

# Crossing Borders

Written for and Delivered to  
The First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
Sunday, February 21, 2021  
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## Call To Worship/ Chalice Lighting

For the majority of my life, Ontarians were my neighbour. When I was a boy, you were across the Detroit or St. Clair River where I could sometimes wave to Canadians who would wave back from shore to shore. When I returned to the Midwest, you became my neighbours to the North, and though I could no longer see individual Canadians across the water, it was a comfort to know that you were there.

For a year now, our whole world has been troubled by this pandemic, a pandemic that closed, for the first time, the borders between our nations. Though for responsible and appropriate reasons,

I have felt, personally and for the first time in my life, really cleaved from my neighbour.

I light our chalice this morning a symbol of our faith. A faith that crosses international boundaries across the globe, a faith that calls us together no matter the land, the language, the setting or the manner in which we gather.

May the light from our chalices bring light to the whole world round.

## Reading

Pages from an *Underground Railroad Conductor's Diary Preserve Fugitive Slaves' Stories*<sup>1</sup>

William Still, Philadelphian and son of a formerly enslaved woman who had escaped to freedom before his birth, was a prominent conductor on the Underground Railroad. Starting in 1852, Still recorded details about each fugitive he encountered, writing down names, ages, skills, status of family members, names of slave owners, and conditions of enslavement.

Here are just three entries from June 22, 1855:

Wm. is about 40, dark chesnut, medium size, very intelligent, member of the Methodist Church, under the charge of the Rev. Mr. Jones. His owner's name was Turner & Whitehead. with whom he had served for 20 yr's in the capacity of "Packer". He had been treated with mildness in some respects, though had been very tighly worked, allowed only \$1.50 per week to board & clothe himself and family upon. Consequently he was obliged to make up the balance as he could. Had

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<sup>1</sup> <https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/09/william-still-his-diary-recorded-details-of-slaves-escaping-on-the-underground-railroad.html>

been sold once one sister had been sold also. He was prompted to escape because he wanted his liberty—was not satisfied with not having the privilege of providing for his family, His value \$1000—. Paid \$240— for himself, wife & child & Mrs Bell.

Susan is about 30, dark, rather above medium size, well made [page break] good looking, intelligent &c, and a member of the same church to which her husband belonged. Was owned by Thos.

Bottimore with whom she had lived for 7 yr's. Her treatment a part of the time had been mild, the marriage of her master however made a change, afterward she had been treated badly. Her master to gratify his wife constantly threatening to sell her. 4 of her Sisters had been sold away to parts unknown years ago. Left Father & mother, 3 Brothers & one sister. Still in Verginia , living about 100 miles from Norfolk. \$1000 was the demand of the owner for Susan & her child 22mos. old.

Louisa Bell is the wife of a free man. is about 28 chesnut color, good looking, intelligent, genteel, and a member of no church. Was owned by L. Stasson, Confectioner. [Her] lot had been terrible on account of the continual threats to sell her. Had once been sold, had also had 5 sisters sold besides her Mother. Louisa was oblige to leave [page break] two of her children behind. a boy 6 yrs & a girl 2½ yrs —the boys name was Robt. & the girls Mary. Her husband, James Bell. is to come on.

## Sermon

How exciting it is to be with you this morning! I would especially like to thank Rev. Shawn and Rev. Lynn for their invitation. It's a rare treat to be sitting in one country and preaching in another!

I guess that's a silver lining for all this safe distance that we've been practicing.

It was the possibility of jointly producing a service on both sides of our border that inspired this morning's service and sermon.

The folks in the church I serve will tell you I'm a bit of a history buff. As I considered what I might talk about today, this transnational relationship between Canada and the States was of course central to my mind, and that brought me to our geography. Ohio and Ontario are neighbors, and we have more in common than just Lake Erie.

We have a wonderful, shared history of people, inspired by their faith and a desire for freedom, a shared story in the Underground Railroad.

