

Faith Story

June 27, 2021

Harriet Tubman



Harriet Tubman's story is one of human perseverance in circumstances of oppression and of strong faith in God's intention for human freedom and flourishing.

Harriet was born into slavery in Maryland in 1820. She was first rented out to work at the age of 5, initially as a nursemaid, and then as a field hand, a cook, a woodcutter. She later said that she preferred outside labor to working inside at domestic tasks.

Like so many enslaved people, she saw her family repeatedly torn apart as her siblings were sold. Her father was freed by a provision in the will of the slaveholder who owned him. Harriet, her mother, and remaining siblings were held on a different farm; although their owner also included a manumission clause in his will, when he died, the heir refused to honor that clause and they were not freed.

During her enslavement, Harriet suffered repeated physical violence. Her worst injury resulted from her commitment to justice. When she was twelve and in town picking up supplies, she spotted an overseer about to throw a heavy weight at a fugitive. Harriet stepped between the two and the weight struck her in the head. She described the experience this way: "The weight broke my skull ... They carried me to the house all bleeding and fainting. I had no bed, no place to lie down on at all, and they laid me on the seat of the loom, and I stayed there all day and the next." The consequence of that injury was a lifetime of seizures, severe headaches, and narcoleptic episodes. Harriet also experienced intense dream states, which she classified as religious visions.

In 1849, Tubman escaped from slavery and traveled to Pennsylvania via the Underground Railroad. She said of her arrival in that non-slave state: "When I found I had crossed that line, 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."

Between 1850 and 1860, Harriet Tubman returned repeatedly to the South to guide other people to freedom, including her parents and several siblings. While an admiring 1868 biography of Tubman credited her with 19 trips that freed over 300 people, Tubman herself always said that the number was much lower. It is fairly certain that she did conduct at least 13 Underground Railroad journeys that carried at least 70 people to freedom.

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which made it legal for fugitive and freed workers in the north to be captured and taken to a slave state, made Tubman's work with the Underground Railroad

much harder. She adapted by leading people further north to Canada, traveling at night, usually in the spring or fall when the days were shorter.

Tubman displayed extraordinary courage, persistence, and iron discipline. She carried a gun, for both her own protection and to “encourage” any charges who might be having second thoughts about continuing on the journey. She often drugged babies or young children so their crying would not alert the slave catchers.

By 1856, there was a \$40,000 reward offered for her capture. On one occasion, she overheard some men reading her wanted poster, which stated that she was illiterate. She promptly pulled out a book and feigned reading it, which worked to fool the men.

During the Civil War, Tubman served as a nurse, laundress, cook, and spy with Union forces along the coast of South Carolina. She was the first woman to lead an armed expedition during the Civil War, guiding the Combahee River Raid which liberated more than 700 slaves. However, she was paid so little for her war service that she had to support herself by selling homemade baked goods. After the war, she applied multiple times for a federal pension and in the late 1890’s, Congress passed a private bill that provided her with \$20 a month.

When the Civil War ended, Harriet settled with family and friends on land she owned in Auburn, New York. She died there in 1913 and was buried with military honors at Fort Hill Cemetery.

Harriet Tubman’s life and work were inspired and supported by her strong faith that God is deliverer and protector of the weak. She would listen carefully to the voice of God as she led slaves north and would only go where she felt God was leading her. Her bravery arose from her confidence that God could be trusted. She said of her Underground Railroad work: “I always told God, I’m going to hold steady on you, and you’ve got to see me through.”

God did always see her through and this woman who never lost one of the people she was leading to freedom is rightly called “The Moses of her people”. She continues to offer us a model of Christian faith, an example of human dignity, and a summons to work for freedom wherever it is needed.

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