

The Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 30, 2019
The Very Rev. Denise Trogdon
Church of the Holy Cross

The Freedom of the Spirit

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Swing Low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home.” The words of this popular spiritual were written before the Civil war by Wallace Willis, a former slave. Inspired by the story of Elijah carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire, Willis wrote this prayer of deliverance for his people. This and another spiritual he wrote, called Steal Away, were said to have been sung at the time of the underground railroad, the freedom movement that helped Southern slaves escape to the North. *“I looked over Jordan and what did I see? A band of angels comin’ after me, Comin’ for to carry me home.”* This was a message of hope and empowerment to a marginalized people.

The story of Elijah and Elisha narrates the passing of the prophetic mantle as Elijah was being carried up to heaven. Much like Jesus’ ascension, important words imparted power to those who would carry on the vision. Elisha inherited this most important task.

At the center of the Hebrew scriptures is the struggle between Yahweh and Pharaoh for the lives of the people of Israel. Elijah’s powers to part the seas hearkened back to the time of Moses, who commanded the waters to part so that the Israelites would be delivered to freedom from slavery. Elisha inherited this mantle of power from his prophetic mentor Elijah, so that Elisha would continue the journey to freedom from the kings of his time. Israel’s challenge to remain faithful to Yahweh in a world of Pharaohs and Kings who held political power, was the charge of God’s prophets, Moses, Elijah and Elisha. The miraculous powers granted to them was a sign of the Spirit’s presence within and God’s unfailing love for God’s people, despite the Israelites’ infidelity.

This chariot of fire that carried Elijah to the heavens contained qualities of judgment and redemption. Those same fires that rained judgment upon the unfaithful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, also came as a burning bush to call Moses to a journey of deliverance. The fire of burning coals put words in the prophet Isaiah’s mouth and the Holy Spirit came as tongues of flame to empower Christ’s disciples to carry on the vision of the kingdom. No matter the challenges God’s prophets faced, the mantle was passed from one generation to the next, empowering them to follow a call to freedom.

Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians many years later, “for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Now he did not refer to a freedom that was an absence of encumbrances, but the will and the power to follow in the way of Christ. This way was often at odds with the prevailing culture, challenging the powers of the day. Only by the Spirit would the vision of freedom be accomplished.

William Still was an African-American abolitionist raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during the height of slavery. He was a conductor on the Underground Railroad, a writer, historian and activist. Before the Civil War, Still aided hundreds of fugitive slaves and kept records to help families reunite. Still’s mother Sydney, had been a slave in Maryland and tried to escape to the North with her four children. After this failed attempt she made the heart wrenching decision to leave her two eldest boys behind, so that the others would be free. Years later, Still had an astonishing encounter with a man who bought his freedom and traveled to Philadelphia to find his family. When Still heard the names of this man’s parents, he realized he was meeting his older brother who had been left behind.

The heroes of those days were careful to secretly communicate their messages of hope. Spirituals about chariots and angels coming to carry me home was a foretelling of the next escape. Those angels were conductors on the underground whose courage and inspiration led others to freedom. At the final meeting of the anti-slavery society in 1872, Still was granted permission to publish the notes he kept of families over the years. He reunited many torn apart by the institution of slavery. He wrote in his diary, “*let us not forget the days of our bondage... that our children may see what their parents have suffered and stand up fully for God and freedom while life lasts.*” A prophet in his own time, Still took up the mantle and kept his eyes on the call to freedom.

We as followers of Christ, have been given the same charge, to be a message of hope and to stand for God and freedom. This mantle may very well put us at odds with the pharaohs of our days. But first, we must consider our chains and the bondage we must break in our own hearts, to see and live the vision. What have we allowed to rule in our lives, keeping us from following Jesus’ call? The gospel is clear that discipleship is costly. To put love of God and neighbor first, means we will leave some things behind.

Having just lost my Mom, I am aware that it is a tender time of change. The passing from one generation to the next means a new perspective for those left to carry on. How will I live out the vision my parents gave to me? What does it mean to carry the role of the elder? We are living this at Holy Cross, as founding members step back from leadership and make room for those who feel the call to ministry and mission here. We have seen the passing of some of our founders and the retirement of others. Thankfully, we still have some of our elders to remind us of the DNA of Holy Cross and the vision handed down over time. But you are the new Elisha. You, my friends, are the future of this parish and how it will be known. What is the mantle you are being called to take up? God equips the called by the power of the Holy Spirit. You already have the gifts you need, but do you have the heart?

Even as we celebrate our freedom as a nation, we must remember those who are still in chains. Lean in my brothers and sisters, for surely the chariots of fire will swing low and we must carry on the vision of freedom. Empowered by the flames of Pentecost, the Spirit will enable us to follow in the way of Jesus and lead others to the freedom God has envisioned for all. Amen.