



KUBLIA

June 27, 2010; The 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Haggai 1:1-8; Galatians 5:1

Gary W. Charles

In a matter of days, patriotic pundits will espouse the virtues of freedom.

Editorialists will remind us of the nature of freedom and politicians will claim a special allegiance to the cause of freedom. But there are other voices to be heard. In fact, those with much to teach about freedom are often those who have had it and lost it or have struggled to find it, and over time have discovered its true source.

Next week's bulletin cover will feature a poem on freedom by the late African

American poet, Langston Hughes. Today, I will share a story that he retells about slaves and their descendents on John's Island, South Carolina. It is a story still told among people for whom freedom is a struggle and at best, a distant dream.

The story begins, "Once all Africans could fly like birds, but owing to their many transgressions, their wings were taken away. There remained, in the sea islands and in the low country, some who had been overlooked, and had retained the power of flight though they looked like other men.

"There was a cruel master on one of the sea islands who worked his people till they died. When they died he bought others to take their places. These also he killed with overwork in the burning summer sun . . .

"One day . . . he bought a company of native Africans just brought into the country, and put them at once to work in the cottonfield. He drove them hard. They went to work at sunrise and did not stop until dark. They were driven with unsparing harshness all day long, men, women and children.

"There was among them one young woman who had lately borne a child. It was her first; she had not fully recovered from bearing and should not have been sent to the field . . . She had her child with her, as the other women had, astraddle on her hip.

"The baby cried. She spoke to quiet it. . . . Then she went back to chopping knot-grass; but being very weak, and sick with the great heat, she stumbled, slipped, and fell. The driver struck her with his lash until she rose and staggered on.

"She spoke to an old man near her, the oldest man of them all, tall and strong, with a forked beard. He replied, but the driver could not understand what they said; their talk was strange to him. She returned to work, but in a little while she fell again. Again the driver lashed her until she got to her feet. Again she spoke to the old man. But he said: 'Not yet, daughter; not yet' . . .

"Soon she stumbled and fell again. But when the driver came running with his lash to drive her on with her work, she turned to the old man and asked: 'Is it time yet, daddy?' He answered: 'Yes, daughter; the time has come. Go; and peace be with you!' and then he stretched out his arms toward her . . .

"With that she leaped straight up into the air and was gone like a bird, flying over field and wood. The driver and overseer ran after her, but she was gone, high over their heads, over the fence, and over the top of the woods, gone, and with her baby astraddle on her hip.

"Then the driver hurried the rest to make up for her loss. Soon a man fell down in the heat. The overseer himself lashed him to his feet. As he got up from where he had fallen the old man called to him in an unknown tongue. When he had spoken, the man turned and laughed at the overseer, and leaped up into the air, and was gone, like a gull, flying over field and wood.

"The overseer ran at the old man with lashes ready; and the master too, with a picket pulled from the fence, to beat the life out of the old man who had made those Negroes fly. But the old man laughed in their faces, and said something loudly to all . . . in the field, the new slaves and the old slaves.

"And as he spoke to them they all remembered what they had forgotten, and recalled the power which once had been theirs. Then all the slaves, old and new stood up together; the old man raised his hands; and they leaped up into the air with a great shout; and in a moment were gone.

"Where they went I do not know; I never was told. Nor what it was that the old man said . . . that I have forgotten. But as he went over the last fence he made a sign in the master's face, and cried 'Kuliba! Kuliba!' I don't know what that means." Perhaps being too presumptuous, but I think I do know what Kuliba means.

Years ago the Israelite hostages in Babylon were released. They returned home to a decimated Jerusalem. The temple, the center of worship, was a pile of ashes. Money was scarce. Inflation was high. Most felt they had left one set of chains for another.

After an initial drive to rebuild Jerusalem, particularly the temple, enthusiasm waned. They had enough to do to make ends meet. So, they left the city and the temple unfinished.

Speaking the word of God into this troubled time and to this troubled people, the prophet Haggai cried, "Kuliba! All God's children have wings. No one can strip you of the freedom God has given you. No situation can strip you of the freedom God has sown in your souls. So, get out of your houses and rebuild my house. Let it stand as a light to all who walk in darkness."

Years later, Jesus spoke to Pharisees about the wings of freedom God gives.

And yet, they were so chained in religious right and wrong that they couldn't rejoice on the Sabbath when a crippled man was healed. So, to his bound brothers, Jesus cried, "Kuliba! The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath."

Later, looking at those who had driven in the nails, Jesus cried, "Kuliba! Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Friends, that's freedom. Rome did not give Jesus his wings, nor did Rome take them away. His freedom came from God alone, who taught him to cry "Kuliba!," to fly to freedom despite oppression and suffering, and to teach others, whatever their situation in life, to fly.

Writing to Gentile Christians in Galatia who were being persuaded to diminish their freedom in Christ by first following Jewish purity and dietary laws, Paul cries out, "Kuliba, in Christ, you have been made free."

For Christians in America, the Fourth of July can be a deceptive day. We can be deceived into thinking that we are the makers of our freedom. The story of our faith suggests another lesson: our freedom comes from God, whether we are walking in the light of day or manacled in a dark tower.

"Kuliba!" then is the cry of freedom's wings to a world enslaved, enslaved to the need to consume more and more stuff, to hoard more and more nuclear weapons, to authorize more and more executions, to build more and more prisons before we'll really be free.

Christ's freedom wings lead us to fly to back allies and crack houses and school yards of drug deals to cry, "Kuliba! You are God's own children. Put down your weapons of self-destruction."

Christ's freedom wings lead us to fly to boardrooms and bedrooms in the West where women are physically and economically abused and are told to stop whining and to Atlanta's streets where young girls are trafficked for a profit. Christ's freedom wings lead us to fly to a vast ecosystems being destroyed by corporate greed and our own greed in the Gulf. Christ's freedom wings lead us to fly out of this sanctuary convinced that no power is greater than the power of the One who has set us free.

Few people have cried "Kuliba" with more eloquence than Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Having suffered greatly through the horrors of apartheid, Tutu can still write, "During the darkest days of apartheid I used to say to P.W. Botha, the president of South Africa, that we had already won, and I invited him and other white South Africans to join the winning side. All the 'objective' facts were against us – the pass laws, the imprisonments, the tear-gassing, the massacres, the murder of political activists – but my confidence was not in the present circumstances but in the laws of God's universe." (Tutu, *A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, p. 2) Tutu looked P.W. Botha in the face and cried, "Kuliba!"

So, when you celebrate Independence Day, know that there is a much deeper independence made possible in Christ. On that day of celebrations, look around in the crowd for someone who cannot fly; someone whose chains are nearly visible; someone singing, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," and shout out the ancient African cry of freedom, "Kuliba! Christ has set you free."

Then, by the mercy given to you in Christ, touch that person and with God's liberating grace, teach them how to fly!

AMEN