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Lent 1C[1]
Peace, Seattle
March 10, 2019
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

THROUGH TROUBLED WATERS

On a clear, moonless night, a half-dozen figures move silently through the fields and along the river trails and hollows of a southern landscape.

Linked to each other through a single length of cloth grasped in their hands, they move urgently through the darkness, carrying on their backs all that they possess in this world.

And every little while, their leader stops to fix her eyes on the sky and one constellation in particular—the Drinking Gourd—and the single star to which it points: the North Star; for in that star lies all that their hearts long for.

For these figures straining through the night are slaves, running for freedom, running to new life, traveling the Underground Railroad.

Their leader is Harriet Tubman. They call her MOSES. Born into slavery in Maryland she escaped her own chains and went on to become the most well-known of all the Underground Railroad's "conductors." During a ten-year span she made 19 trips into the South, escorting over 300 slaves to freedom.

The music of African American spirituals played a significant role on those journeys to freedom. Because many escaping slaves knew the secret meanings of these songs, they could be used to signal many things.

You know the chorus of one of those spirituals, WADE IN THE WATER:

- ♪ ***Wade in the water, wade in the water children***
- ♪ ***Wade in the water, God's going to trouble the water..."***

What is this song about?

On the one hand, the it recalls the story of Moses leading the Hebrew people out of slavery under Pharaoh and into the freedom of the Promised Land.

GOD'S GOING TO TROUBLE THE WATER takes us to the shores of the Red Sea, where God's people—with Pharaoh's army closing in—witness God's saving power as the sea is stirred and the waves parted to allow the Hebrew children to pass safely to the other side.

GOD'S GOING TO TROUBLE THE WATER means God is on our side now like he was on their side then. And God will bring us safely to the other side.

But the troubled water is about more than just that scene. The troubled water is also about the waters of baptism, the waters of the Jordan River, which mark the boundary between the old life and the new. These baptismal waters are troubled because they signal the end of the old ways of trusting ourselves and the beginning of a new ways of placing our trust fully in God's hands.

These troubled waters are full of promise, but they are full, too, of challenge and change.

[1] I first wrote this opening story about Harriet Tubman in a sermon on 6th Sunday of Easter in 2016.

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There's still another layer to this spiritual. It's the layer that Harriet and others called upon as they led men and women and children to freedom on the Underground Railroad:

Humming the tune for Wade in the Water meant it was time to get off the path and into the river, to make sure the hound dogs couldn't sniff out their trail. Wade in the water, God's going to trouble the water.

Harriet, they say, would brook no second thoughts from those she was helping to freedom. She assured them God would indeed aid their efforts, and to make the point even clearer, she promised to shoot anyone who gave a thought to turning back.

Wading in the water with Harriet was a profoundly troubling experience.
But as Harriet often testified: **"***I can say what most conductors can't say — I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."* [2]

On this first Sunday in Lent, we join the church in remembering Harriet Tubman & Sojourner Truth, women of uncommon courage who, through acts of love in the face of fear and injustice, rose above trauma to lead their people—and this nation—toward a new freedom.

Like Harriet, Sojourner Truth, too, was birthed into slavery. Born Isabella Bomfree in Dutch-speaking Ulster County, New York in 1797, she was bought and sold four times before she gained her freedom, and was subjected to harsh physical labor and violent punishments.

But her spirit remained unfettered.

She escaped her "owners" at age 30, fleeing to the home of an abolitionist family nearby who bought freedom for her and her baby daughter for twenty dollars. After moving to NYC and working for a minister she got caught up in religious revivals that were sweeping the state and became a charismatic speaker.

And when in her mid-40's the Holy Spirit called her to be a proclaimer of the truth, she renamed herself Sojourner Truth.[3] Though she never learned to read or write, she became an outspoken advocate for abolition, temperance, and civil and women's rights.

