The Freedom Train

Performed June 16, 2024

(Note: written by Marcia Harrington for the 8th Day Faith Community, Washington, DC; the Child is about age 7-11)

Harriet, **Announcer**, William, Ellen, PegLegJoe, Eli, Mary, Thomas, Frederick, Sojourner (10 adults)

SONG: When Israel was in Egypt’s land, Let my people go

Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go

**Chorus: Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land,**

**Tell old, Pharoah, Let my people go.**

The Lord told Moses what to do, Let my people go

To lead the children of Israel through, Let my people go. Chorus

Oh let us all from bondage flee, Let my people go

And let us all in Christ be free, Let my people go. Chorus

**Announcer: “**Since the first African American churches were founded in the 1700s, black religious organizations have brought biblical values to bear on the freedom struggle. Black ministers preached against the institution of slavery, and slaves sang spirituals promising deliverance from bondage. African Americans drew on that same faith during the segregation era. And when the people rose up against racial oppression during the Civil Rights Movement, they were emboldened by a belief in a just and a compassionate God. They trusted that God was with them and that [God] would set them free.” (The Beatitudes: From Slavery to Civil Rights)

“What we have begun to learn is the weight of liberty. Freedom is a heavy load, a great and strange burden for the spirit to undertake. It is not easy. It is not a gift given, but a choice made, and the choice may be a hard one. The road goes upward towards the light, but the laden traveler may never reach the end of it.” (LeGuin, The Tombs of Atuan)

**Announcer:** Child, do you hear the whistle? The train is coming. Are you getting on?

**Child:** I don’t know. What train is this?

**Harriet (Tubman):** “The Freedom Train. All aboard the Freedom Train. All aboard.”

**Child:** Should I get on?

**Harriet:** “It’s your choice but it’s a dangerous one. Hurry up. All aboard! Doors closing.”

**Child:** Wait for me!

**SONG: *Get on Board! (played – 1:30 or 3 min)***

**Child:** Who are you? Where are we going? 2

**Harriet:** I’m Harriet, the Conductor, and we’re going North to Freedom. The cars on this train have names, and you’ll meet people who have taken the dangerous journey to freedom. These courageous people were the crews of the Liberty Line. This train is the North Star.

Child, you will find out that *“As your real power grows and . . . knowledge widens, ever the way you can follow grows narrower; until at last, you choose nothing, but do only and wholly what you must do.”* (adapted from Le Guin, A Wizard of Earthsea, 71)

**Child:** I see the name **Travellers** on the car door. Can we go in?

**Harriet:** Push open the door, Child.

**Child:** Who are the Travellers?

**Harriet:** The slaves who escaped. They ran and walked, rode and sailed to freedom. I was once one of them. Let the travellers tell you about slavery. Meet Ellen and William Kraft.

**William:** We were brought here from Africa and sold as slaves. More of us died on the ships coming over than reached these shores. Those who got here alive were sold and then worked long hours on a plantation for no pay. On the plantation, men, women, and children as young as five could be sold in a moment. We all were just property.

**Ellen:** If we tried to escape and were caught, we often were whipped or beaten unmercifully. Some had a foot cut off or got sold away from their families and friends. Then, they never saw their families again.

**William:** A legal or church marriage was not allowed. So, instead a man and woman would jump a broom to show that they were married.

**Ellen:** It was against the law for a slave to learn to read or write though some did learn secretly.

**William:** It was against the law to hold a meeting, even to preach the word of God. We had to meet and communicate in secret. We used songs and symbols and sounds to communicate like *Steal Away*.

***SONG: Steal Away, steal away* steal away to Jesus! Steal away, steal away home, I ain't got long to stay here.**

**Child:** What did a train have to do with slavery?

**Ellen:** Oh, the Freedom Train was not really a train. It was people like you and me . . . of various backgrounds, beliefs, colors and creeds who hated slavery. They all helped to create a lifeline. It was like a road or a train out of slavery, but it was a dangerous journey. Making a decision to escape was agonizing. We had to wade through fearful questions: What if we get caught? What if somebody gets hurt or dies along the way? How will we eat? What if we make it to freedom? Then, what? Where will we live? How will we make a living? 3

**Harriet:** The only way to cross over fear is to do what you are afraid of doing.

**William:** But, there were helpers with names like conductors, station agents and masters, shepherds, watchers, and prophets. They were the crews of the Liberty Line and helped the slaves go north. The cost of freedom was high and took great courage. Many of us were caught or died escaping.

