

Chapel Words (April 3, 2008) – Rev. Jim Holland

One of the big epic themes of the Bible is the theme of Freedom and Slavery. The people of Israel were at one time slaves to the Egyptians, to the Babylonians and to the Romans. And, it shouldn't come as a surprise that freedom, both the political as well as the spiritual variety, was a central concern for them. Since we have just returned from Spring Break, I thought this theme of freedom and slavery would be an appropriate one for this morning. I want to talk particularly about the great hero of freedom in the Hebrew Bible and one of its most important figures. I am speaking, of course, about Moses.

You may know the story of Moses. You will if you have seen the Disney movie "Prince of Egypt." Moses was born to an Israelite mother during the time of the Egyptian Captivity. Mrs. Moses wanted freedom for her son so much that she was willing to let him go rather than see him raised a slave. So she put him in a basket and sent him sailing down the Nile River where he was discovered by none other than the daughter of the Pharaoh. He was then raised in the Royal Household as a free person.

But, from early on, Moses had a strong sense of justice, and one day when he saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite slave he intervened and inadvertently killed the Egyptian. As a result he had to flee Egypt. He wandered alone for many years. He acquired a wife, was adopted by his new wife's family, and had a good life, with his own large flocks of sheep and goats. But Moses felt compelled to return to Egypt and free the people of Israel. So, he went back, and with divine help, he took on the most powerful person in the known world, the Pharaoh. After God sent ten horrible plagues on Egypt, the Pharaoh relented and agreed to let the people of Israel go.

The stories of slavery and freedom in the bible are, as you might expect, more than ancient tales. They are metaphors for our own lives. And the question that I want to ask you this morning is: when do you feel most free, and when do you feel most enslaved?

When we think of freedom, we often think of the feeling of lying on the grass on a summer day with no agenda and no one around to tell us what to do. That *is* a wonderful feeling, but the freedom I am talking about is a more profound thing. The freedom that I am referring to is the freedom that comes when we know what our passions are and are able to pursue them; when we are doing what we feel we were put on earth to do. Freedom is that feeling of getting totally absorbed in the thing we love the most, and this is going to be different for each one of us. Some of us are going to find this freedom at the keyboard of a piano or blowing into a horn. Some will find it on the rugby field, when we bump heads with a kid twice our size and leave *him* lying on the ground. Some will find it through paint and canvas, and others in advanced calculus. Some

will find it reading and analyzing great literature and others in performing great literature and music on the stage. Each of us will find our freedom by expressing the passion and creativity that is inside of us.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that there are some things that give us a temporary sense of freedom, but in the end actually end up enslaving us. We think of excessive or habitual use of alcohol or drugs, or compulsive playing of video games. These things can become traps that, in the end, take away our freedom.

So, ironically, slavery can sometimes feel like freedom. At the same time freedom can sometimes feel like slavery. The interesting thing about Moses and the Israelites is that when they left Egypt they went from the frying pan into the fire. God told Moses that he had a Promised Land for the people of Israel, a land of milk and honey, but they had to wander in the desert for 40 years before they found it. This was perhaps the most difficult period in the history of the Israelites, but it was also a most important time for them. It was during this time that they forged their identity as a people. It was during this time that Moses climbed Mount Sinai and came down with the Torah, the Law. It was during this time that the people of Israel made decisions about what they really believed. So, by the time they did finally enter the Promised Land, they knew who they were, they knew what was important to them, they knew what they believed.

Real freedom has nothing to do with our circumstances, with whether we have people telling us what to do or what not to do. Real freedom comes when we know ourselves, when we know what we are capable of, when we know what our values are. This doesn't happen overnight, but from exploring our deepest feelings and beliefs, from testing ourselves against life's challenges. When we develop this kind of freedom, the freedom of truly knowing ourselves, no one can take it away from us.

As we enter into the final stretch of the year, and head for the freedom of Summer Break, I wish for you that it will be a time of self-discovery that leads to real freedom.