

Emancipation Proclamation – 150th anniversary
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In Zanzibar, on the east coast of Africa, the Anglican cathedral is in the heart of the old town, where the largest slave market used to be. That cathedral was built over the old slave dungeons, where human captives were held until the market “disposed” of them. It was built as a celebration of the end of slavery. In front of the altar there is a round marker laid into the beautiful marble floor to mark the place the whipping post was. It would be a more than adequate sign of crucifixion in that place even without a cross. Yet there is a cross there, made from the wood of a tree that grows on the grave where David Livingstone’s heart is buried. When he died, his body was carried back to England, but the people in the village where he spent his final days insisted his heart belonged in Africa.¹ Livingstone’s writings were a significant impetus to ending the slave trade in east Africa.

Zanzibar was the last place in east Africa to end the sale of human beings. Slavery was outlawed in Britain in 1833 (it took another 30 years here), but that island off the east coast of Africa continued the trade until the British Navy blockaded the harbor in 1896. The sultan finally suppressed the trade in human beings, and Zanzibar became a British protectorate.

The spirit of God has been delivering people from slavery for a very long time – at least since Moses led his people out of Egypt. Former Haitian slaves fought on these shores to help Americans achieve freedom from England. Their own revolution in Haiti (1804) freed all the slaves and produced a new democratic nation that gave hope to slaves here.

Yet that deliverance is not finished. Laws have been made around the world to forbid the sale of human flesh, yet children and adults, their bodies and their labor, continue to be sold like commodities – even here. Most of us unwittingly buy goods that are the fruits of modern slavery – goods produced from the output of mines in Africa, South America, and Asia; foodstuffs and agricultural produce from this country and many others, and cheap manufactured goods from Asia. And people continue to buy the bodies of others in a vigorous sex trade here and abroad. If you want to learn more, explore [Slavery Footprint.org](http://SlaveryFootprint.org)²

Officially, slavery ended here 150 years ago, yet the consequences have not ended. Generations of exploitation continue to reverberate in the diminishment of human potential, the indignities of prejudice and discrimination, and lives torn apart by systems of injustice that fill prisons with human beings who have not had equal access to education, health care, adequate

¹ In what is now Zambia

² www.slaveryfootprint.org

nutrition, and dignified living conditions. Sin has consequences – as the prophet Jeremiah³ puts it, “the parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth have been set on edge.” Sin has consequences, and the world, this nation, and this diocese continue to eat some of its bitter fruit.

Yet the spirit of God continues to set people free. The bold act of Abraham Lincoln 150 years ago freed the slaves of rebellious southern states, and the 13th amendment solidified that freedom announced in the Emancipation Proclamation and extended it to the entire nation. And oh, how quickly the sin returned in the guise of Jim Crow.

The spirit of God moved again in the middle part of the last century, awakening a post-war America to the ugliness that still lurked within. Dr. King and his companions brought a new urgency to the struggle for true freedom, and new acts of deliverance enshrined greater equality before the law.

Yet God’s people thought that amendment of life had been accomplished. Well, my friends, the depth of our sin has only begun to be addressed. Racism continues, the chauvinism of one’s ‘own kind’ endures, and we rarely recognize or admit that this is only thinly veiled idolatry. We have sinned, and there is no health in us, as the old prayer book put it.

Yet God’s spirit continues to set the people free. Today’s act of repentance is another freshening breeze. May it remove this storm cloud from the face of the Sun/Son, and let not that cloud devolve into another whirlwind of destruction. That breath of God, the spirit of God, will blow away the cloud, that gale of freedom will propel us forward toward the reign of God, if and only if we are willing to let go of anchoring chains that bind us to our own self-centeredness. God’s people can soar freely only if we will to do it together, as one people God has made in the divine image.

The consequences of our sin continue in places far beyond here. Cuba is one such place, where slavery wrought abundant evil under the oppression of others. Attempts by interests in this nation and others to continue a functional slavery after legal abolishment in 1886 eventually led to a revolt. The results are still being played out between our two nations in the farce called an embargo or a blockade. The Cuban people live in far greater poverty than is just or necessary and the American people are prevented from discovering friends and building honest and open relationships. Yet the church in Cuba is giving witness to the possibility of resurrected life. The recently retired suffragan bishop was the first Afro-Caribbean bishop in the Diocese of Cuba. The face of the Diocesan Synod there is far more richly varied than what can be seen here. Yet neither church has expunged the consequences of slavery and racism.

And still the spirit of God continues to set people free. A Bolivian woman, descended from peoples originally enslaved by colonizing Spaniards, is now the bishop of the church in Cuba, someone initially deemed an outsider, pre-judged on the basis of her national origin, her indigenous features, and her gender, rather than what God might be doing in her. Her robustly

³ Jeremiah 31:29

effective leadership has brought recognition and gratitude for the gifts God has given, and new life is emerging from a community's amendment of life.

What is the spirit working here in Virginia? At the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, 80% of the clergy in Virginia owned slaves. Was this called "The Diocese" then? Jim Crow was deeply embedded in the life of this Commonwealth for a very long time. Has Virginia become The Commonwealth for all people? The work we do today is a sign and symbol of moving toward those aspirations, that this church, this community, this commonwealth might indeed be a whole and healed city for all the people of God.

Emancipation is not merely one act in time, one statement 150 years ago, or a single amendment enshrined in our constitution. Emancipation is another word for the ongoing resurrection we know in Jesus the Christ, who continues to set us free. To discover the depth and reality of that freedom, we must re-encounter it, every day of our lives. Emancipation becomes reality as deep friendships and common cause are made across difference. True freedom is known as the welfare of neighbor evokes not only our concern but our compassion and action to ensure the welfare of all neighbors. We will never be set completely free until all of us are freely and fully able to enjoy all the blessings of this life – until there is justice for all. We will remain suspicious of the *other* as long as inequality continues. When we can approach that circle in the floor before the Zanzibar altar without fear, with arms open wide to embrace the Christs we will encounter there, then we will begin to know a just society. We must approach that whipping post with love for the beaten and chained – and for the slaver – trusting that the spirit of God will continue to set each one of us free.

Then, now, today, know that the spirit of the Lord has also anointed us to bring good news to the poor, release to all the captives, to let all the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor for all people and all creation. Then, now, today, O Lord, let this scripture be fulfilled in the world's hearing!