

# Steal Away

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[ 0 : 00 ] All right, Table Church, it is good to be with you, at least virtually. You may have heard that the Rona has gotten me, and that is true.

Still, I wanted to talk to you today out of just a bit of the fruit of what I've been thinking about. This will be more of a sermon reflection than a formal sermon, but I pray that it will give us something to consider as we enter into this Black History Month.

So if you would, please pray with me. God of all creation, God of our liberation and of our becoming, thank you for this holy moment in which we are able to meet you.

Thank you that your goodness is abundant in this moment, even if that is deeply hard for us to see. I pray, Lord, that no matter how we've entered this room or this space, that we would know ourselves held by you.

And I pray, God, that as I come here surrendering and coming from a place of deep imperfection, I ask that you would bless what is created.

[ 1 : 33 ] Thank you so much. In Jesus' name. Amen. All right. So I'm a person who reads every single word at the beginning of a book.

I read everything at the opening. If I have my e-book, my Kindle e-book with me, and it starts me not at the first page, I will go back to the cover so that I can look at the art.

And I'll say that one of my favorite things to read are the full words in books, particularly if they're by prominent authors or other well-known scholars.

And one of the best full words that I know is from Grace Jisun Kim's book, *Healing Our Broken Humanity*. And the foreword to that book is by Willie James Jennings, who's a scholar, theologian in his own right.

And he opens that foreword talking about 2 Corinthians 12, 9. That verse that says, He says, He says, He says, He says, He says, He says, He says,

[ 3 : 56 ] He says, He says, He says, different models of church than the ones given to us by the Western church. Different models.

As we enter this first Sunday of Black History Month, what better time to begin to talk about how at least one of these models is deeply embedded in Black history.

So this week and next week, what we're going to do is we're going to explore what we can learn from the hush harbors created by enslaved folks in the Antebellum South to inform us of what we might need to consider as a community of faith, desiring to be formed outside of colonial Christianity. As we talk through this series, *Marks of a Liberating Church*, we're going to be using Brandon Rensher's book, *Liberating Church*. Brandon Rensher is a fabulous human being and pastor who actually is in my hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina. And essentially, Brandon, in his book, *With a Group of People*, sets out research into the hush harbors and from that research discerns marks of sacred community and sacred space that are liberating as opposed to oppressive.

So in this week and next week, we're going to explore two marks. And then after Ash Wednesday, we're going to spend a little bit of time more broadly thinking about things we need to repent of in terms of dominant forms of Christianity. And then a little bit later in the year, we're going to return to these marks as well. Now, I have to say that a major part of my formation took place in, you all know this, more conservative spaces. And I can remember hearing of and being encouraged toward the nine healthy marks of church, or the nine marks of a healthy church. This is, I think, trademarked that language. Those marks include things like expository preaching and biblical theology, a biblical understanding of evangelism, biblical church discipline, the leadership of godly men.

And yet I think we need models that give us something different to aspire to, that set out different marks, marks of a liberating church. So here are some of the ones that Brandon Renscher and his team came up with. Steal Away, Hidden in Plain Sight Alternative to Empire, North Star, All God's Children's Got Shoes, Egalitarian Leadership, Sankofa, Talking Book, Ubuntu, Joy Unspeakable, and Staying Woke or Remembering.

[ 8 : 28 ] These are some of the marks that he sets out for liberative community, marks that were discerned through research in Hush Harbor communities. And we're going to talk about some of those marks in the coming weeks and then later in the coming months. But the first thing I want to do is just define what a Hush Harbor is. Here's his definition. I think this is a good one, pretty basic one.

He says, Hush Harbors emerged alongside of and were the antibody to slaveholding religion, the precursor to the religious right. Many enslaved Africans were not content with slaveholding Christianity, the racially integrated plantation church which upheld it or black folks' approximation of plantation culture that was under the master's gaze. Hush Harbors were secret and illegal meetings, often in the wilderness, away from the plantation church and culture, where enslaved Africans would gather to worship and organize for personal and political transformation, blending their native religious beliefs and practices with Christianity. From the Hush Harbors emerged the spirituals, underground railroad and slave revolts. The Hush Harbors were decolonizing monastic missional communities, faith rooted small groups on the fringes characterized by radical formation, friendship, and fierce revolution. Virtually overlooked when interrogating what faithful Christian community entails in the U.S. The Hush Harbors are a needed witness to cultivate new, liberating expressions of church for these spiritually and politically volatile times. As a North American church grapples with an eroding position of privilege in society, how do the antebellum Hush Harbors often offer a vision of church from the margins? In what ways did the antebellum Hush Harbors function as expressions of church?

Where are the contemporary Hush Harbors within the North American church among Black communities?

So key things to know. The Hush Harbors were small gatherings of enslaved folks who escaped secretly, often in the night, and went down into the woods outside of the plantation, or they went to swamps or ravines, or they met inside cane breaks. They met, they found essentially these natural refuges where they could gather in secret. And they worshiped in the ways that they wanted to. They sought God and they found Jesus, which is what I love about Hush Harbors. They were spaces in which enslaved folks were able to discern by the Spirit that there was something deeply wrong with the the the theology, the plantation theology they were being fed. And they discerned that, often without being able to read and write, without with often only knowing a few Bible stories. They learned to interpret the stories they did know from Scripture along liberative lines. They would gather and lament and celebrate and testify and dance and witness and sing. And when I talk about the Hush Harbors, I don't want to romanticize them. They were spaces for survival, absolute survival.

