

PREPARING A PLACE

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In 1913, a woman passed away in a nursing home that she herself had been instrumental in building, and which had been completed five years earlier in 1908. The nursing home was in Auburn, NY – only about a hundred miles from where we are gathered here this morning. The nursing home was a little unusual in that in addition to the usual requirements for admission – that you be elderly and unable to take care of yourself – this nursing home was intended exclusively for “aged and indigent colored people,” by the explicit instruction of the woman who had made its construction possible, the same woman – aged, and indigent, and of color – who was to conclude her own life as a resident of that home five years later. Her name was Harriet Tubman. The last thing she is recorded to have said before she passed on was something she quoted from the Bible, even though she never learned to read. She said: “I go to prepare a place for you.”

Earlier this year the Secretary of the Treasury announced that starting in the year 2020. Harriet Tubman's portrait would begin to appear on the twenty-dollar bill. It is hard to imagine anyone else who might better symbolize the human desire for freedom, the same desire that laid the foundation for the great nation we commemorate and celebrate on July the Fourth every year, and that in its best moments continues to inspire it down through its history and even to the present day.

Harriet was born as a slave into a slave family in the state of Maryland sometime around 1820. For twenty-nine years, she lived the life of a slave, working without pay

either for her owner or for whomever her owner rented her to. Daily physical labor was her lot in life, with no reward, no relief, no dignity, no education, and no hope for improvement. She was a slave, and not even a particularly valuable one, being small and plain and suffering from fits that probably resulted from a head injury she received from one of the men she'd been rented out to as a child.

That life of slavery came to an end when Harriet was twenty-nine years old. In September of 1849, she escaped, and headed north.

The details of that initial flight north have never come to light, except for one. Harriet herself recorded her reaction when she stepped into Pennsylvania, a free 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."

Every so often in reading history, we come across individuals who just seem impossible. What it is that motivates them, where their strength comes from, who they are...the most fundamental things about them remain mysterious, forever inexplicable. One thinks of Joan of Arc, one thinks of Mother Teresa. And one thinks of Harriet Tubman.

I go to prepare a place for *you*.

One thinks of Harriet Tubman, not because she was an escaped slave. There were many slaves who escaped, by the grace of God. One thinks of Harriet Tubman because, having escaped, having reached a place of security, having arrived in the Promised Land that reminded her of Heaven, she didn't simply live content in her freedom. Instead she went back to rescue others from their bondage. At least thirteen times over the following years leading up to the Civil War, Harriet made the difficult journey by foot back to Maryland. Thirteen times she gathered together friends and

members of her family who were still trapped in slavery. Traveling at night, always in winter, when the nights were long, thirteen times she guided them along the hidden paths and dangerous byways patrolled by slave-hunters eager to collect the bounty on her head and the heads of those she was liberating. She carried a pistol, both as protection against those hunters and their dogs, and also to intimidate any the slaves who might grow fearful to the point of wanting to abandon their flight to freedom. "You go on or you die," she told one of them once, pointing her revolver at his head.

There is much more to Harriet's story. Before the Civil War, she met and collaborated with John Brown, and might have participated in his assault on Harper's Ferry if she hadn't been ill at the time. During the War, she worked as a nurse and as a military scout for the North, and actually led one armed raid against a Southern encampment that resulted in freeing 750 slaves, the greatest military achievement, before or since, of any female in American history. After the war she was active in the women's suffrage movement, and deeply involved herself in caring for the aging population of the slaves freed by the War, including, as we noted at the beginning, building that nursing home in Auburn that bore her name, The Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged. All this, without even being able to read.

Yes, there are many other things we could dwell on in her long and rich life. But I want to keep our focus on those thirteen trips Harriet made back to Maryland to free those she had known and grown up with, and left behind on her own first flight to freedom.

I go to prepare a place for you, she said at the end, quoting Jesus. And surely the vision she had in her mind during those last moments was the same as the vision he always had in his. When Harriet looked at her life, she didn't see it in terms of herself, of what an amazing achiever she had been, of her courage and selflessness and moral

goodness. She wasn't thinking of herself at all. She was thinking of them, of the people she was helping, the people whose futures she was changing.

I've had the great privilege of being in the hospice residence here in Albion when one of the long-term patients has just died. I've seen the staff, with tears in their eyes, go into the room to change the linen and clean up and put everything in order. Those aides and nurses are in there, with their hearts bleeding, preparing a place for the next patient to experience the freedom of dying with dignity.

When Mother Teresa heard her instruction from God to go and help the poorest of the poor, she went out and started preparing places where the malformed could sleep on a mattress instead of in a gutter, where the blind could learn to read, where lepers could have someone who would wash the nasty scabs on their backs. She was preparing places where the crippled and abandoned could experience the freedom that comes from being treated as human beings.

When the Pilgrims landed on what we now consider the northeastern coast, isn't it obvious now, in retrospect, what they were doing? They were preparing a place. Like Harriet, they had flown from bondage. Like Harriet, they carried with them the full awareness that they were the beginning of something, not the conclusion. They were preparing the place for an experiment in human freedom unlike any the world had ever seen.

During the second world war, more than 400,000 American soldiers were killed. Why were they killed? What were they doing? They were defending civilization, true. They were resisting evil, true, perhaps the greatest evil the world has ever known. But in another, deeper sense, what they were doing was preparing a place for us, preparing the world we live in, full of the freedoms we continue to enjoy.

On July fourth of every year, America celebrates the anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence by the fifty-six members of the Continental Congress. Those fifty-six individuals that day were preparing a place. What sort of place? The opening sentence of the Declaration tells us. They were preparing a place where all people are considered to be created equal, where they have certain God-given rights which cannot and must not and will not be denied them within the borders of this new country, including the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to the pursuit of happiness.

Is the country we live in the perfect realization of that preparation? Of course not. The bondage Harriet Tubman escaped from was after all a bondage found on these very shores. The Pilgrims were the first wave of a massive immigration that deprived native populations of some of their freedoms. These are truths, and they must certainly be acknowledged; but surely that's not to give the prize to the cynics among us. Nothing happens historically in a vacuum. Show me the perfect country, and I'll show you heaven.

The Fourth of July is not the anniversary of the achievement of perfect national and universal liberty, but of our national commitment to it. Bondage did not cease to exist on July Fourth, 1776; oppressive colonization did not vanish from the pages of history; excessive taxation - God knows - is still with us. What we will be remembering tomorrow is not the end of national bondage, but what someone else of Harriet's generation called "a new birth of freedom."

In exactly the same way, what we will be commemorating beginning in the year 2020, when Harriet's portrait is to be added to the twenty-dollar bill, is not the achievement of equality of opportunity - still a goal - but rather her dedication to its achievement. And what we will be reminded of each time we think of her is the saying that's carved into

one wall of the Korean War Veteran's Memorial in Washington D.C.: "Freedom is not Free."

The future is not a place waiting for us to arrive and move in. The future is always being prepared by what we do today.

Each day of Harriet Tubman's life was spent preparing a place for the future. As we celebrate the birth of our nation, let us include as a part of that celebration a commitment to follow her example. Let us remember that the future is no longer in her hands, nor in the hands of those who signed the Declaration of Independence two hundred and forty years ago. The future is in our hands.

And so let this be our prayer for this morning, O Gracious God, that we be empowered to cherish the future as well as the present, that we recognize our responsibility to the world to come, that we make a new and fresh commitment to the freedom and emancipation from bondage that animated the life of Harriet Tubman, along with the faith that enabled her to affirm at the end that, as she had done in life, so she would continue in death, to prepare a place for those who follow. Amen.