

“Deliverance and Celebration”  
June 20, 2021

Isaiah 52:7-10  
Luke 4:14-21

Let me start with a couple of questions: When was the last time you received some good news?

And how did you feel?

The book of Proverbs says that “Good news refreshes the body” (Pr. 15:30)—and it does! It might bring a burst of elation, perhaps followed by a sense of relief or relaxation.

Proverbs also tells us: “Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.” (Pr. 25:25)

Among many other things, the Bible is the story of people waiting for good news.

The Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt, with taskmasters set over them “to oppress them with forced labor.” The Egyptians “Became ruthless in imposing hard tasks on the Israelites and made their lives bitter with hard service.”

In the far country of Midian, Moses reluctantly hears and accepts the call of God, who knew the suffering of the people and was coming to deliver them. With Aaron, his brother, he goes to Pharaoh and in the name of the living God says: “Let my people go,” and prepares the people for their exodus.

Refreshing, good news.

Centuries later, the exiles in Babylon, the people of Jerusalem, conquered and taken into captivity in a distant land, awaited the good news that they would return to their city, awaited the prophet’s call to prepare the way home, to make the path straight, to lift every valley and make every mountain and hill low. The message was so good, it would seem as though even the feet of the messenger were beautiful.

One commentator remarked: “but feet are hardly beautiful.” And another clarified: “Their beauty consists in their intimation of the beauty of the coming of the tidings—and this is beautiful because it awakens jubilation.”

Refreshing, good news.

Jesus comes to his hometown of Nazareth. Reading from the prophet Isaiah, he is clear that the living God has called him, that his mission is to bring the good news—the gospel—to the poor, to the oppressed; that his task is to proclaim release to the captives.

By God’s grace we are partial heirs of the tradition of those and ancient people set free. By God’s grace, we are followers of the One who brought good news to the oppressed, to the captive—and as those followers, we are called to do the same.

We give thanks to God when deliverance comes. We celebrate the refreshment of good news.

Yesterday we marked Juneteenth—and we marked it differently than in years past. While it has been observed in Iowa since 1990 and has been a state holiday since 2002, Juneteenth became an Iowa City holiday just last Tuesday with Mayor Teague’s proclamation. And only last Thursday, it became a federal holiday.

Juneteenth celebrates the arrival of long-awaited, refreshing good news.

I hope by now even the people of this mostly White congregation know the story: While the Civil War ended in April of 1865, it wasn’t until June 19 that news of the end of the war and of the end of slavery reached Texas. In Galveston on that date, Major General Gordon Granger issued “General Order, Number 3,” stating: “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equity of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves...”

The long-awaited good new had arrived.

But Henry Louis Gates reminds us that “when Texas fell and Granger issued his order, it wasn’t exactly instant magic for most of the Lone Star State’s 250,000 slaves. On plantations, masters had to decide when and how to announce the news — or wait for a government agent to arrive — and it was not uncommon for them to delay until after the harvest. Even in Galveston, the ex-Confederate mayor flouted the Army by forcing the freed people back to work.”

This, Gates says, was “hardly the recipe for a celebration.” Still, he adds, rejoicing over deliverance and freedom could not be suppressed. “Defying confusion and delay, terror and violence, the newly ‘freed’ black men and women of Texas...now had a date to rally around. In one of the most inspiring grassroots efforts of the post-Civil War period, they transformed June 19 from a day of unheeded military orders into their own annual rite, ‘Juneteenth’ beginning one year later in 1866.”<sup>1</sup>

Independence, freedom, equality come far too slowly, with great struggle and opposition. But when they come, shouldn’t everyone celebrate? Shouldn’t we all give thanks to God when people are delivered from oppression?

Our nation took another small, belated step forward this past week. Yes, there is still, as Martin Luther King, Jr. told us, a great promissory note that has not been paid. Even so, all people can celebrate—as we are in Iowa City and across the nation—remembering and giving thanks for that day when good new arrived to the oppressed and release was proclaimed to the captive.

Margaret Jordan is the president and chief executive officer of Dallas Medical Resources and also a direct descendant of Paul Jennings, James Madison’s enslaved manservant. Awhile back she wrote: “Most Americans have not been taught to see and embrace African American history as part of their history as Americans. Indeed, in the telling of American history, we have failed to fully grapple with the reality of slavery and its lasting hold on society. This has consequences.

“It would be simplistic,” she says, “to suggest that in understanding our past we will find all of the answers. But [she believes] that without deeper reflection and engagement with our history — in all of its complexity — we will not have the foundation of understanding and respect on which progress can be built. Without it, we remain trapped in a vicious cycle powered through complacency and ignorance.”<sup>2</sup>

Our complex history as a nation includes captors and captives, liberators and the liberated, oppressors and those who rise up against oppression.

Perhaps this past week we moved a little closer toward that foundation of understanding and respect. We should give thanks to God when deliverance comes. We should mark those occasions in the life of our nation that make all of us better off, celebrating the freedom we have, moving toward greater freedom for all.

When good news comes to us, we celebrate and give thanks.

When good news comes to others, we join with them in celebration and thanksgiving. The deliverance of God in all times, in all places, for all people calls forth our rejoicing.

Let us bring good news, let us hear good news, let us with eager hearts await the continuous deliverance of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates, "What Is Juneteenth," [What Is Juneteenth? African American History Blog | The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross \(pbs.org\)](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aiaa/articles/pages/2017/06/what-is-juneteenth/)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/too-many-americans-still-dont-see-black-history-as-their-own/2017/06/30/6561e04c-5b59-11e7-9b7d-14576dc0f39d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.20153e3b3aff](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/too-many-americans-still-dont-see-black-history-as-their-own/2017/06/30/6561e04c-5b59-11e7-9b7d-14576dc0f39d_story.html?utm_term=.20153e3b3aff)