**SONG: *Oh, Freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me,***

***And before I be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave,***

***And go home to my Lord and be free.***

***No more darkness, no more darkness, no more darkness over me . . . .***

***There’ll be glory, there’ll be glory, there’ll be glory over me . . . . . .***

**Child:** You said that you were a slave once, Harriet?

**Harriet:** Yes, in southern Maryland on the eastern shore. I escaped and made it north to freedom. I always told the Lord, “I trust you. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me, and he always did.” Let’s move on to the next car. It’s called the

**Conductors**.

**Peg Leg Joe:** Welcome, Child. I’m Peg Leg Joe.

**Child:** Nice to meet you, Joe. Why are you in the Conductors’ car?

**PLJ:** We conductors led the slaves to freedom by teaching them the escape routes or leading groups of slaves like Harriet did.

**Child:** What did you do, Joe?

**PLJ:** I was a traveling carpenter. Every winter, I arrived in the South, mostly Alabama and Mississippi and moved from plantation to plantation working and teaching a song with the escape route in it. I left in the very early spring, and after that some of the slaves started escaping north.

**Child:** What did your song teach, Joe?

**PLJ:** My song, **“**Follow the Drinking Gourd” meant to walk toward the Big Dipper pointing to the North Star. The slaves were to travel north along the bank of the Tombigbee River to northern Mississippi. I marked the dead trees with drawings of a left foot and a peg foot in charcoal. Those kept them on the trail. Next, the song taught them to go north between the hills to the Tennessee River and follow it north until it meets the big river, the Ohio. I would then be waiting usually in the winter to meet them and take them over the frozen river into Illinois, a free state. It could take almost a year for this trip.

**SONG: *Follow the Drinking Gourd* (play 2:30 if start at :30 sec)** 4

**PLJ:** And, Aunt Harriet, too made 19 trips and “carried” hundreds of men, women, and children to freedom on the Underground Railroad. She never lost a passenger.

**Harriet:** Time to move along. Next is the **Agents’** car.

**Child:** What did the Agents do?

**Harriet:** They provided safe hiding places for the slaves in houses, barns, churches, wagons. Let’s go in and meet Eli and Mary.

**Eli and Mary:** Welcome, Child. Welcome, Harriet.

**Mary:** We were farmers and lived in a grey farmhouse on a river in Maryland. We let slaves

sleep in a small secret room in our basement. If it was safe for them to come to us, we kept a

lantern glowing in the window when it was dark. If it was daytime, a star quilt hung on the

fence. When there were patrollers looking for runaways, we took the quilt inside and no lantern

burned.

**Eli:** We provided a bed, clean clothes, water for washing and food, good food. You see we were

Quakers and believed that slavery was wrong. We believed that we were all God’s children and

that God was on the side of the poor and oppressed. We also helped the runaways get to the next

safe place, to the next station agent. We had a network of people who worked with us. Some

were **watchers** and passed along information. **Shepherds** helped to move and encourage people.

They were also good problem-solvers and comforters.

***SONG: There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.***

**Child:** Where did *you* send the people you helped?

**Mary:** North, Child, up the eastern line through Delaware, then into Pennsylvania, New York,

New England and Canada. We sent many to the Quaker, Thomas Garrett in Wilmington, Delaware. He was a Station Master and abolitionist known for his comfort and boldness. For 40 years he helped over 2700 slaves escape to freedom.

**Child:** Is he on this train, Harriet?

**Harriet:** Oh, yes. He’s in the next car back so let’s go in.

**Child:** So, this must be the **Station Masters’** car?

**Thomas:** And, I’m Thomas Garret, child. I ran a hardware store, and my life’s work was

helping runaway slaves get to freedom. I welcomed thousands of them and moved many along to

my dear friend, William Still, a free black man in Philadelphia. He, too, was a Station

Master. He talked with all the runaways that he welcomed and helped. He kept detailed records

that documented the Underground Railroad. 5

**Child**: Did you and William know Harriet?

**Thomas:** Oh, yes. We were very good friends and worked together for justice for many years.

**Harriet:** Child, we don’t have much more time so let’s move to the **Prophets** car.

**Child:** Tell me about the Prophets, Harriet. That doesn’t sound like a railroad job.

**Harriet:** It isn’t exactly. The prophets were the truth-tellers; they spoke out about the ugliness

and terror of oppression and slavery. Some were escaped slaves themselves like Frederick

Douglass and Sojourner Truth. Those two were powerful thinkers and speakers and used their

minds and voices to do God’s work.

