

*Based on \*Deuteronomy 5:6-10. The First Commandment*

*\*incarnational translation below*

*The story of deliverance is the central event of the Hebrew Scriptures.*

Although this direct quote belongs to scholar and writer Thomas Cahill, anyone who takes the Bible seriously could say the same thing.

The story of deliverance IS the central event of the Hebrew Scriptures. Witness the very first words of the very first commandment of Ten Commandments in our Lesson today: *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

This is how God self-identifies: as The One Who Sets the People Free.

Over and over again, through the prophets and the psalms, and even into the New Testament Songs of Mary and Zechariah preparing for the births of Jesus and John the Baptist, over and over again, the God of the Bible is identified with deliverance. First with deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and then with deliverance from whatever form of bondage the people of God find themselves caught up in, both as victims and as perpetrators.

The God of the Bible, simply put, is the God of Liberation.

Once the people are free, however, they need a framework for how to live in that freedom. Which brings us to the Ten Commandments, the first of which is our Lesson today. These core teachings try to help those who have been delivered from slavery NOT to turn into the very thing they just left. The Ten Commandments try to keep the liberated people from adopting the heinous characteristics of their former captors and turning their vengeance onto an innocent minority. In this first commandment that is our Lesson today, God points out that very fact. If you keep my teachings, God says, your Beloved Community can thrive for generations. But if you don't, God warns, let's face it, your children will suffer the most.

Which is exactly what happens, we find out, when we keep on reading. For a while the teachings work, and the people do live in somewhat Beloved Community. But it does not take long for them to forget the God of Liberation. They just cannot seem to help themselves, tempted as God knows they will be by the gods of power and privilege that dominate the landscape around them.

The worst among them indeed rack up more land than they deserve and more wealth than they need, while others go hungry and homeless. The trauma of injustice indeed passes from one generation to the next to the next to the next. To the point where several generations down the line, things have gotten so messed up the people cannot even begin to fathom how to fix it.

Which, as we know, is also the story of THIS land of promise and plenty occupied by many of our own ancestors seeking freedom from literal or metaphorical bondage in far away lands. In many families, including mine, it was religious persecution or flight from war or famine that led them to this nation. We pass our families' stories down over holiday dinner tables so our children remember to be grateful.

The stories we *don't* tell our children, or at least the stories my family never told us, are the ones about whose supposedly "free" land our ancestors were offered to homestead, or how our ancestors' scientific scholarship objectified indigenous inhabitants in this nation and around the world, or how the GI bill funded our grandparents' homes after World War II, while redlining and sidelining stole generational wealth from black and brown families at the exact same time.

Then there is the story we struggle to tell as a congregation, coming to terms with our spiritual ancestors' role in actively perpetuating slavery here in the Shenandoah Valley. When SPC joined the Confederate Presbyterian Church, our ancestors intentionally aligned with a denomination whose expressed mission was to conserve the institution of slavery.

Even as we celebrate the healing hope of this building as a hospital on the bloodiest day in American history, we struggle with language to lament the truth that this entire town was, as author Kevin Pawlak describes, *one vast Confederate hospital*, with our sanctuary as its largest operating room.

How do we heal such horrendous historical harm, generations in the making, in our families, in our congregation, in our nation? How do we reclaim God's teaching in our Lesson today toward a truly Beloved Community?

The first step, as we have said many times, is simply to *remember*, as the Lesson itself points out. Remember who our God really is: The God of Liberation. Remember who our God really wants us to be: Beloved Community perpetuating that freedom. Remember the ways our ancestors squandered that vision. Or, for some of us, remember the ways our ancestors were victimized by – and survived! – that squandered vision. Then work, step by step, steadily in a Spirit of solidarity, to repair the harm that has been done, as best we can.

One small but profound example toward this kind of healing historical harm has been the SPC Social Justice Committee participation in the Eastern Panhandle Community Remembrance Project, dedicated to education about at least two lynchings that occurred in our area. As part of that project, two Sundays ago, a small group of us from SPC honored the descendants of Joe Burns in their ceremonial unveiling of an historical marker to identify his lynching in 1886.

As we gathered under a tree of heartbreak and hate that hosted his murder, as we offered prayers for truth-telling, as we recited the context of the lynching historically and in its present-day trajectory, as we read the plaque aloud, as we sang for wholeness, as we chimed a bell twenty-one times for each year of Mr. Burns's young life, slowly and steadily the tree that witnessed such horror so many generations ago began to transform. This former hallmark of hatred began dedicating its beauty instead toward resurrection hope. It was almost like

a physical manifestation of our own *Warming the Cross* liturgical art, with its vision of the promise of the peaceable kin-dom on the other side of the worst that humanity can do – and *did*.

Make no mistake. Even with only a few of us physically present to represent the broader SPC community – out of a desire to center the experience of the descendants of Joe Burns, rather than our own – the entire SPC family participates in this work simply by insisting that *this* is who God calls us to be. In an era where too many self-identified Christians spew hatred and xenophobia as an article of faith, our one small act, in this onesmall part of the country, *matters!*

The truth is, as we said from the beginning, the story of deliverance is THE central event of the Bible. Period. And the truth is, the God of Liberation will never stop trying to teach us how to live in Beloved Community. And because the God of Liberation will never stop working overtime, for all time, to heal historical harm – and present day harm – carried out in abuse of the divine name, neither, my friends, should we.

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\*Deuteronomy 5:6-10

YHWH says,  
through Moses,  
to the people at the edge  
of the land of promise and plenty:

Hey! Remember me?  
The god who brought you out of the land of Egypt?  
The god who delivered you from the house of slavery?  
I am your god!  
YHWH,  
who created you  
and liberated you  
and wants to help you live abundant life!

The most important thing is to remember who I am.

When you enter the land of promise and plenty,  
you will be tempted by gods of power and privilege.  
They will promise you more land than you deserve,  
and more wealth than you need,  
while others go hungry and homeless.  
Don't fall for it!

I am trying to teach you  
how to live in Beloved Community.  
It is like a marriage:  
Yes, there are hard times.  
But there are also great times!

If you run off at the first sign  
of a seemingly better arrangement,  
forsaking your family in the faith  
for your own hedonistic pursuits,  
the consequences could become irreparable  
for your children  
and your children's children  
and the children of your children's children.

But if we stick it out together,  
in steadfast, faithful enduring commitment,  
blessings inevitably abound  
for just as many generations, if not more!

*\*"Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places" (Cosgrove and Edgerton, **In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching**, 62).*