if you have a sense deep down, at least some of the time, that no matter what life serves up, God is good and that God is always on time; then you know a little about the Promised Land.

You know what it means to hope in something that is so much more than this world can offer. You know that any pharaoh in this world doesn't have the final word. But God does.

You know that being brothers and sisters and loving each other and struggling for what Dr. King called "The Beloved Community" has more value than a new car or any achievement this world can offer.

You know—indeed, as I look at all of you here—I know that each of us knows a little about the Promised Land. And if we haven't caught a glimpse of it in a while, we pine for it. We pine for a world of freedom for all, peace, and a world where people dance through their lives much more than slog through their days. We pine for the day when every human being is free—really free.

Black History Month Is Born

But I'm getting ahead of myself here. Let me talk about little about Black History Month. For as long I have been associated with this church, which has been over 22 years, First Presbyterian Church in Benton Harbor has celebrated Black History Month in February. Many of you know that the practice of focusing on the contributions of black Americans began in 1926, when historian Carter Woodson encouraged the practice of integrating the contributions of black Americans into American history, contributions that were often left out of the telling of American history. At that time, Langston Hughes wrote the poem, "I, too, Sing America," noting

that it isn't just people of European descent who know and love America and who have sweated and toiled on this land. The second week of February was chosen at the time because Abraham Lincoln's birthday is on February 12, and Frederick Douglass's birthday is on February 14. Both were significant leaders in the abolition of slavery.

Eventually, the practice grew into a month-long celebration that not only happens in the United States, but also in Canada and the United Kingdom. While history books are much better now than they were at including the stories and contributions of African Americans in our history, many of us agree that there is still a need to lift up the unique struggle and courage and accomplishments of American men and women of African descent—to lift up the faith and Gospel witness of the descendants of African slaves in this country who have strengthened, deepened and given all of us hope in ways we may not even realize.

The story of the Hebrew slaves in the Old Testament, and how God freed them from Pharaoh and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land, has had deep resonance in the black community and in black history in this country. The struggle for freedom, for equal opportunity, safety within the law, to be seen as somebody in a country that originally only saw them as three-fifths human, and so many other struggles, is a struggle still going on in the lives of many African Americans. One hundred and fifty-four years since the Emancipation Proclamation, over 50 years since the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s—while much ground has been covered, there is still a long way to go. Particularly in the tense political climate of our times, sometimes we wonder, “Will we ever get to the Promised Land?”

So this will be our theme in worship for Black History month this year: “Gettin’ to the Promised Land.” I will preach two Sundays. Our beloved George Barfield will preach on February 19, bringing with him some of his new friends from Grand Haven. And Pastor Paul Campbell, a fiery, loving and prophetic preacher from the Overflow Church, will preach the last Sunday of the month.

Pharaohs Still Have Iron Grips on Us

In the *Message* passage that Shirley read from Deuteronomy, the people had already gotten to the Promised Land. They had been freed from slavery, they had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, and they finally crossed the Jordan River into a land flowing with milk and honey. In this text we are told that God released the Hebrew slaves from the IRON GRIP of Pharaoh. So getting to this new Promised Land—the land over the Jordan River that was flowing with milk and honey and freedom—was a land where they would be free from the iron grip of Pharaoh.

When they were slaves they woke up every morning to fulfill the commands of Pharaoh and build Pharaoh's world, and if they didn't, they would get beaten and much more. And many wise writers believe that even in the wilderness, after they had been freed from Pharaoh, he still had a grip on their hearts and their identities, and that it took years in the wilderness to help them trust God and trust that they were not slaves but they were free men and women. The iron grips of the pharaohs of this world can be strong indeed.

Iron grips. Even today, the iron grip of Pharaoh can seize us. This week I was in both St. Joseph High School and Benton Harbor High School. The disparity of what is available to students in these schools continues to profoundly grieve me. In our community and nation we find unequal opportunities, overrepresentation of black men in the criminal justice system, pay inequities, and more! Oh, the iron grips of Pharaoh are still at work in our world.

Will we ever get to the Promised Land?

Those of us who are white or have access to the resources we need to survive each day really cannot have a sense of what it is like to live in a world where one never knows when the iron

grips of Pharaoh will seize them.

