
Leaving Slavery Behind

Exodus 12:1-15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 7, 2014 by Dr. Anatheia Portier-Young

The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. They were a convenient supply of labor, and easy to identify as “other” by their customs, their bodies, and their worship. The supply cities of Pharaoh, warehouses of national ambition and stockpiles against fear, were built with the sweat and blood, the muscle and bone of Hebrew slaves. When they cried out to their taskmasters, to protest the harsh conditions of their life and labor, they were beaten. They were given quotas for the making of bricks, for the building of monumental architecture that would hoard wealth and proclaim glory for an earthly king. They were *deprived* of raw materials that would enable them to meet their quotas. They were put in an impossible situation and punished for the consequences of conditions they did not create. Their babies were taken from them and drowned in the river. Their hope and future, ripped from their arms and choked in treacherous, dirty water.

When the Pharaoh looked at the Hebrew people – they were multiplying, growing, against the impossible odds – Pharaoh viewed the Hebrew people with fear – fear that if he set them free they might chart their own course. If he set them free, he might lose his free labor. If he set them free, they might oppose his rule, might challenge his hegemony, might demand rights he was not willing to give them. On the visible surface, slavery benefited Pharaoh, and he held on tight.

This economy of slavery would become for Egypt an economy of death. It would cost Pharaoh and his people what and whom they held most dear: every first born among them. When the economy and achievements of a culture are built on exploitation, domination, and brutality, built on the degrading of human bodies and human life, built on the denial of personhood, that culture is bound for death. That culture has already lost its firstborn.

And Moses said to the Pharaoh, let my people go.

Surely, not I, Lord. Surely, we are not Egypt. Surely, we are not the ones holding your people captive. Surely, not I. Surely, we left slavery behind long ago. The church condemns it. On this we are clear.

The 2013 Global Slavery Index [reports](#) that nearly 30 million women, children, and men are enslaved around the world today. Their slavery has many forms. For millions, especially women and girls, it is prostitution, forced marriage, or other sexual and reproductive exploitation. Others – an estimated [16.4 million](#) – are forced into labor in spheres ranging from domestic work and agriculture to construction and manufacturing. Others are tricked, kidnapped, and/or sold for illegal adoption, forced begging, armed combat, forced crime, and organ harvesting. As globalization continues to increase demand for cheap labor and movement across borders, human trafficking – sale and movement of people for forced labor, including prostitution – has become the [“fastest growing international crime.”](#) It nets traffickers billions of dollars in profit each year.¹

But that must be somewhere else? 15 to 17 thousand people are trafficked into the US each year.² An estimated 60,000 are illegally enslaved in the United States today.³

¹ This paragraph is excerpted from Anatheia Portier-Young, “Slavery, Surrogacy, and Society: Making a Future in the Wilderness,” *Huffington Post*, June 16, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anatheia-portieryoung/slavery-surrogacy-and-society_b_5500251.html. Sources for statistics are embedded as live links.

² US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report 2006.

³ <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/united-states/> accessed September 7, 2014.

But surely not I, Lord. When we buy cheap retail clothing, stuffed animals, shower curtains, chocolate, we are, whether knowingly or unknowingly, supporting and sustaining the economy of slavery.⁴ When we turn a blind eye to the pornography and sex industries, degrade prostitutes, accept the premise that human beings can be used and viewed for pleasure until they are consumed, abused, and thrown away, we support and sustain the economy of slavery.

People at greatest risk for modern slavery are those who experience discrimination in the workplace and legal system, with limited or no access to financial and medical assistance, migrants who are cut off from their networks of support. Risks are greatest where there is crisis, instability, and corruption. When we do nothing to rectify the inequities that leave whole groups of people in our society vulnerable to these conditions, we support and sustain the economy of slavery.⁵

And Moses said to Pharaoh, Let my people go.

I've talked about trafficking. Illegal slavery. But there's something more.

Prisons in the United States, our system of mass incarceration, produces a different kind of slavery, and it is the poison fruit of what Douglas Blackmon has called "slavery by another name".⁶ The thirteenth amendment freed slaves. But it had a loophole: There shall exist in the US, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." Did you catch that? If someone has been convicted of a crime, that person can become a slave of the state. In the years since the civil war, rafts of laws have been enacted at the state and federal level that have criminalized *black* ways of life, criminalized being black, criminalized living in impossible circumstances, in order to justify the imprisonment of black men who would then legally be slaves once more. Increasingly the same is true for communities of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Police forces have been trained to profile, to spot criminals they should target for enforcement. They are trained to focus their efforts and attention on people of color, and their focused effort guarantees a steady stream of slave labor for our carceral system.

So to be clear, slavery is still legal in the United States, it is supported by our tax dollars, our legislatures, and our law enforcement practices, and it is managed through our prison system. Increasingly, the management of our prisons has become a for-profit enterprise. That means that private, for-profit corporations in the US have a stake in the growth of our prison population.⁷ That population has indeed grown, so that we can boast the largest documented prison population in the world. More than Russia, more than Rwanda – by wide margins.⁸ Mass incarceration and the slavery it enables in the United States affects all of us. But it disproportionately affects people of color.⁹ It is a legacy of racialized chattel slavery upon which so much of our economy depended in the 18th and 19th centuries.

And Moses said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go."

⁴ See, e.g., Elizabeth Cline, *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. Penguin, 2012 and Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2008.

⁵ This paragraph is excerpted and adapted from Anthea Portier-Young, "Slavery, Surrogacy, and Society: Making a Future in the Wilderness," *Huffington Post*, June 16, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anthea-portieryoung/slavery-surrogacy-and-society_b_5500251.html.

