

A WOMAN CALLED MOSES: THE HEROIC LIFE OF HARRIET TUBMAN

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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The months of February and March offer an opportunity for all of us to celebrate the contributions of African-Americans and women to our nation's history. In doing so, we recognize not only their courage and foresight, but also the challenge their lives offer to each of us: to live a life of integrity in which our personal actions express our most deeply held values. The true heroes of history are people who were **transcenders**, who were somehow able to overcome the limitations of their personal lives in ways that inspired others to do the same—not only during their own lifetime but in the future they envisioned. Today I want to invite you to join me in celebrating the life of **Harriet Tubman**, a true American heroine who was courageously involved in both the struggle for racial justice and the struggle for gender equality. **[Brandish her framed photograph.]**

It's hard to imagine a heroic figure with more humble origins. She was born into slavery as Araminta Ross on a plantation in eastern Maryland. Like many other slave families, her family was split up early in her life, and "Minty" (as she was called) was forced into taking care of her slaveholders' children when she herself was only a child of five or six. When she was thirteen years old, a slave overseer in anger threw a two-pound metal weight at one of his disobedient slaves, and instead it struck Harriet in the head. This severe injury left her with a lifetime of seizure episodes, when she would experience visions and dreams which she considered divine messages. Her religious interpretation of these unusual revelations continued for the rest of her life.

When she was in her early twenties, Minty married a free black man named John Tubman, and shortly afterwards changed her name from Araminta to Harriet, her mother's name. Faced with the prospect of being sold to a different slaveowner a few years later, Harriet decided that it was time for her to escape to freedom. In plotting her escape route, she made use of the Underground Railroad, an informal but highly organized network of free and enslaved blacks, white abolitionists, and other activists who guided and harbored slaves escaping to freedom in northern states or Canada. They traveled mostly at night, guided by the stars, and exchanged coded information mostly by singing. One of the songs in our hymnbook is "Follow the Drinking Gourd" (the Big Dipper). When Harriet finally crossed into Pennsylvania, she recalled later, "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything: the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven." [Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People*, p. 19]

Over the next few years, Harriet made more than a dozen secret return trips to her former home in Maryland in order to lead more than 60 family members and friends to freedom. One of those who chose **not** to leave Maryland was her husband John Tubman, who had already married another woman. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, harboring escaped slaves became a high-risk endeavor. But Harriet was fearless in her mission. "You'll be free or die," she told her comrades. "There was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other, for no man should take me alive." She always carried a

pistol. [Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, p. 175] Years later she told an audience, "I was conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say—I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger." [Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*, p. 192] She earned the name "**Moses**" within the abolitionist community.

One of the side benefits of learning about a historical character is the glimpses it provides of other important figures—in this case Frederick Douglass and John Brown. Both of these men held Harriet in high regard. In a letter sent to her in 1868, Douglass wrote, "The midnight sky and the silent stars have been witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting John Brown . . . I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have." [quoted in Bradford, pp. 134-35] John Brown called her "General Tubman," and often referred to Harriet using masculine pronouns. Unlike Frederick Douglass, Tubman supported John Brown's goals of fomenting a massive slave uprising and establishing a new state for freed slaves in western Virginia. She actively recruited volunteers for his ill-fated raid at Harpers Ferry in 1859, although she did not participate directly in it.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, Harriet became an increasingly public figure, addressing large audiences at antislavery rallies in the north. As one of her biographers recounts, "Plainly dressed, very short and petite, quite black-skinned, and missing front teeth, Tubman physically made a stark contrast to Sojourner Truth, one of the most famous former slave women then speaking on the antislavery lecture circuit, who was nearly six feet tall." Both of these women had their femininity challenged. Sojourner Truth on one occasion bared her breasts in response to male hecklers. "Unlike Truth, who used the incident in the meeting to defend her womanhood and denigrate the manhood of her critics, Tubman embraced an identity that crossed gender lines. . . . Like [Sojourner] Truth, however, Tubman shocked her audiences with stories of slavery and the injustices of life as a black woman. . . . Tubman and Truth stood for millions of slave women whose lives were marred by emotional and physical abuse at the hands of white men. [Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, p. 168]

When the Civil War finally broke out, Tubman took full advantage of the opportunity to rid the nation of the scourge of slavery, serving as a nurse, scout, spy, and logistical supplier. After the Union military established a foothold near Hilton Head in South Carolina, Harriet Tubman became the first woman in American history to lead an armed assault. Applying some of the same skills she had learned when guiding fugitive slaves through the marshy lowlands of eastern Maryland, Harriet guided a small fleet of Union gunboats up the Combahee River, where they set fire to plantations and created enough chaos to liberate more than 700 slaves before the slaveowners could stop them. Many of these former slaves joined the Union army. She became an overnight hero in the North. In spite of her heroic achievements during the war, Harriet did not receive a government pension for her service until 1899.

Harriet Tubman spent most of her remaining years living in Auburn, New York, on a small farm she purchased from William Seward (abolitionist Senator and Lincoln's Secretary of State). There she tended to her family (including her aging parents) and a host of other people in need. She also became actively involved in the women's suffrage movement, which was

centered in the nearby town of Seneca Falls, NY. When a white woman once asked Tubman whether she believed women should have the right to vote, she replied, “I suffered enough to believe it.” As she once again gained public attention as a speaker, she used the sacrifices of countless women throughout history—including her own—as evidence of women’s equality to men. However, her unselfish contributions to the welfare of others had left her in poverty. When a series of receptions in her honor were scheduled in Boston in 1897, she had to sell one of her cows in order to pay for her train ticket. [Larson, p. 281] She donated part of her property for establishing the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged, where she herself spent the final years of her life. Shortly before she died at the age of 91, she told those in the room, “I go to prepare a place for you.” **If there was ever someone from whom such a statement was believable, it was Harriet Tubman.**

When I reflect on a life such as hers, I ask myself, “What enables a person such as Harriet Tubman to transcend the adversities of her life in a way that inspires others to follow her example?” What is it that moves someone from **surviving to thriving**—from focusing only on managing their **own** suffering to the capacity to respond effectively to the suffering of **others**? I would describe it simply as the **power of compassion**, a quality that is central to nearly all of the great religious and ethical traditions throughout human history. In Harriet Tubman’s life, it was her profound experience of liberation from slavery that motivated her to do everything she could to enable others to share that same experience. The potential for compassion emerges from the depths of our own experiences of suffering. So I pose this question: What experiences of personal suffering might you harness in service to others? What are the reservoirs of pain or rejection or disappointment—and the resources you drew upon to overcome them—that you can offer to others who face a similar challenge?

Let me close with a poem by Denise Levertov titled “The Fountain”:

Don’t say, don’t say there is no water to solace the dryness at our hearts.
 I have seen the fountain springing out of the rock wall and you drinking there.
 And I too before your eyes found footholds and climbed to drink the cool water.
 The woman of that place, shading her eyes, frowned as she watched—
 but not because she grudged the water, only because she was waiting to see if we drank
 our fill and were refreshed.
 Don’t say, don’t say there is no water.
 That fountain is there among its scalloped green and gray stones,
 It is still there and always there with its quiet song and strange power to spring in us,
 up and out through the rock.

[in Marilyn Sewell (ed.), *Cries of the Spirit*, p. 183]

In that spirit, let us give thanks for the life and legacy of Harriet Tubman.

DISCUSSION

Choir and Congregation Song, “I Am Willing,” by Holly Near [words printed in order of service, led by Lorain Harouff]

CLOSING WORDS # 694 (by Frederick Gillis)