**Frederick:** That’s right. I was born on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. By chance I learned to read

and write some, and then practiced reading and writing in secret. I endured beatings and

whippings. When I was 21, I planned my escape and left for the north. I changed my last name to

Douglass to protect myself and began to talk about my experience as a slave. I lectured for the

American Anti-Slavery Society and wrote my autobiography. I started a newspaper called *North*

*Star* to educate people on slavery and segregation. And I became a conductor on the Under-

ground Railroad.

**Sojourner:** Your work and words were strong and magnificent, Frederick. I, too, had to tell

terrible truths about slavery and my life as a slave in New York state. I had to make people

understand. So when I asked people, “Is this any way to treat a human being?” people knew the

answer was NO.

**Child:** How did you get your unusual name, Sojourner?

**Sojourner:** Sojourner means someone who is just passing through, moving from one place to

another. I was called by God to be a sojourner, always moving on to spread my message. And I

knew I would never serve any master but the truth.

**Harriet:** When Sojourner was dying, she told her friends and family that she was going home

“like a shooting star”.

**Child:** Mr. Frederick Douglass, how many people and cars are on this train?

**Frederick:** This Freedom Train has no caboose; it’s endless. Thousands of people are on this train; more get on every day. You may know some of them: Martin and Coretta King, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Cesar Chavez, John Woolman, Abraham Lincoln, Langston Hughes, Dave the Potter. The list goes on and on and on. The power of their lives could not be silenced by bondage of any kind.

**Child:** Sojourner, is Jesus on this train? 6

**Sojourner:** Yes, indeed. He is constantly walking through all the train’s cars and sharing his light and love and telling stories. We don’t see him too often because this is a very long train, and his walk is long.

**Child:** Give him my love when you see him, Sojourner. Harriet, why is the train slowing down?

**Harriet:** Because we have to stop to let you off. Your time with us is almost over.

**Child:** Do I have to get off *now*?

**Harriet:** Yes, child. The people who stay on the North Star train are the people whose work on earth is done. But, their work continues in the spirits and lives of those whose work for freedom on earth, and that work is not yet finished. Your work has hardly begun.

**Child:** Will I see you and all the others again?

**Harriet:** Not for a long time, but one day, yes. You can always see and hear all the people on this train in your mind and heart. Keep working for freedom and justice, and you will “see” us. Trust God as I did and keep singing for freedom. Here’s your stop. Doors opening!

**Child:** Good-by, Harriet and thanks for being my conductor on board.

**Harriet:** You’re very welcome. Remember ultimately, no one can free anyone else. You have to free yourself. Somebody else can unlock the door and even push it ajar, but they can’t walk through it for you. You have to do that.

Child, stay on board the freedom train on earth, and keep your eyes on the North Star.

***SONG: Freedom is a Constant Struggle (sung by Kim Harris on CD Get on Board, 5 min played)*** 7

**Resources**

Books

Amazing Americans: Frederick Douglass by Mary Grace Becker

Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky by Faith Ringgold

The Beatitudes: From Slavery to Civil Rights by Carole Boston Weatherford

From Slaveship to Freedom Road by Julius Lester

Only Passing Through: The Story of Sojourner Truth by Anne Rockwell

The Tombs of Atuan & A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula K. LeGuin

CDs

Steal Away: Songs of the Underground Railroad by Kim and Reggie Harris

Get on Board: Underground Railroad & Civil Rights Freedom Songs by Kim and Reggie

Harris

DVDs

Roots of Resistance: The Story of the Underground Railroad (PBS Video, WGBH)

Safe Harbor (Mainstreet Media)

Whispers of Angels: A Story of the Underground Railroad (Janson Media)