

“Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes; but Aaron’s staff swallowed up theirs. Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.” Exodus 7:11-13

walking wounded

by Karen Georgia A. Thompson

“The wound is the place where light enters you” - Rumi

there is a resident brokenness that sits
quietly humming
yearning for attention
demanding to be seen

these broken places pool with fear
stagnant waters teeming with all that festers
bringing bitterness
lives fragmented, overflowing with despair

we limp along
walking sharp edges
on the borders of fertile grounds that call
yet we resist, afraid

and when we touch the darkness
we feel tiny slivers of light
we hear the music
we feel the emptiness and taste hope

17 July 2018
LAX - JFK
10:19 PM
KGAT

Copyright © Karen Georgia A. Thompson

The Exodus narratives, especially the early chapters of Exodus, are popular for preaching. The story of Moses pulls us in, the baby placed in a basket to escape the infanticide of a brutal government. A baby who is later adopted by the daughter of the Pharaoh, and grows up in the Pharaoh’s house. The pain and suffering of the people calls us to the need for justice when we hear God calls Moses from the burning bush. We learn that God cares, God is a God of wonders and miracles, and in the call of Moses we see that the presence of God with us is the primary ingredient for answering the call to address problems far greater than our human capacities. God present with us is necessary in our pursuit of justice and liberty for all.

Exodus 3:7-8 say: Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians...”

The Exodus narrative is one of the primary sources for liberation theology. In Exodus God takes action to liberate the people who are enslaved in a land which is not their home. They migrated into the land as a result of famine, voluntary migration, and as the population grew outpacing the Egyptians, the people are enslaved, persecuted and traumatized. There is an identified fear of the other present in the oppression of the enslaved people. You see, a new Pharaoh who did not know the history of the people in the land, a person in power who chose not to learn the story of these people that he governed, thought it best to oppress that which he could not control.

The text says: *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land"* Exodus 1:8-10.

I love this story of God liberating the people which comes much later in the book of Exodus. Until we get to the liberation, we have plagues and we have a Pharaoh who is resistant to what God is asking. A reading of the book of Exodus points to many problematic assumptions including the displacement of the people already living in the land that is about to be occupied by these liberated enslaved people. And in the midst of the liberation of the people is the figure of the Pharaoh who is also a problem in this representation of oppressive government, Empire, patriarchy and a system of enslavement designed to dehumanize and disregard the lives of these God's people.

Pharaoh has become a person of interest for me in the midst of the happiness and joy of liberation and freedom of the enslaved. As I grappled with the text in the light of Juneteenth and the current pandemic of global racism, I am struck by the hard heartedness of this leader and I experience the presence of the Pharaoh among us through the ages in the history of the enslavement of Africans in the Americas, in the denial of freedom after emancipation, in the withholding of human rights, dignity and respect, and in the current war on black bodies globally. The text notes repeatedly: Pharaoh hardened his heart. Pharaoh is a prototype, a symbol of oppression and callousness.

Being hard hearted is a callous way to live.

According to the dictionary, to harden one's heart is "to stop having kind or friendly feelings for someone or caring about something" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/harden%20one%27s%20heart>). To be hard hearted means that a person is deemed to be incapable of being moved by pity or tenderness. That person who is hard hearted is unfeeling. This was the condition of the Pharaoh in the land of Egypt, such was the condition of Europeans who enslaved Africans, such was the condition of the Jim Crow south and the days of Apartheid in South Africa and so it is today with the toxic reign of racism, xenophobia, Afrophobia and all forms of discrimination in the land. Among us today, live the hard hearted, those who have hardened their hearts in the face of injustices and are in need of God's healing!

My soul is troubled and my spirit is vexed by the Pharaoh. Why continue to punish people who want to be free? Why take from them the materials they need to construct buildings for you? Why break their backs with the whip and deny them their freedom because YOU are afraid of them? Because you fear their growing numbers you take their children. You kill their children. You bring grief and pain on human lives and set in place generational trauma. You institutionalized hatred and xenophobia from the highest seat of power in the land. And yet, it is the people who are problematized not the privilege and power of oppression imposed by the Pharaoh.

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The nation was heading into its third year of Civil War. The nation was divided over the buying and selling of people - primarily Africans and African descendant people. The history of brutality is well documented. Tendencies to romanticize the institution of slavery with notions of benevolent slave holders are to be refuted. The denial of civil liberties and freedom of millions of African and African descendant people is to be confronted, interrogated and acknowledged.