[ 11 : 58 ] And there are things that we can learn from them, even as many of us are trying to do more than survive. So, if you don't remember anything else about the Hush Harbors, just know they were these risky places outside of the plantation gaze where people discovered the sacred and they plotted liberation for their communities. I love what one writer talks about, Lenise Pinkert. She talks about our call to sign onto a different account of reality. And essentially that's what was happening in these Hush Harbors, this different view of what the world was and could be. These folks were at risk of their lives signing on to that.

Now, when I thought about this in Scripture, this Scripture came to mind that I want to just explore a little bit. And it's Exodus 5, 1 through 9. And I'll just read that. Exodus 5, 1 through 9.

After Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Let my people go so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness. But Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord that I should heed him and let Israel go?

I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go. Then they said, The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us. Let us go a three days journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword. But the king of Egypt said to them, Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors. Pharaoh continued, Now they are more numerous than the people of the land, and yet you want them to stop working?

That same day, Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people as well as their supervisors, you shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks as before. Let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously.

[14:01] Do not diminish it. They are lazy. That is why they cry. Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God. Let heavier work be laid on them. Then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.

So the first thing I just want you to note here that I find fascinating is that the Israelites, at least Moses and Aaron in their name, are asking to go to celebrate a festival in the wilderness. They asked to leave what I'm going to term the plantation gaze, the empire's gaze, which is a threatening act in and of itself. Now there's a lot of scholarly controversy about did they really only want three days? Some people would say that that's all they were asking for initially. And some people would say, no, they were using holy deception. They really always intended to go and escape as soon as they could. But no matter what, there's the sense where they know they have to leave and enter into the wilderness place as a way to attain greater freedom, greater dignity. And then there's a ton of places in scripture where you can see this, the way in which there's a subversive energy in the desert. Think John the Baptist we'll talk about probably as we get into Lent.

Think about the ways in which he's outside of kind of the status quo things as they are. There's this energy out in the wilderness where the sacred can be found in a new way. So their first move is to try to get off the plantation, even for a short time. And I think what a critical question that we always have to be asking ourselves is, what is the plantation that we need to get off of? Like, what is the plantation that you need to get off of? And what is the plantation that we as a church need to get off of? How do we think about that for ourselves as a community who's trying in some way to think of itself in light of the hush harbors? And then the second thing I just want you to notice in this passage is that the God of the Hebrews, this is verse three, then they said the God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us. And I love this because that phrase, God of the Hebrews, the term Hebrew was a sociopolitical identity. It was used most frequently by foreigners to refer to Israelites and to indicate their status as slaves. It has connections in Hebrew to the word, to the language of outsider.

[16:42] All right. So there's this sense that when they begin to leave and to want to leave the plantation, when Moses and Aaron begin to lead them in that direction, it is the God of the Hebrews who begins to speak to them. And I think about this a lot, the way in which our understanding of God has to shift.

And probably the easiest way to talk about this and the easiest way, or maybe the most prevalent way you'll hear about this in Black History Month is like moving away from white Jesus and all that white Jesus is and stands for. Later this month, we'll talk some about anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is connected to white Jesus. So over and over, we have to find these ways to identify deeply with the God of the Hebrews, even though I would argue identifying with the God of the Hebrews is a slippery slope.

Because as you identify with the outsider, you only see more and more who the outsider is. And you only are called into deeper and deeper solidarity with the outsider. The third thing I just want to say about this passage that I find interesting is that the second half of it, in the second half of it, basically things get worse. There's this sense that, you know, they're not allowed to go out into the wilderness. And then Pharaoh says, you know, why would I let them stop working? Why would I let them essentially have a Sabbath? They're more numerous than the landowners. Why would I do that? And I'm going to punish them. So now they don't have brick or straw to make bricks. So they're punished. And I think another thing to just remember as we consider what it means to move into a place of not living out dominant forms of faith that oppress other people and not being the kind of community that does that, it's important to remember that the first attempt that these people make at it is a failure. And how do we talk about that? How do we talk about that our first attempt to leave the plantation might not go well and may place us at risk? And we have to be thinking about that, what it means in some ways to live with a fugitive mindset.

How can we be honest that as we leave the dominant business as usual status quo way of doing things, we are guaranteed less security, not more. See, fundamental to hush harbor spirituality was an ability to steal away. That's the first mark of a liberating church. And that's what is similar to

what's happening in Exodus 5, 1 through 9. Moses and Aaron are attempting for a little while or forever, potentially, to steal away. And you might have heard that spiritual steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus, steal away home. I ain't got long to be here. Stealing away, Wrencher says, was a metaphor for a lifestyle of fugitivity and holy deception. Think of the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Pua, who they don't actually leave the quote unquote plantation, but they have this mindset that they have to break laws, that they have to stand outside the status quo no matter what in order to bring liberation. Stealing away is about betraying plantation religion and economy and the mythology of superiority, the economics of extraction and the politics of domination. And it's important to know that stealing away is something that is both physical, sometimes we literally have to exit systems of domination, and sometimes it's interior.

[ 20 : 31 ] And we have to be shrewd. It's something that's happening within us that we continually maintain. So I think that's mostly what I have for you. Just to consider and to go into this week and into this month, considering how you are called to steal away, how we as a church are called to steal away from these dominant models of doing church and of being church that have only led to deep oppression creation of most parts of creation. In order to close today, what I'm going to do is have a couple questions on the screen that I'm going to ask you to discuss for about six or seven minutes.

To get to know one another, it's kind of a way of meeting and gathering in a different way is to talk to each other. So get into a group of, I would say, five people or so and talk to each other, you know, say your name, your pronouns, and then consider what it is to steal away and what it is you need to be considering this month.