As one of only the few African American women speaking publicly at the time—and a physically striking woman at nearly six feet tall—the renown and respect Truth achieved for herself truly were remarkable.[4]

> "Children," she began as she addressed one crowd, "who made your skin white? Was it not God? Who made mine black? Was it not the same God? Am I to blame, therefore, because my skin is black? …. Does not God love colored children as well as white children? And did not the same Savior die to save the one as well as the other?"[5]

[2] Harriet Tubman at a suffrage convention, NY, 1896. Cited in http://www.harriet-tubman.org/quotes/
[3] Excerpted from an article on the Women's History website, edited by Debra Michals, PhD. https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sojourner-truth Ms. Truth speaks about giving herself the name Sojourner first, and then later the name Truth. https://sojournertruthmemorial.org/sojourner-truth/her-words/
[4] https://sojournertruthmemorial.org/sojourner-truth/her-words/
[5] From a speech given at Battle Creek in 1863. https://sojournertruthmemorial.org/sojourner-truth/her-words/

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The book of Deuteronomy presents itself as the final instructions of Moses to his people before they enter the Promised Land. Today's reading is a kind of primer on the festival of First Fruits—a script to guide future generations away from an attitude of entitlement and toward an attitude of gratitude.

The phrase "The LORD your God" is used 14 times in our reading—a not so subtle way to remind Israel to whom they owe their thanksgiving and allegiance. Like most commandments, at its core it's about TRUST.

Notice the timing of the first fruits ritual: Just as the previous year's stores of grain are running out, the people are called upon to gather the first fruits of this year's harvest and dedicate them to God.

It's like taking that first paycheck from the new job and instead of using it to buy groceries for the family, you bring it to church and put it in the offering plate. Not an easy ask.

Along with the ritual comes the recitation of history summarizing the shared story of God's people, *"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor..."* It recalls their experience of bondage under Pharaoh, and their rescue at the hand of God. The point is to help a people prone to amnesia to remember where they came from.

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE AND WHO YOU BELONG TO, the ritual says, AND REMEMBER HOW YOU GOT TO THIS PLACE YOU NOW CALL HOME.

When after wading in the water Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, he's reenacting Israel's journey all those centuries before. And the way Luke tells it, Jesus faces the same kinds of temptations at the hands of DIABLO that God's people faced, and none of them greater than the test of entitlement.

IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD DO THIS...
IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD DO THAT...AFTER ALL YOU'RE ENTITLED—RIGHT?

But Jesus doesn't take the bait. He refuses to allow Satan to define the terms.

For people born into the injustice of slavery, like Sojourner and Harriet and generations of others who were forced on the middle passage, I can imagine DIABLO'S tactics moving in the opposite direction:
CAN'T YOU SEE THAT YOU ARE WORTHLESS?! YOU ARE NOTHING!
YOU DON'T DESERVE TO BE FREE—GOD DOESN'T WANT YOU TO BE FREE!

To resist the temptation to be defined and bounded by such words, and by a culture and an economic system that broadcasts and enforces that reality minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day—how could it be done!?

And yet, these women did resist—and so much more. Through daring acts of courage they showed their people how to seize the freedom to which they were entitled; the birthright they could and should claim as much as any other human being. Said Harriet:

"I prayed to God to make me strong and able to fight, and that's what I've always prayed for ever since... [God] set the North Star in the heavens; He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free." [6]

When Jesus faced down DIABLO in the desert, he started a new narrative. Not one that ignored the past but one which showed us that the same old, sad stories of captivity need not dominate our lives.

[6] Quotes from Harriet Tubman, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, by Sarah Hopkins Bradford. And personal testimony by Tubman to Ednah Dow Cheney, SC, in 1859 and 1865. http://www.harriet-tubman.org/quotes/ Emphasis mine.

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He showed us what living as a fully human being looks like. He showed us a new way to live with God and with each other.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he preached, "for God has anointed me to set the captives free."

Christ came to liberate us—not just spiritually, but physically, socially—from everything that stands between us and complete trust in God, and full communion with sisters and brothers of every race and nation. He began by going toe to toe with Satan.

In spite of all they endured at the hands of unjust men in an unjust system, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth came to know and trust that the one true God was on their side.

Their testimony is an invitation for us to do the same.

Like these indomitable women, we are called to make the love of God in Jesus real—to give it traction—in the lives of those we encounter day by day...

- In our interactions
- In the way we make room for their voices
- In our advocacy work with organizations like WIN and FAN
- In the ways we show up in our families and communities

When we meet Christ at his banqueting table this morning, when we take in his body and blood with the bread and wine we become, by his design, what we eat: The body of Christ for the world.

Amen.