

Spiritual Slavery

by Rev. Lisa Ann Moss Degrenia¹

OPENING PRAYER: Fill my cup Lord. I lift it up Lord.
 Come and quench this thirsting of my soul.
 Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more.
 Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole.²

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 81 (NRSV)

1 Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob.
 2 Raise a song, sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp.
 3 Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our festal day.
 4 For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
 5 He made it a decree in Joseph, when he went out over the land of Egypt. I hear a voice I had not known:
 6 "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket.
 7 In distress you called, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah
 8 Hear, O my people, while I admonish you; O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
 9 There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god.
 10 I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.
 11 "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me.
 12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.
 13 O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!
 14 Then I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes.
 15 Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him, and their doom would last forever.
 16 I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."



This week, People Magazine featured the incredible story of Jaycee Lee Duggard. Jaycee was abducted from her school bus stop when she was 11 years old. She was forced to work in her abductor's print shop and to bear him two children. She and her children were forced to live in a run-down assortment of tents and shacks in his backyard.

This story is shocking to us on many levels, but especially because Jaycee was a modern day slave. She was taken against her will, threatened, and forced to work for no pay. It took 18 years before she was able to find her way to someone who could help her.

It's hard for us to imagine slavery alive and well in America, the land of the free and the home of the brave. And yet the CIA reports to us that there are 14,000 to 17,000 slaves trafficked into the United States every single year. There are 20-27 million slaves worldwide, on every continent except Antarctica, even though slavery was abolished worldwide in 1927.³

The thing that helps us get through Jaycee's story is that it has a happy ending. We see her smiling and well on the cover of the magazine. She and her children seem to be adjusting wonderfully to a life of freedom.

¹ This sermon was offered October 25, 2009 while Rev. Degrenia was serving as the pastor of Allendale United Methodist Church in St. Petersburg, Florida

² Refrain from *Fill My Cup Lord*. Words and music by Rev. Richard Blanchard. © 1964 Word Music, LCC

³ http://www.iabolish.org/slavery_today/primer/index.html

The sad reality is many who have been enslaved do not make that adjustment. They have trouble adjusting to a new way of thinking and living. If they do find physical freedom, they remain enslaved emotionally, mentally and even spiritually. Their body is free, but their being remains chained to the past.

Spiritual slavery is a real and dangerous threat, even to persons who have never known the oppressor's chains. Are you a spiritual slave? What are the warning signs?

Psalm 81 refers to the primal story of freedom found in the Bible, the story of Exodus. The people of God are enslaved in Egypt by Pharaoh. God delivers them from slavery through mighty acts of power. Their deliverance is followed by a time of wandering in the wilderness where they learn how to be free people, God's people. On the other side of the wilderness is God's Promised Land.

This story is not just an ancient story of the Bible; it is one of the main images of the story of salvation. We are all slaves before we know Jesus. We are slaves to sin. We are slaves to death. We are slaves to wrath, to revenge, and bitterness. We have no purpose except purposes prescribed for us by outside voices. These voices are modern day Pharaohs, who tell us what to do in order to serve their interests. What to wear, who to love and who to hate, how to have fun, what goals to achieve, how to respond.

But God sends us a Savior who dies for us on a cross and delivers us from slavery to sin and death so that we might be a free people. When we accept Jesus' offer of new life, we leave the slavery of Egypt and follow Jesus out into the wilderness, to learn a new way of living, to learn to be God's free people. In continuing to follow Jesus, we follow him on home into the Promised Land of heaven.

But what we find out in the story of Exodus, and way too often in our story as well, is that we can lose our way in the wilderness. It is possible for a person to hear the story of freedom in Jesus Christ, being the journey of freedom with Christ, yet cling so hard to the past that they aren't fully free. In fact, we can become so distracted that we never make it to the Promised Land.

It is not God's fault that we lose our way in the wilderness. Look what God does for us.

Psalm 81:6 I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket.

