

Freedom Means... Telling It Like It Is
Exodus 1:1-13, 6:5-7 (AFBC 7/1/18)

Exodus 1:1-13 1 These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: ² Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; ³ Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; ⁴ Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. ⁵ The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶ Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, ⁷ but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

⁸ Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. ⁹ "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. ¹⁰ Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country." ¹¹ So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites ¹³ and worked them ruthlessly.

Exodus 6:5-7 ...I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. ⁶ "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

Independence Day is almost here; and though our freedom does come with some challenges, we wouldn't have it any other way... than to be free people, living in a free nation. We have a lot to celebrate each July 4th, and every other day. We're blessed!

Given our history as Americans, though, it would be tempting to think that we somehow came up with the idea of freedom on our own. It's true that our founding fathers and mothers began an experiment in freedom here that continues to this day.

But as free people who, in our freedom, seek to study and know God's word, we realize that freedom is not original with us—not even with great leaders like Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, and others. That's because freedom is deeply rooted in Holy Scripture.

Freedom is, and always has been, God's plan for our lives. This is why we're considering this topic today. In fact, our plans are to examine various aspects of our God-given freedom on all five Sundays during the month of July. Yes, freedom is this foundational to who we are!

Freedom is not just an Old Testament theme either. In John 8:32, Jesus announces: "...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." For these five Sundays, however, we'll be considering the book of Exodus. This ancient writing is chock-full of God's ideas about how we can experience freedom in our lives.

When we look at freedom from a Biblical perspective, we realize that the way our culture thinks about freedom and the way the Bible describes it are often in conflict. Jesus said that our freedom is found only in knowing the truth—that truth is what we should pursue, because it is only truth that can set us free.

Some of you seemed surprised when I mentioned on Memorial Day weekend that my great-great grandfather, and two great-great uncles died fighting for the South in the Civil War. Half of the deaths this nation has suffered in times of war happened during that one awful conflict—all taking place on American soil.

Whether or not you know this part of your family's history, many of you also lost family members back then. Our church's graveyard bears witness to how many were lost in this congregation. Did I mention that freedom isn't always easy?

I learned about the three Thomason brothers fairly early in life, but it was much later that I heard about my Mom's side of the family. Both of her great-grandfathers—Captain Andrew Jackson Monroe and Sargent John Machen--were land owners over in Princeton, SC. They were also slave owners—and I'm told there was much more to their story—none of which makes me proud.

It took me a while, though, to realize and reflect on the important truth that the Thomason brothers were all dirt farmers and poor, while the Monroes and Machens were fairly well off by comparison.

The poor folks—the Thomason brothers--did their duty, served as privates in the Confederate army, and died in battle. Those who had land and slaves and, because of this, also had much more at stake in that war, enjoyed much higher military ranks, and managed to return home to continue living their lives.

There's a lot about this truth that I don't like. In twenty-three years of serving as your Pastor, I've not shared all this with you before. But even though it's an ugly truth, I do find it liberating to come clean about it. Jesus is right: the truth, especially, I think, inconvenient truth, does... set us free.

Isn't this what confession and repentance are all about? Of course, it is. I don't believe it dishonors the lives and sacrifices of our ancestors when we tell the truth about this history and so many other things that we could refuse to acknowledge or choose not talk about. That's the way so much of this has been handled so far.

Our Lord told us it's more important to know the truth and tell the truth. He said we'll never truly know freedom until we do. It's liberating to finally come clean.

Speaking truthfully also sets us free from the falsehoods that cloud the issues we face today—some of which could have been laid to rest long ago, if we had been willing to be more truthful, and maybe... less defensive.

Here's a troubling example. Back in the 1970s, a book came out about the history of Southern Baptist missions—it was an authorized history of our missions program. The book claimed that Southern Baptists split from their Baptist brethren in the north in order to do missions in a new way.

Sounds good, it's just not the truth. The truth is we split away from our brethren in the North over the issue of slavery. Methodists and Presbyterians had already done this a few years earlier.

It took longer for Baptists because, well, we tended to be poorer and didn't have as many slaves. Still, beginning in the 1840s, our southern churches boldly proclaimed that God created a superior race and an inferior race, and that the enslavement of Africans was

God's intention all along! Freedom was good for some people, but not all people.

I doubt that those churches heard many sermons from the book of Exodus—but it became a favorite book of the Bible for those who were enslaved. They found in Exodus the truth of God that could set them free.

Frankly, this is some more of our history that we've tried to "sweep under the rug." Some of you may think you would rather it stay there—except that we're in the truth business. Anytime we settle for something less than the truth, we relinquish some of our freedom—because it's the truth that sets us free.

July the fourth is a time when we remember our history and celebrate our freedom. These stories I've just shared relate to both. It's just that history gets a little messy if we're truthful about it.

I get it that most of us would rather view our past in a more flattering light than the light of truth. Still, we have it on the authority of God's word, that it's the truth that sets us free.

So whether we're talking about days gone by or what's happening in our world today, the only way to demonstrate our love for and commitment to freedom is to demand that truth be told.