But all of us, black and white, do know how easily fear can grip us. Fear for our children, fear for our futures, fear of “the other.”

All of us know the pharaohs of bitterness and unforgiveness can bind our lives. The same is true of the pharaoh of self-denigration. It is so easy for us to forget who we are and whose we are. That we belong to God and are loved beyond measure. The iron grip of Pharaoh would like us to forget that.

The iron grip of Pharaoh still tries to seize us and pull us down in this world.

The ‘Pharaoh’ in Jesus’s Day

Our text from Matthew might give us some help in dealing with Pharaoh’s iron grip. In Jesus’s day, the Romans were in charge. Roman oppression was the pharaoh in that day. The Romans had the power, hogged the resources and looked down on people who were not Romans. Talk about an “iron grip!” There was really no way in that culture that the Jews ever could have expected a fair shake from the Roman government, that they ever could be free. And to make matters worse, many in the religious institutions cozied up to the government in hopes of getting their fair share of the pie. Imagine that!—religious leaders selling their souls to politicians for power and prestige and who knows what else?

Many hoped that Jesus would be the one to help set them free from Roman oppression—to be the “Moses” to help free them from this new “iron grip” of the pharaoh of their day.

Jesus came on the scene, on the heels of John the Baptist, preaching a new kind of Kingdom. A “Promised Land,” if you will, that didn’t follow the rules of the world and didn’t need the power of the world. We’ve been talking the past couple of weeks about that Kingdom, this “Promised Land,” that Jesus brings. Last week we looked at the Beatitudes and that we are blessed as we

receive the undaunted acceptance and love of God and live deeply amid the trials and joys of life.

This week we are still in the Sermon on the Mount. If you remember, in this “Sermon,” which was most likely a series of sermons, Jesus sat down and was getting intimate with his disciples. His disciples were some of the “small” people of the day. They were not Romans. They didn’t have money or power. They were in the oppressed class. They were trying to figure out how to live in a world where the pharaohs of that day certainly had an “iron grip” on how they could live in the world.

Salt of the Earth, Light of the World

And this is what Jesus told them. You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. The pharaohs may think they rule the roost. But we know something deeper. Salt, of course, is a seasoning that gives flavor and pizzazz to food. Jesus was telling his disciples that their lives, their loving, their values were to give flavor to the world and change the whole taste of the world in which Pharaoh seems to have an iron grip. Salt in that day was also a preservative. They didn’t have refrigerators and freezers. So to preserve meats and other foods, they had to be salted. Jesus seems to be saying to his disciples that they are to preserve what is right and good and beautiful in a culture where the pharaoh has an “iron grip.”

So, the promise for all is that Pharaoh’s iron grip does not and will not have the final word. And one thing we can do is to be salt and light along the way to the Promised Land. And as we sprinkle our salt of love and hope—sprinkle the vision of “God is good! All the Time” and shake out our believe that God always does show up ON TIME—we can sprinkle this vision of the Promised Land into our world by God’s grace.

John Lewis’s Life is Salt

If you haven’t listened to or read Congressman John Lewis’s story, I hope you will. It is not

political reading; it is spiritual reading. It would be good spiritual reading for you in this Black History month. His books are “Walking With the Wind” and “Across that Bridge.” Also, his recent interview with Krista Tippett from “On Being” is rich and full, and you can find it online.

He was born a poor sharecropper’s son in the South in 1940—smack dab in the middle of Jim Crow. But, early on, he caught a glimpse of the Promised Land. Although he was poor and saw his parents struggle under the weight of poverty; although he attended substandard “separate but equal” schools and knew that men who looked like him were lynched; although he was beaten in a march with Dr. King and was incarcerated 40 times for peaceful protests—in spite of all this he had a glimpse of the Promised Land is in his soul, and he couldn’t and wouldn’t let it go—and he still won’t let it go to this day.

Lewis nurtured this vision by choosing the discipline of love in the face of hate. He has spent his lifetime sprinkling the salt of freedom and a vision of the Promised Land in Atlanta, in his family, in the House of Representatives and wherever he goes. This is a daily discipline for him. When you listen to his story, I promise it will bring out the flavors of hope and freedom in your life. His story, full of God’s love, helps preserve the vision of the freedom for all and helps us see the good in all people—even our enemies.