Egyptian slaves often wore a yoke across their back. It was usually a rod of some kind with a basket hanging from either end. They would use these baskets to transport the clay from where they collected it to where it would be mixed with straw. They would put that mixture back into the baskets drag it to where the bricks were made. Once the bricks were dry, they would again load the bricks into the baskets and take them to where they were doing the building project. This was backbreaking work.

Friends when we do not know Jesus we have an overwhelming burden on us. In one basket we have sin and in one basket we have the fear of death and we are weighed down by it. You know what that burden feels like. You're weighed down by the stress and the pressures of life. You slave away to make sense of life and get ahead in this world. God has the desire and the power to take that burden from you, to take the basket from your hand.

Psalm 81:7 In distress you called, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder. I tested you at the waters of Meribah.

When we're first coming to God, we often come with many burdens on our back. We cry out to God, "God help me. There's got to be something better than this. I can't save myself. I can't take these burdens off my back myself." We cry out to God and God answers. God says, "I have a way." Just as the slaves in Egypt could not free themselves from Pharaoh's demands, we cannot free ourselves. So we cry out to God and God hears. God in Jesus Christ not only relieves us of the burden, God can deliver us from it.

Once they were delivered from slavery in Egypt, the people were led by God through the wilderness. In that difficult climate, God provided food from heaven and water from rocks, like the rock at Meribah. There was always a pillar before the people. At night time it was of fire, like a giant night light. In the daytime it was a pillar of cloud. God's presence and power would thunder forth from the pillar. It was a tangible reminder that God was with them- the protection of God, the provision of God, the leadership of God. That God would see them through to the Promised Land.

Yet, most of the people in the wilderness lost their way. They didn't make it. It wasn't because God wasn't there with them. It wasn't because God wasn't providing leadership and salvation and answers. It was their own choice.

Psalm 81:11-12 But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.

Oh friends, isn't that frightening. Instead of listening to God and trusting God, the people grumbled. They complained. They worshipped false gods. They began looking back towards Egypt. They clung to their former life rather than embrace God and the new life God offered them. They were as empty and burdened as when they were slaves.

Friends this is the danger that we face when we begin the Christian life, when we begin to walk with God in the wilderness. God delivers us from slavery to sin and death. But instead of embracing the new life, we long for the old life. We don't turn our face fully to the Promised Land. We see someone who's living in a way that we used to live and we begin to long for it. We become stubborn to the way of God. We don't surrender anymore. We don't listen anymore. God is not Pharaoh, so God will not enslave us. God will let us go. God will let us follow our own counsel.

This week I was having a Facebook conversation with some friends from high school. By the time I was checking in, there were probably 20 responses on this one thread. They were talking about the missing girl that was found in Georgia this week and they were angry. They were angry at how a person could do this to a little child; just leave her like garbage in a dump. We should be angry at actions like that. It is evil. It is not of God.

As the discussion went on it began to spiral down into evil reactions; into what they wanted to do to the perpetrators- into revenge, wrath, and bitterness. As I read there came a moment where I needed to decide if I was going to join the discussion. And if I was going to join, what would I say.

Have you ever been in that situation? Maybe you've been sitting around having a meal or playing cards or maybe you were at work and the discussion starts going to a place that is destructive. It starts looking back to Egypt. It is wrath. It is bitterness. It will not bring about any good at all. You reach that moment: Are you going to open your mouth? Will it be a word from Egypt or a word from the Promised Land?

So I said a prayer, took a deep breath and started to type. I spoke about how God in Romans 12 reminds us "do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21) I encouraged my dear friends take the energy that they have, to take the passion that this would not happen to another child, and instead of using it for wrath and for evil and for bitterness, to turn it for good. If we use it for wrath and for evil and for bitterness we're slaves. Those who did this evil act will have more victims if we behave in an evil manner right back at them. I opened my mouth and was able to speak because God had already put something there to say.

