

An Old Story becomes a New Song

John 2:13-22

March 8, 2015 Alan Claassen

The original lyrics for the spiritual, Gospel Plow, written sometime in the 1800s, went something like this.

Well, I got my hands on the Gospel plow
And I wouldn't take nothin' for my journey now
Keep your hands on that plow of God

Well, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
All those prophets are dead and gone
Keep your hands on that plow of God

Sister Mary was bound in chains
And every link was Jesus' name
Keep your hands on that plow of God

The song affirms the need to keep your hands on that plow of the love of God so that your rows are straight and long.

Your hands on the plow are the connection between all that power of the animal that is pulling
and that earth that is being turned over.

It is your connection between earth and heaven.

In 1965 a civil rights activist named,
Alice Wine, took this old spiritual and made some changes,
so the song became

Paul and Silas bound in jail had no money to go their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on

Paul and Silas thought they was lost
dungeon shook and the chains come off
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on

Freedom's name is mighty sweet,
Black and white are gonna meet
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on

Hold on, Hold on. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

So the image of the plow in the soil becomes a little richer,
digs a little deeper into earth, into struggling love

There is the need to hold onto the plow because,
because it is more difficult to move against hardened hearts
than hardened earth.

And to keep going you will have to keep your eyes on the prize of freedom,
your higher purpose, God's higher purpose.

“If there's anything that God has as an agenda, it's setting suffering people free.

Yahweh brings the people out of “Egypt,”
which is understood in the Bible as “a narrow place,”
into a “broad and spacious place” flowing with milk and honey.

God brings us out of suffering and oppression live in a land of sustainable peace.

If a relationship is abusive or oppressive, God's way is clear:

God wants us out of there.
God wants us to be free.

The story of the Exodus is about God's desire to free us from all sorts of “narrow places” in our lives:

political and economic injustice,
racism
abusive relationships, addictions,
coercive religion,

This could be an overwhelming task considering the amount of suffering there is the world.
But, if we remember that Suu Kyi calls this courageous compassion “a revolution of the spirit,”
and if we remember how Jesus surrendered himself into the arms of John,
and the waters of the Jordan River,
and the love of God,
and if we remember how Jesus went even deeper into trusting God,
while seeing and feeling suffering in the 40 days in the wilderness,
we may be able to experience the courage of compassion,
as a benediction rather than a burden.

When we want to care for others,
rather than having to care for others,
we are freed from the narrow place of self-interest
and enter into the spaciousness of the Spirit
who is the one who calls us and cares for us
while we are on our wilderness journey.

This is the Holy Loving Spirit that was with those courageous people
who walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge 50 years ago
because they had their eyes on the prize of the right to vote.

The new words to Gospel Plow that Alice Wine wrote in 1965 grew as people added their
own lines to the song,

based upon their own experience

Only chain that a man can stand,
That's the chain of hand in hand
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on

I gonna board that big Greyhound.
Carry the love from town to town
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on

Even in situations that we can't escape, God draws us toward freedom.

Even in prison, Nelson Mandela was a free man.
He was free of his captor's fear and their narrow mindset,
narrow view of the future.

The promise of Exodus is not that we will succeed, soon or forever;
but that freedom is as basic to God's creation
as is hydrogen and helium.

So keep your eyes on the prize and hold on.

This keeping his eyes on the prize of compassion gave Jesus, a Galilean tradesman,
the courage and the righteous anger to stand at the temple steps and say to the money-
changers,

This is wrong and must be stopped.
No more exploitation of the poor.
No more turning the holy place into a market of commercialism
Everywhere is holy in the sight of the Creator
Everyone is a temple of the Creator's love.
God's love is given freely to everyone.

I can't help thinking about how this passage of the money changers extorting the poor on the
steps of the Temple applies not just to a particular temple, or Holy Land, but to earth herself.

How have the money changers turned the beauty of the earth and all of its abundant resources,
what should be a birthright, an earthright, for all people and all creation,
into a commodity that serves 1%.

The temple that is being destroyed today is our own mother earth.

I am grateful the compassion of the earth care committee of this congregation and so many other
faith communities and organizations who provide us with ways to see, feel and want to take
action for the well-being of this blue boat home that is most wonderful gift of the Creator.

Looking back from the vantage point of this week-end when are remembering the 50 year
anniversary of the March in Selma,

it makes me think that Jesus turning over the tables, but not harming the money-changers themselves,

is a good example of civil disobedience, social change through non-violent and yet forceful means.

Two of my favorite verses in Keep Your Eyes on the Prize are these:

The only thing we did wrong,
stayed' in the wilderness a little too long
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on

The only thing we did was right.
Was to organize and fight
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on

Hold on, Hold on.
Keep your eyes on the prize.
Hold on

Fight. Stand up. Stop wandering.
You see what you need to do.
Remember your higher purpose.
If you say Yes! Then Do Yes!

That old gospel song, Gospel Plow,
went through some changes during the Civil Rights movement.
It was the same spirit moving and guiding,
but the people find new words for new times.

As I was thinking about the words to these songs, how they changed, and how they kept their eyes on the prize of the original vision of the song,
I thought about this congregation at this time in your history.

You have a great old song within you,

how might the words change for these times we are living in now?

You have a beautiful and historical sanctuary,

how might the structure be changed for these times we are living in now.

You have a beautiful location set within a beautiful land trust,

how might you change the landscape in a way that keeps the same spirit
but changes the feel so new people want to enter into this holy place

Can you set your eyes on the prize

and keep your hands on the gospel plow

and sing a song of extravagant welcome?

Can you sing, even in the midst of this time of transition,

we are not afraid?

we are willing to trust that we will be nurtured and guided

learning what we need to learn so we can enter into a broad and spacious place

that will welcome so much more than a new minister,

but also a new beginning for this united and uniting church

that has such a unique voice to raise in this beautiful valley of

milk and honey

and cabernet and zinfandel

and olives and cheese and eucalyptus and you.

The words to the song, Gospel Plow changed as the people sang it, but the spirit remained
the same.

How is FCC Sonoma going to let the song of this church change
even as the spirit remains the same?

How?

We are going to sing;

Keep Your eyes on the Prize. Hold on.