Most students in the States learn at least something about the Underground Railroad. We learn that Harriet Tubman was an escaped slave who help hundreds of others escape to freedom. We learn of the Fugitive Slave Act, and the need for freed slaves to go North. We know they often went to Ohio, or to my home state, Michigan, and then on to Canada.

And that's kind of where our knowledge of things ends. At the border, at the water.

History is often like this, we learn the part of the story that is most germane to us, and the rest sort of fades away.

But of course, people came to your shores, and set up lives for themselves. Harriet Tubman herself had a home in St. Catharines in the 1850's. On a trip as volunteers with some senior citizens out of Port Huron, Michigan, just across the St. Clair River from Sarnia, my Mom and Dad visited the Tubman house, and when I told my Mom about this morning's sermon, she recalled her trip very fondly and remembered being very impressed with the site.

This story doesn't go just one way, though, does it? No, it is not just the story of people fleeing slavery and landing on the safe shores of Ontario. One of the greatest tools of the American efforts at abolition was inspired by a man living in Dresden, a man named Josiah Henson. Mr. Henson met a Unitarian woman named Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe had met Mr. Henson in Andover, Massachusetts in her home. Inspired by both Mr. Henson's story and the way her own Unitarian faith called her to work for abolition, Stowe wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Mr. Henson wrote of the release of Stowe's book

"When this novel of Mrs. Stowe came out, it shook the foundations of this world... It shook the Americans out of their shoes and of their shirts. It left some of them on the sandbar barefooted and scratching their heads, so they came to the conclusion that the whole thing was a fabrication."<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Henson, met with Mrs. Stowe, on one of his trips back to the United States. In the service of abolition and of freeing individual people from the evils of slavery, Mr. Henson made dangerous returns to the States, guiding 118 others to freedom.

Mr. Henson, with the aid of Samuel Atkins Eliot, penned his own autobiography, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself*, was published in 1849.

Samuel Atkins Eliot, would in his lifetime, be both Mayor of the City of Boston and be elected a Representative for Massachusetts in the Federal Government of the United States. He came from a prominent family, and his Grandson, the Rev. Samuel Eliot served the American Unitarian Association from 1898 to 1927 as its President.

Not all the Unitarians in this story were on the leading edge of history in this question of slavery in the United States. I'm sorry to report that President Millard Fillmore, in what could be called a flawed attempt to preserve the Union of the United States, signed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which allowed bounty hunters to pursue escaped slaves north, up into the Free States to be returned to the Slave states. The bounty hunters, not surprisingly, were more interested in profit than ethics, and there are many tales of free blacks being erroneously "returned" to slavery.

Solomon Northup's Book, *Twelve Years a Slave*, from 1853, made into a movie in 2013 is just one example of this appalling reality.

Being from Ohio, I would be remiss, I think, to not mention John Brown. John Brown was an abolitionist, sent he felt, by God to strike down the unholy institution of slavery. While Brown was

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/story-josiah-henson-real-inspiration-uncle-toms-cabin-180969094/>

not born in Ohio, he grew up in the little town of Hudson, Ohio. My husband and I visited it just a couple of weeks ago, it's so close to where we live.

In fact, we live between the city of Hudson and the City of Oberlin, where Rev. Shawn went to college. Oberlin is another famous Underground Railroad city in Ohio.

It was in the Congregational Church in Hudson Ohio where John Brown made his public declaration of his war on slavery during a meeting. John's father, Owen Brown's was a leading figure in Hudson, and operated a station in the Underground Railroad. John Brown's attack at Harper's Ferry is often cited as one of the catalysts for the secession of the Southern States and thereby the creation of the two nations: the United States of America and the Confederate States of America.

In essence, for a time, passengers along the Underground Railroad had to pass through three sovereign nations to freedom.

This morning, I requested the song Follow the Drinking Gourd because it is just one example of songs that were used to guide people along the Underground Railroad to freedom. According to some scholars, the song contains directions for escape from the deep south to Canada.

When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
The old man is a waiting for to carry you to freedom,  
Follow the drinking gourd.