The book of Exodus tells us about a group of slaves that God, for reasons all His own, chose to set free. Because God is all about truth, He chooses to tell us the story of their freedom struggle—warts and all. It's not a pretty story—lots of suffering and death.

If the Hebrew people had been writing the story, I promise you there are things here they would have left unsaid—like we do today. But the Almighty Himself inspired these writings, so we get the truth—the whole truth, even when it's not so flattering.

Getting across the Red Sea and watching those waters crash down on Pharaoh and his army is only one part of this freedom story. God knew that this event--even as significant as it was--would not by itself mean that His people were free. Being free would mean

far more than just escaping from the people who had enslaved them.

Now, that's not to take anything away from what might be called "political freedom." When the slaves in the American colonies began to hear the stories found in Exodus, they started singing spirituals like "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land. Tell old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go.'" Can't you hear them saying, "We'se just singin' Bible stories, Massuh—that's all."

Years ago, the United Nations Ambassador at the time, Andrew Young, was invited—believe it or not—to speak at the Southern Baptist Convention. I was privileged to be there.

He talked about the impact of the Biblical message on the oppressed people of the world. Many of these were enslaved by their own governments!

He told us, "We did a revolutionary thing. We went around the world and we told people they were God's children. We taught them to read and write, and we gave them Bibles and they understood Moses taking the children of Israel out of Egypt. They ended up wanting to be free themselves all over the world."

The book of Exodus is all about freedom. It's about the truth that God wants His children to be free; and it's about the truth of God that sets us free.

It's not just about what we know as "political freedom." It's also about the freedom we have to be in right relationship with God—"spiritual freedom," in other words—and freedom to be in a right relationship with one another—"social freedom," a freedom that grows out of our spiritual and political freedoms.

Political freedom, you see, even as important as it is, is insignificant and unsustainable if it does not exist in the context of spiritual and social freedom—the freedoms that result when people acknowledge their Creator and seek to live by His laws—laws that are clearly stated for the first time in this book of Exodus.

This is why there are so many people, even in this "land of the free and home of the brave," who are enslaved—not by the government

or the plantation owner, but by habits and attitudes and ways of life that keep them from enjoying the freedom that God intends them to have.

They need to hear the Good News that God's still in the business of setting people free from whatever it is that has them enslaved.

We'll be dealing with several of these issues, by the way, as we travel through the book of Exodus. There's a wonderful variety of ways in which God's truth sets us free.

Along the way, we'll discover that God's freedom is not just an individual experience. Instead, God's freedom involves our relationships with one another.

Freedom for those Hebrew slaves was found in being part of God's covenant people. To so many today, the idea of a covenant—think marriage, for example—they believe that's something that puts limits on our freedom.

God's word says that's not so. Instead, true freedom comes only as we maintain the right kinds of relationships with God and one another. Anything short of God's truth in these matters always leads to some form of bondage.

Our political freedoms can cause us to put so much emphasis on the individual that we become self-centered. We start thinking that everything revolves around us, and every decision should be made based on how it affects us.

We get to the point that we forget God's call for us to live in communities where we really do care about each other. We fall victim to the lie that freedom means we only have to look out for ourselves, and our only real commitment is to us!

That's an ugly distortion of truth. God's not in it! It doesn't work, and only ends up enslaving us to... ourselves.

Maybe this will help. Try picturing yourself on a desert island. There's nobody there but you. Nobody to tell you to do anything, nobody to get in your way, nobody who wants the same thing you want at the same time you want it—get the picture?

Now, would that be freedom? Maybe it would feel that way for a day or two, but I don't think it would feel like freedom for long. That's not how God made us, and it's not what He made us for.

Faster than we think, we'd begin to feel just like Adam did—lonely. Just like that first creature God made in His own image, we would soon be enslaved by our loneliness. That's not freedom!

We need each other, so we have to find a way to get along... together—freely, together! So God gives us laws to live by. It's worth noting that many of the laws which govern our land today are based on those ancient laws—the Ten Commandments and others--that God gave us way back there in the book of Exodus.

Do these laws take away our freedom? No--they actually make freedom possible. We could not live in freedom together without them. That's what God's truth tells us—and it's His truth that sets us free.

This may be one of the hardest things for people living in a "free country" to understand. But it's hard for everybody—including those ancient Hebrews, newly liberated from their Egyptian slave masters. It was a tough lesson for them, just as it is for us, that we still need structure and direction in our lives.

The truth we all have to learn is that there can be no absolute freedom—in other words, freedom without any strings attached—because that kind of freedom doesn't exist for people who've been created by One who is greater than them.

God made us to be free; but God also knows that it's only in allowing His truth to guide us that we can be free. Maybe this sounds complicated—but listen: freedom often is complicated.

We can't figure it out on our own, but God can help us. He gives it to us straight. He tells us the truth... so that we can be free.

Desire the truth—in every aspect of life. This is our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

Seek to know the truth. Speak the truth, in love, to others. Because this, friends, is the only way that we can be truly free!