⁶ Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. Anchor Books, 2008.

⁷ Michael Hallett, *Private Prisons in America: A Critical Race Perspective* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁸ Roy Walmsley, International Centre for Prison Studies, "World Prison Population List" (9th edition, 2010) <http://www.icpr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/WPPL-9-22.pdf> accessed September 7, 2014.

⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New Press, 2010).

The greatest number of people in our prisons our men. Our first born sons. According to recent reports by Business Insider and ABC affiliate WSOCTV in Charlotte, an estimated one million of incarcerated men in the US are veterans of US military service, including 2000 in NC prisons. And I will share with you something else. The impossible circumstances, the economy of slavery, the trauma it begets, leaves its mark on the whole population, not just men. According to the Correctional Association of New York, 75% of incarcerated women in the US have experienced intimate household violence as adults, and 82% are survivors of abuse as children.¹⁰ Instead of addressing this problem at its source, and instead of asking how we as a people can provide healing for survivors of domestic violence and child abuse, we enslave them.

A few years ago I taught a course in the Raleigh Correctional Center for Women. And as part of a class session, we were examining biblical laws concerning Sabbath. And I called the class's attention to God's declaration in the Decalogue – you were once slaves in Egypt, but you are no longer slaves, and so you must keep the Sabbath in memory of your slavery and in memory of your liberation. And I asked the students to commit to Sabbath. But they turned to me with hard looks, and said, we *are* slaves. We do not get to choose to keep the Sabbath at a certain time. We are still slaves in Egypt.

And Moses said to Pharaoh, let my people go.

It is time for freedom. It is time to let go of slavery.

It is hard to slavery behind, but it is time. That's what God says: It is time to leave slavery behind.

Scripture tells us that it was a “mixed multitude” that left Egypt and entered the desert together. Israelite and Egyptian walked the desert road to freedom, together. It didn't matter which side of the doorway, which side of the line they came from, they could ALL answer God's call to leave slavery behind.

That long, circuitous, dry and dusty march out of slavery is going to take us on a hard road. That road is riddled with snakes and scorpions, doubt and despair. But it is a road filled with revelation. It is the only road we can walk if we will truly become a people, God's people, and live into our covenant calling as a freed and free people bound by our own choice to a radically free God who has also chosen us. We can say “yes, Lord, we will be free.” “Yes, Lord, we will all be free.” “Yes Lord, we will walk the hard road to freedom together and we will not go back to Egypt”.

We will not go back to Egypt. God knew that the people would want to go back. In the desert, God's people wanted so badly to get back to the thing they knew. It didn't matter that it was an awful, deadly thing that stole their freedom and future. They wanted so badly to get back to the Nile, to the meat and savory vegetables (Exodus 16:3; Numbers 11:5), God had to send them through a wilderness maze to ensure they could never find their way back to slavery in Egypt (Exodus 13:18).¹¹

And if we are on the outside of that story, it sounds crazy. Go back to slavery? Go back to Egypt? But we aren't outside the story. We are in the story. In this place and time, day after day, we keep going back. When Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri, we went back. When we as a nation militarized our domestic police forces,¹² we went back.

But God has ordained a different path for us. God has ordained a different road. It is a long road. A wilderness road. But we must walk it together into covenant, into release, into freedom for all.

¹⁰ <http://www.correctionalassociation.org/issue/domestic-violence> , accessed September 7, 2014.

¹¹ Paragraph adapted from Anatheia Portier-Young, “Commentary on Exodus 12:1-14,” WorkingPreacher.org 2014 http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2178 accessed September 7, 2014.

¹² Radley Balko, *The Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (Public Affairs, 2013).

Now I want to bring you back to this Old Testament lesson. To the Passover meal. To the Eucharistic meal that we celebrate today. God ordains that the people must let go of slavery together. They, we, can't do it by half, and no one can do it alone. God says, "tell the whole congregation" – all of them – to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household (Exod 12:3). They, we, are one people. The command is for every household. Every family. Each individual. No family will be left out, no household left out.

And if a household is too small, if they can't do it alone, if they don't have the resources, the strength, the means, the wherewithal, you shall join house to house! You shall join with your neighbor. And the lamb shall be apportioned so that every person has an *equal* portion (12:4).

The lamb is our strength. The lamb redeems our first born. The lamb sustains us for this hard journey. The lamb became a slave and gave his life and stands slain for us, so that we can let go of slavery and all be free. The lamb has committed everything, staked it all, on freedom. When we partake of this Eucharist, we commit to freedom. We join household to household, family to family, orphan to orphan, to strengthen one another, to refuse the economy of death, to leave slavery behind.

The lamb is slaughtered at twilight, literally "between the evenings" (12:7). That's the hour of transition between day and night, a time of ending and beginning. The lamb's blood on the doorposts shows us where we went in and how to get out. It's a bright red exit sign. The Hebrews were on their way out. God told them there was only one way to eat this last meal in Egypt. You have to eat it with shoes on your feet, traveling clothes on, staff in your hand. Be ready to move fast into freedom. Why a staff in your hand? It's going to propel you forward on that hard road, it's going to hold you up when you feel like *giving* up. And it's going to keep us from holding on to all the things we need to let go. If we are going to leave Egypt, the furniture can't come with us.

It is a new kind of time. **Today marks** a new time. God said to Moses, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you" (Exod 12:1) The first day. Why? It's the beginning of freedom-time. Let this Eucharist be your last meal in Egypt. It's time for us to leave slavery behind.