Follow the drinking gourd,  
The old man is a waiting for to carry to you freedom.

Now the river bank makes a mighty good road,  
The dead trees will show you the way.  
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,  
Follow the drinking gourd.

Now the river ends between two hills,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
There's another river on the other side,  
Follow the drinking gourd.

Follow the drinking gourd,  
The old man is a waiting for to carry to you freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Without diving too deeply into the lyrics of the song, the song teaches those who know it when the best time to leave is. When the first quail calls is in the Springtime. The river bank refers to the Tombigbee river, which leads to Northern Mississippi. Markings, left on dead trees by a man named Peg Leg Joe, helped you find your way, and the river ending between two hills are directions to the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveguide/session15/169036.shtml>

Ohio River.<sup>4</sup> Once over the Ohio River, an escaping slave was, until the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, safe.

Along the whole way you follow the Drinking Gourd, the Big Dipper, which points north to freedom, to Canada.

Which brings me back to Upper Canada, or as it's called today, Ontario.

In Ontario, several communities of former slaves thrived. Places like Amherstburg, Chatham, London, Oro, Woolwich and Windsor. Others crossed the Great Lakes to freedom and made their homes in Owen Sound and Toronto.

In each of these stories, some more famous than others, the people involved in the Underground Railroad, people's understanding of God called them to duty. Some of the histories have only captured a snippet of a whole life.

Earlier Rev. Shawn read just three entries of people he helped along the Underground Railroad to freedom. Mr. William Still was determined to tell the stories of the people who, to quote him "had the determination toward liberty, even at the cost of life."

It would hard, if not impossible, for many of us to dream, to really imagine the kind of faith it would take to run from the only home we may have ever known, even though it be an unhappy home, into the dark of night, and into the unknown.

To know that you would need to hide from slave catchers, to know that you'd have to find food on the way, to know that there were no really established paths, no paved and marked roads for you to follow.

I believe it is impossible for us today to imagine what making a choice like that, a choice to leave, must have been like. It took courage, probably desperation, and I've no doubt it took faith. Faith that there could be help along the way. Faith that you would find people willing to feed you, to help you, or at the very least, turn a blind eye to you as you made your way to freedom.

I would invite you to imagine for a moment, contemplating walking a journey of some 1,250 km.

That is the distance between Montgomery, Alabama to Cleveland, Ohio. Imagine facing such a dangerous journey. It's a journey few of us would contemplate in the best of times.

And yet, even today, there are refugees world-wide who are forced into this kind of decision.

And yet the journey is and was undertaken. More often than not, the journey was not completed successfully. Heartbreakingly often.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/Appendix\\_Teachers\\_Guide.htm](http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/Appendix_Teachers_Guide.htm)

But sometimes the journey was completed, and with great joy. Families reunited, new families created and generations to follow.

All of these journeys, those that reached the goal of freedom and those who were not able to, were assisted by the faith of the people. The individual who was bold enough to begin had to have faith. The people of the Underground Railroad, the conductors, the station masters, those providing safe houses and depots, each of them working by what they understood to be the moral path, each of these moral paths taught to them by their faith.

When we consider our actions today, when we think about the meetings we go to, or the protests, or the rallies. When we hold vigils or deep and sometimes uncomfortable conversations in service, we hope, of creating a world more just and more fair for all, a world of possibilities for the children that we love, biological or not, we are tapping into the same well of faith, even if it be called by different names.

As your co-religionist, your cousin in faith from across this friendly political border we share, I hope that we remember, no matter what borders seem to separate us, we are all one humanity, one family in our faith.

Ever relying upon each other,  
Ever inspiring one another.  
May our mutual admiration, affection and efforts truly transform our world.

### **Benediction/Chalice Extinguishing.**

It is with gratitude for a lifetime of shared good relationships and memories, that we now extinguish our chalice, knowing that this flame, though beautiful, is merely a metaphor for the power and passion that our faith calls from within us, to use our gifts to improve our world.