That the Bible was used to justify the enslavement of God's created, and that the church - the body of Christ - followers of Jesus Christ who himself fought for the rights of the people in his day when in their land was occupied by Roman soldiers - that this church would find itself upholding and sanctifying slavery is a sign of the spirit of Pharaoh at work in the history of this land and across the world. It is the hard heartedness, absent of love, who named people as savages and held Bible and God as supporting enslavement and hatred.

The process of Emancipation of African descendant people journeys with a tale of hard hearted people in need of healing. I name the process of Emancipation because as yet we are not all free. First Emancipation was declared in 1863. This declaration of emancipation did not mean the people were free. The declaration hinged on assumptions that were not yet realized. The hearts of the enslavers were hardened and so they fought on to hold in place an institution which would allow them to continue owning and brutalizing the lives of people to ensure their wealth and privilege. They continued going to church and praying to God, their hearts hardened refusing to let the people go after emancipation was declared.

According to the National Archives: *The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free."*

It continued to say: *"Despite this expansive wording, the Emancipation Proclamation was limited in many ways. It applied only to states that had seceded from the United States, leaving slavery untouched in the loyal border states. It also expressly exempted parts of the Confederacy (the Southern secessionist states) that had already come under Northern control. Most important, the freedom it promised depended upon Union (United States) military victory."* (<https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation>)

Freedom was declared, but there was no freedom to be had in the land. The general consequences in parts of the country and yet across the world was that the preservation of white supremacy was so important that Europeans and European descendant people hardened their hearts in the face of the injustice of racism and the oppression of African descendant people. Their hearts were hardened in their enforcement of the Doctrine of Discovery and their quest for manifest destiny. The churches stayed open, the Bible was present with them as they hardened hearts continued to ignore the humanity of others and they evidenced the absence of God in their lives.

Second Emancipation came on 19 June 1865. Second emancipation. On that day federal troops of the United States of America rode into Galveston, TX and took control of the state to ensure the freedom of the formerly enslaved. This is the Juneteenth celebration. This was a full two and a half years after the Emancipation declared by President Abraham Lincoln. Their hearts were hardened.

This is the evidence of a hardened heart absent of the love of God given freely and richly through Jesus Christ. And still they hardened their hearts with Jim crow laws, relegating African descendant people to a place of being less than whites, they amplified the laws to enforce white supremacy. Hardened hearts. Hardened hearts in need of healing. To address the state of

racism, the on-going militarization of our cities, the systemic racism and elevation of whiteness, we in the church need to find our way to healing hardened hearts.

Third Emancipation brought the Civil Rights movement. Fourth and fifth emancipation are present in our day, perhaps even the quest for a sixth or seventh emancipation a call for freedom. And like the Exodus story contents, freedom will not come as long as the Pharaoh's heart is heartened. Freedom will not come when majority culture holds hatred in one hand and the Bible in the other. Freedom will not come when Afrophobia is reinforced and validated from the highest seats of government, from pulpits and houses and worships. And God said: Let my people go!

The time has come to confront the truth that white privilege, white supremacy, Christian privilege and Christian supremacy are in need of God's healing grace. Every major religion and spirituality points to love as a product of God's grace. We are called to love, over and over and over again. We sing of God's love. We preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and yet love is absent. Healing is needed in the land.

Listen to these words from 1 John 1:18-21, *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

June 19th, 2021 as we celebrate the Emancipation of enslaved people in the United States, it is with the awareness that change must come. As Christians, the commandment we have is clearly stated and written: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. We are called to love, an everlasting love that calls us to repentance, to repent the historic wrongs that were inflicted on African people, indigenous people, poor people, immigrant people and so many others who are named as racialized and minoritized communities.

We are called to love because God loves us and love can heal our wounded places. The wounding of our spirits can be healed with the light of God's love. We must pray for healing from the traumas and years of oppression imposed on people. And we must also pray for those who oppress that the redemptive love of Jesus find its way to permeating their heart condition healing their hardened hearts.

Our brokenness, emptiness and fear are antithetical to what God desires for us. Our fear of our siblings made in God's image is THE problem. God's love must prevail among us. Celebrating the release of Africans and emancipation on this Juneteenth points to the need for change among us today. The work for justice is contemporary work, our ability to be resilient in the quest for justice is the call of God to bring new life for all people, to bring healing to the world.

Healing hardened hearts is a part of the call for these days. The heart of the Pharaoh must be healed. The heart of the Pharaoh must be released from fear and God's love allowed to shine forth and bring freedom in the land. The Pharaoh continues to be hard hearted. And God is still saying: Let my people go.

Contact:

Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia A. Thompson

revkgathompson@gmail.com

IG: karen_georgia FB: Karen Georgia A. Thompson