

October 1, 2017

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God's Name is Revealed

Scripture reading: Exodus 3:1b-15; 4:10-13

“God of the Exodus, God of the Oppressed”

“When I stand before customs-officers and police-commissioners, I smile mischievously, for no one detects the divine contraband, the stowaway, whose highly discreet presence is visible only to angels’ glances.” - Dom Helder Camara

Good morning. Okay, so I have to let you know: as soon as I read the scripture passages for today, I immediately got a Beyoncé song stuck in my head. Mind you, this would not be the first time. To be totally honest, I pretty much always have Beyoncé songs in my head. You see, we only have a CD player in our car and we really only play one CD -- and that's Beyoncé's *Lemonade* -- because our kids love it more than anything else. The girls know every single word to every single song, and in terms of just pure *heart*, I think Wendy could seriously compete with Beyoncé herself. The song that got stuck in my head this week is a song called “Freedom.” If you haven't heard it, you must, and really it is best to watch her sing it live with Kendrick Lamar (check YouTube). The chorus goes like this: “Freedom! Freedom! I can't move / Freedom, cut me loose! / Freedom! Freedom! Where are you? / Cause I need freedom too! I break chains all by myself / Won't let my freedom rot in hell / Hey! I'ma keep runnin' / Cause a winner don't quit on themselves.” It's a cry for freedom from slavery. It's a black feminist cry of self-determination and self-love. It's a battle cry for liberation, for release. The song is powerful and haunting; and it struck me that this is really an Exodus song. You see, the book of Exodus is what we might call a “freedom” narrative. It charts a movement *from* slavery *to* liberation; *from* bondage *to* freedom; *from* exile *to* exodus; *from* (social) death *to* new life.

The Exodus story begins with the brutal reality of slavery, with the sounds of the people of Israel *groaning* and *crying out* under the yoke of slavery, displacement, and exile. When we read these texts we assume that we are reading ancient history. But of course we are not. And for us, anyway, we cannot interpret and understand the present meaning of this narrative, the meaning of this narrative for us living in America, without at the same time bringing to mind the 250 year history of slavery in the United States. Nor can we understand the present context in which we live -- that is the world of Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter, the world of Colin Kaepernick and Donald Trump, the world of the white nationalism of Charlottesville and the black fists of Ferguson -- without grappling with this 250 year history of enslavement. You see, the present antagonisms are the afterlife of slavery. Slavery is, as one scholar has put it, “one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave.”¹ In

¹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 3.

other words, slavery sets up a relation of power that is constituted by total dominance over a people. In this way, slavery seeks to take the life out of a people. Slavery seeks to remove the image of God from human beings. And this relation of dominance is so extreme, so total, that some scholars have characterized slavery as *death* in social form. Slavery is social death.

Slavery in the American colonies was part of a wider ideological structure and system of ideas that was quite different than the ideas that supported earlier forms of slavery. These structures and systems were based on the idea that God had ordered the world and human beings in a *hierarchal relationship* and had done so along the lines of what early modern Europeans began calling “race.” Respected philosophers and scientists helped develop the idea that certain biological traits and social realities were representative of superior human qualities, while others were representative of inferior human qualities. It was argued that God had given some persons superiority over other persons and indeed these superior persons were to “care” for and govern those viewed as inferior persons. When Europeans encountered the unique customs and culture of African people, they decided that *dark skin* was a mark of inferior “race.” Many of the people who were slaveholders were also Christians and they viewed “racial difference” as divinely ordered; slavery was the destiny of this order. Christians who read their Bibles, who viewed this same Exodus story of freedom from slavery as scripture inspired by God, somehow also saw no contradiction between the Bible and a slaveholding society. In fact, they used the Bible to *justify* their right to enslave African people!

From the beginning, African people countered arguments for their enslavement and inferiority with different interpretations of scripture and different interpretations of God, insisting on God’s affirmation of their humanity and their blackness and on the history of God’s liberating activity on the behalf of the oppressed. These counter-interpretations drew their inspiration from the narrative we read this morning, the narrative of the Exodus. For here we see that it is out the cries of a people traumatized by slavery that God’s very name is revealed: in Hebrew, YHWH - “I am who I am”; or, as some scholars prefer, “I am who I will be.” Revealed in these passages is more than just another name for God. What is revealed is *who* God is, and we come to see the *who* of God by *what* God does among the people. The name of God means *freedom*. Salvation and redemption means liberation from the chains of slavery. It is from the context of God-abandonment that the name of God is revealed. It is from out of the depths of social death that their cries for help rise up to God. And the text tells us that God heard their groaning; God heard their cries. God is the One who listens and hears the cries of the oppressed; it is out of the horrors of slavery that the God who created the world out of nothing and the God who sustains the world in love, reveals the living truth of who God is and also who God is not.

While this narrative was often a source of hope for African slaves in the Americas, it was also pretty troubling at times, for God often did not seem to hear their cries for help. Was God a white racist? Sometimes it has felt that way. God often seemed silent to their cries. Where was their burning bush? Where was their deliverance? Even after emancipation, God seemed silent. It is out of the silence of God that blues and the spirituals emerged.

In 1906 W.E.B. DuBois protested against God's silence: "Done at Atlanta, in the Day of Death, 1906. O Silent God, though Whose voice afar in mist and mystery hath left our ears an-hungred in these fearful days. . . . Bewildered we are . . . mad with madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy Throne, we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen Fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers, by the blood of Thy crucified Christ: *What meaneth this?* Tell us the Plan; give us the Sign! Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering. Surely Thou too art not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing?"²

Can you hear the cry of the people of the Exodus in this litany? This cry is nothing other than what we mean by prayer, a prayer that rises up in the face of God's silence. Dorothee Sölle puts it this way: prayer is the act that refuses to "regard the ground of the world as an ice-cold silence."³ Even when prayer emerges in our despair over reality and our protest against the silence of God, it is paradoxically a radical expression of hope. And YHWH says, "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry" (Ex 3:7). God sees and feels and hears the misery of the enslaved people; indeed, we might say that the perspective of the oppressed just is the perspective of the biblical God, the God of the Exodus. God is partial to the one living in exile, to the stranger in a foreign land, to the slave whose freedom has been taken away. God does not look down upon the world from the heavens as some kind of bystander, as one who is *indifferent* to injustice and to the groans and cries that emerge from suffering, but as one who is intimately involved in the daily struggles of those who have been stripped of all belonging, of a place, of a home, bereft of the conditions that make and sustain human lives. It is out of the depths of tremendous human suffering that the people of Israel groan and cry out, and God hears these groans and cries as *prayer*. God does not stand idly by; God is not passive in the face of human suffering; the Spirit intercedes in the midst of the groaning of those living under the weight of the world. Nor does God call people to remain passive. Rather God calls us to be people whose hearts and eyes are open to the movement of grace, to perceive the cries of God's children in our world today. We are to be people of prayer, not by withdrawing from the world or closing our eyes and moving inward, but in and through our everyday lives. We are called to live in prayerful relation to the world around us with wide-open eyes and wide-open hearts, to listen for the voice of God precisely where God seems silent. And from these spaces we will most certainly hear the voice of Moses and the voice of Beyoncé: "Pharaoh, let my people go! Freedom, Freedom! Cut me loose!" Will we join them on that Exodus walk to freedom?

² W.E.B. DuBois, "A Litany at Atlanta," in *Black Voices*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1968), 360, 362.

³ Dorothee Sölle, *Mysticism and Resistance*, 294.