

## **Juneteenth**

I am going to do a quick overview of Juneteenth in my sermon. I will look at the initial arrival of Union troops to the shores of Galveston, Texas in 1865. The celebration of this moment continues to this day. The Diocese of California and the United States have both taken formal action to enshrine this day as a day of remembrance and celebration. At the same time, I want to take pains to point out in my sermon that we join a celebration party that has been going on since the late nineteenth century.

In the middle of the civil war, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The war would not officially end until April 9, 1865, when Robert E. Lee surrendered at the Appomattox Courthouse. Enforcement of the Proclamation relied upon the advance of Union troops. As an aside, in 1866 the last of the enslaved people would be officially freed by the less well-known Treaty with the Choctaw and Chickasaw, April 28, 1866. Several indigenous groups had sided with the Confederacy. You can read this [webpage about the Choctaw Confederates](#) to get a better sense of some of the complexity of this period.

## **Juneteenth: Baptism**

Juneteenth might seem like a curious choice to understand a theology of baptism. The longing for liberation started in Genesis and found a people leaving Egypt for a new home in the book of Exodus. Water shows up in both: God starts a new thing over the water and frees people through water. These stories are almost lifted word-for-word in the baptismal liturgy. (We have a baptism on Sunday at 10am). I am going to even go so far as to say that the moral arc of baptism is clearly seen in the celebration of Juneteenth.

## **Bible: Exodus**

Exodus is about enslaved people longing to be free. God heard them and raised up Moses as their leader. You've got Moses famously saying, "Let me people go," and the great story of God parting the waters for freedom. Just as the Israelites were freed from physical slavery, we too are called to ask for help when we find ourselves in bondage both spiritually and physically, AND to be a liberating people for God by being willing to do something about the bondage of others. You can help others with personal addiction, community food deserts, crippling anxiety, or legal racism -- all of it belongs in the story of us with God on our own exodus to the Kingdom of God in heaven and earth.

### **Liturgy: Baptism is bigger than us**

Baptism symbolizes our identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Through the waters of baptism, we die to our old selves and rise to new life, washed clean and liberated from sin's power. Just as the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and left their bondage behind, baptism represents our crossing from a life of sin and brokenness into a life of freedom and wholeness in Christ. Jesus is sometimes called the new Moses. I hope you hear this Sunday's baptism as a powerful reminder that true liberation—a fresh start, a clean slate, and a new beginning is way bigger than individuals.

### **History: The Emancipation Proclamation**

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, declared freedom for enslaved people in the United States. His words were a confrontation of the systems of oppression and injustice that dehumanize and enslave others.

### **Songs of Freedom: Underground Railroad**

You know that the Underground Railroad was neither underground, nor a railroad. I won't rehash all this history, but a dedicated group of abolitionists took it upon themselves to create a network. This was a secret network that people used to escape these work/concentration camps (politely known as plantations). Music was a part of this network.

Songs were used to communicate and instruct would-be escapees. There are many songs of the Underground Railroad, but you may have heard of Follow the Drinking Gourd, Wade in the Water, and / or Go Down Moses. The lyrics of spirituals likely contained some hidden messages and encoded information about escape routes, safe houses, and other details related to the Underground Railroad.

I caution you not to take this too far. Enslavers were smart too, and too much easily decoded information would have meant great suffering for the captives. So without going too far: Wade in the water *might* have been an easy to remember reminder to get in the water when you fled in order to shake off a bloodhound tracking you. It might have been sung by different work parties to sing on the night when someone was planning to escape (in order for the network to help provide assistance) .

This legacy is part of the Episcopal Church as well. Lift Every Voice and Sing is an authorized Hymnal of the Episcopal Church that draws heavily from the African American singing traditions. Spirituals served as a means of preserving cultural traditions, providing solace in the face of hardship, and fostering a sense of community among enslaved individuals. Today, we can connect in a very direct way to this same God by singing these songs ourselves and remembering our complicated history. So, let's sing, baptize, celebrate history and give thanks **Todd**