John Lewis’s life not only is like “salt;” he is also an example of being “Light.” He calls himself a pilot light and not a firecracker. He says the journey to freedom and to justice is long and is not for the faint of heart. It takes tenacity and devotion and perseverance and discipline. It’s like a pilot light that keeps the furnace going all winter long. It’s like a pilot light that keeps the stove ready when it is time for someone to cook up some new justice. He shared this light by seeing what he calls “the light of the divine” in every person—even his enemies.

Now, lest you forget, John Lewis is an ordinary man. Since John Lewis is a famous congressman, we forget that he started out just like us. Ordinary. All you have to be is an ordinary person with

a tiny salt shaker or a little match to start spreading salt and light into the world. To spread the vision of the Promised Land into the world.

Anita Robinson and The Pencils

I've told you about Anita Robinson before. She was a principal I worked with in Macon, Georgia. When I'm with Virginia Maxwell of our own congregation, I'm often reminded of Anita. Anita never knew her dad. She was raised by her mom in one of the housing projects of our country, and she would often say, "I never really knew I was poor because I was so loved!" Anita always dressed to the nines and walked with her beautiful brown head held tall, loving every child in our school. She hugged the children, expected them to dress and walk with dignity, expected them to work hard, and expected her teachers to work hard. She carried the vision of the Promised Land in her heart for every child and she was constantly spreading the salt of affirmation, high expectations, love, and hard work herself.

One story about Anita: There was a sixth-grader from the housing project next door to the school who had weak fine motor skills and had trouble with writing. He came into the office one day and told Anita, with that attitude only a sixth-grader can muster, "I can't write. Don't make me."

She pulled out a pencil and sharpened and gave it to him. She said, "Ah, yes you can. Your writing may not be pretty, but you can write. You just need to practice and find the right pencil." She sat with him a few minutes, and he promised to try. The next day she came into my office with a big smile and showed me a bag of pencils she had gotten—about 50 of them, all with different things on the. One had smiley faces, one had footballs, one had flags. You know what I'm talking about. And each day she asked him to come to the office for a minute and she asked how his writing was going. Then she would give him a new pencil. "Maybe this one can help you write." Sprinkling salt of love and belief and affirmation is what she did. Her pilot light was always on. I heard that this young man ended up writing lots of stories and eventually went to

the University of Georgia.

This is how we are meant to live in this world. Holding glimpses and hope for the Promised Land in our hearts and sprinkling that where we go. We are meant to be pilot lights—ever burning and keeping the vision of freedom and love alive for all.

Even as I say all this, I look around and realize I am preaching to the choir. There is a room full of salt shakers and pilot lights here. But sometimes we need some encouragement. Especially in days like these when the divisions and racism in our country seem deeper than ever before, and some people are afraid of losing basic freedoms that people lost their lives to secure. At times like this we need to keep being salt and keep being those pilot lights.

You Salt Shakers, You Pilot Lights: Keep On!

It is easy to lose heart or get bitter. We may surely be tempted to get very discouraged by some things going on in Washington and around the world these days. It is tempting to think that nothing will ever change—especially when we look back over history and it seems like we are repeating it once again.

But let's keep sharing that glimpse of the Promised Land: God is good! All the Time! All the Time! God is Good! God will show up Right on Time! Love is always stronger than hate, and love always wins!

I wonder if that is why Jesus had to circle up his disciples close on that mountaintop when he was teaching them as the Romans and their power lurked behind every corner. I wonder if that is why he had to get really close and intimate and remind them to keep being salt, to keep adding love and God flavors to this world, to keep that light on no matter what happens.

So, you salt shakers, you pilot lights: Keep on keeping on! Keep loving! Keep marching! Keep

working!

Because: God IS good – All the time! All the time! God IS Good.

God may not come when we want Him, but he is ALWAYS on Time!

Love is always stronger than hate. . . and LOVE always wins!

Let's keep marching to the Promised Land!

Amen! Amen!