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Summerland and Westbank United Churches

Deliverance: A Sermon on Exodus 6:2-9 (NRSV)

God also spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The LORD' I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'" Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

What does it mean to be enslaved? I hope that none of us know from firsthand experience. But without knowing, without having some glimpse into what slavery really meant, we can't feel the full power of this story.

James H. Cone was a Black American theologian. Here's what he writes:

"Slavery meant being snatched from your homeland and sailing to an unknown land in a stinking ship. Slavery meant being regarded as property, like horses, cows, and household goods. For blacks the auction block was one potent symbol of their subhuman status. The block stood for 'brokenness,' because on sale days no family ties were recognized. 'My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one,' recalled Josiah Henson, 'while my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand.' When Moses Grandy's wife was sold, he was permitted only to stand at a distance and speak with her before she was taken away. 'My heart was so very full,' he remembered, 'that I could say very little.' Slavery meant working fifteen to twenty hours a day and being beaten for showing fatigue. It meant being driven into the field three weeks after delivering a baby. It meant having the cost of replacing you calculated against the value of your labor during a peak season, so that your owner could decide whether to work you to death. It meant being whipped for crying over a fellow slave who had been killed while trying to escape."

Cone paints for us a vivid and powerful picture using words. And with that in our minds, I'd like to ask Judi to share on our screens another powerful picture of slavery that doesn't use words. I'm going to give you a moment to examine the picture, and then I'm going to describe it.

[Frances explains significance of picture.]

I'm going to ask you to keep this image in your mind, because it is connected to one of the hymns we're going to sing afterward. For now, thanks Judi, let's take it down.

We can see why so many enslaved Black Americans identified with the story of the people of Israel in slavery under Pharaoh. So many Black spirituals sing of liberation of the oppressed. What enslaved Black Americans understood was that slavery contradicts God and is a denial of God's will. James Cone writes that "God is the liberator, the deliverer of the weak from the injustice of the strong."

What does it mean to worship a God who proclaims "I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them"? It sounds good, it sounds fair, it sounds like the kind of thing we hope God would do, but what does it mean for us today, here in Canada?

First, it is good news. It is good news to all who have suffered, which is all of us. It is an affirmation that God values us in our brokenness and pain.

Second, it means that God is political. It means God cares about the everyday lived reality of God's people. It means that God notices suffering, exploitation and injustice and is opposed to them.

Third, it means we are called to ask who might be enslaved today.

When we look back at the transatlantic slave trade, when we think of the American Civil War, it is easy to see the inhumanity of the system. It is easy to be horrified by the brutality and cruelty and degradation. It is easy to see, from our vantage point, how wrong it was.

The problem is, all that is harder to see when you are in the system.

The enslavement of African people and their descendants didn't happen *because* European explorers, traders, and merchants were racist. It happened because it was a money-making system. And in order to justify the money-making system, racism was born. If you're going to put chains on people's necks and cram them into ships and then sell them off as objects, then you have to convince yourself that they are not humans. They do not have feelings. They are not like you. And so the white explorers, traders, and merchants did that.

This is what we call systemic sin: when we find ourselves participating in a sinful system that is not of our own making, but is a sinful system that keeps our everyday lives running, and so we end up participating in it. Slavery was such a system. And it was a system that happened here in Canada.

The images, stories, and songs of black enslavement in the United States are more popularly well-known, but slavery existed in Canada from the beginning of first contact with Europeans. European explorers abducted Indigenous people to take them back to Europe as display pieces and objects of curiosity. New France of the 1600s traded in Indigenous slaves, most of whom

were captured or bought in what is now the United States, and shipped up north. Sometimes they were then sold or traded to plantations in the Caribbean. The first written evidence of African slavery in New France is from 1629, when a six-year-old boy was bought. In the late 1600s, there was a growing demand in New France for enslaved Black people as a source of cheap labour, to avoid paying costly European workers. More Black slaves came into what are now the Maritimes after the American Revolution, when White loyalists emigrated with Black slaves. In all, about 3,000 enslaved Black people were brought into British North America. And while Canada became the Promised Land to which Black American slaves escaped in the 1850s and 1860s, in the late 1700s, enslaved Black *Canadians* were escaping to northern American states after states like Vermont and New York outlawed slavery.

When slavery was made illegal in the British Empire in 1834, Canada had had just over 200 years of the practice. And as I read articles online in the Canadian Encyclopedia about slavery in Canada, it became clear to me that slavery was an economic condition as much as anything. Slaves in Canada were mostly domestic servants or tradespeople in urban centres, and the colonies, whether French or British, needed their unpaid labour to grow in European-style prosperity. As in the cotton and sugar plantations of the Caribbean and American South, the economic system was built on cheap or free labour. It was so deeply embedded in the workings of society that bishops, priests, nuns, and religious institutions like hospitals owned slaves. As Christians today we are appalled by this. But the question then for us becomes, who is enslaved in our society today? On whose unpaid or underpaid labour does our system rely? Who is considered expendable?

Slavery still exists. It's just harder to see, because people aren't put up on the auction block. Slavery exists today in human trafficking, cybersex crime, forced labour, child labour, prison labour, and forced marriage. Some of that happens here in Canada. COVID-19 has exposed fault lines in our society, showing us who is most vulnerable because of their living conditions, but also who is most vulnerable because poverty means that if they don't go to work, they don't eat. Migrant workers, temporary foreign workers, live-in care workers, all these people have stories of overcrowding, poor sanitation, having their passports confiscated, being threatened with deportation, and abuse.

If we take this passage from Exodus seriously, it means that we have to have the courage to look at how our society relies on cheap labour and how we are caught in a system not of our own making, but in which we participate.

It doesn't mean we have to fix it in a day. It doesn't mean we have to have the answers. But if God hears the cries of the Israelites in Egypt, and if such slavery and bondage is contrary to God's will, then we, as people of God and followers of Jesus, are called to listen for the cries of people in bondage today. This might be painful, but it will also be liberating. We are called to see ourselves in the slave, and to see them as children of God, with names and stories and hopes and dreams. We are called to bear witness to suffering, as Jesus did. We might feel helpless in our lack of answers or solutions, but in witnessing, we testify to God's liberating action.

Thanks be to God.