The great danger is that we get lost in the wilderness. How will we respond when trouble comes during our journey? Our eyes can start looking back to Egypt, returning to the old way of thinking, an old way of being. It doesn't have to be this way. Free people, no matter the situation, look forward to the Promised Land. They think and act like people who are headed toward heaven. Our responses reveal which way our heart is leaning.

When we look back to Egypt, God weeps. God hears our complaining. God sees our desire for revenge. God sees us unwilling to submit to the ways of God, the ways of new life. Again, God is not Pharaoh. God does not respond with wrath but comes at us with love.

Hear the longing of God's heart, *"O that my people would listen to me that Israel would walk in my ways!"* (Psalm 81:13) It's the same longing Jesus expressed, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"* (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34 NIV)

Are you willing to be fully free? Do you want to follow Jesus faithfully through the wilderness and on to the Promised Land? Look at what God offers in verse 10. This is how we step out of spiritual slavery and step into spiritual freedom with God. Psalm 81:10 is the answer. *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it."*

You see friends it costs us very little to open our ears. Tiny holes. Can't get much in there. We hear and then dismiss it easily. In one ear and out the other. But if you open your mouth wide, things can really get inside of you. Opening our mouth wide is an image of us opening our hearts wide to God being the leader of our life. We are opening ourselves to deep change.

Opening your mouth wide is an act of complete trust. It is the exact opposite of a stubborn, clenched jaw. Think of the little birds in the nest opening their mouth wide for the momma bird to come feed them. Think about the elderly person opening their mouth wide so the caregiver can give them a sip of water. The humble person opening their mouth wide for communion. The sick person opening their mouth wide for medicine. The person in the dentist chair opening their mouth wide. (That takes huge amounts of trust!)

Opening our mouth wide is an act of submission. This is how we are freed from spiritual slavery. We open our mouth wide and God pours into us the Holy Spirit. It's like the lover opening their mouth wide for that juicy grape from their beloved. The fruit of the Spirit begins to be alive and well in our lives. It teaches us, fills us and changes us. That fruit is not a fruit of bitterness and wrath and revenge. The fruit of the Spirit is love, and joy and peace. Patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. (Galatians 5:22)

Psalm 81:16 I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.

This is what God wants to fill our lives with. God wants to fill our lives with the word of God. We open our mouths wide and eat of the word. We open our mouths wide and eat of prayer and eat of singing and eat of worship. And God fills us. And all of a sudden when we are filled with this new goodness, Egypt doesn't look so good anymore. We see it for what it is. We see the emptiness and the burden. We see the intent of the slave driver and how different that is than the intent of our loving God. We repent of our old ways, turning and orienting ourselves to the new. A new heaven, a new earth, a new life with Jesus.

Friends when we are filled, then we can open our mouths and we have something to say. A word of peace to a world of violence. A word of hope to those who are in despair. A word of blessing. A word of testimony. A word of salvation. A song of praise on our lips. A prayer of thanksgiving in our hearts.

Friends the good news is that you do not have to be spiritual slaves lost in the wilderness of this world. We can be free- fully free. Are you ready to be free? Are you ready to fully let go of the old and turn yourself to the new? That is what God is offering you this day. Will you trust and surrender? Will you open your mouth wide so God can fill it?

Fill My Cup Lord

Words and music by Rev. Richard Blanchard

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Refrain: Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up Lord
 Come and quench this thirsting of my soul
 Bread of heaven feed me till I want no more
 Fill my cup. Fill it up and make me whole

Like the woman at the well I was seeking
For things that could not satisfy
And then I heard my Savior speaking
Draw from my well that never shall run dry (Refrain)

There are millions in this world who are craving
The pleasures earthly things afford
But none can match the wondrous treasure
That I find in Jesus Christ my Lord (Refrain)

So my brother if the things this world gave you
Leave hungers that won't pass away
My blessed Lord will come and save you
If you kneel to Him and humbly pray (Refrain)