

“Today’s Amistads”

Psalm 27

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 7 Mar 04

Some of you know all about the *Amistad* incident, which happened in 1839, and others of you have scarcely heard of it, so I’ll give you a really quick thumbnail sketch. The trans-Atlantic slave trade had been outlawed, and in contravention of international law, Spanish slave traders had captured a large group of Mendi people in what is Sierra Leone in West Africa and transported them to Havana, where they were sold. A group of 54 of them were then trans-shipped, presumably to Charleston, South Carolina, to be sold in the slave market there. The captives took over the ship on which they were sailing, which was ironically called *La Amistad* (or Friendship). These people had been forcibly taken from their homeland, illegally sold in Havana, and shipped off to the United States.

The act of taking over the ship was violent: both Spanish slave traders and Mendi were killed in the process. But, the Mendi succeeded in capturing the ship, and insisted that the crew head the boat eastward, back to Africa, which they did by day. But by night, the crew steered westerly, and the Gulf Stream carried them north. So, after more than a month on board, they were spotted by the U.S. Coast Guard on Montauk Point at the tip of Long Island, and they were towed into New London, CT, where they were arrested.

While they had been met only by hostile slave traders in Havana, and they had been clapped in irons and jailed in New Haven, they finally were met by a group of people who extended to them the hand of fellowship. Within a week of their capture, news had spread, and a group of Congregationalists, black and white, lay and clergy, formed the Amistad Committee to secure their release. The Amistad Committee worked diligently, using every political, rhetorical, judicial, theological, and even spiritual angle. (And they didn’t ever stop! They later helped form the American Missionary Association, which built more than 500 schools and colleges for freed African-Americans following the Civil War.)

It took more than two years, and a trip to the Supreme Court of the United States, but the Mendi people were declared to be free. The Congregational church in Farmington, Connecticut, provided ten acres of land for them to farm, built a school for them, and welcomed them into the congregation (though later that same congregation would relegate African-American members to the balcony). The Farmington church also helped raise funds for their repatriation to Sierra Leone. God called these people to act on her behalf as the implements of liberation, and she calls us still.

Now, if you saw the Stephen Spielberg film, *Amistad*, you didn’t see much of that part of the story. And I invite you to come and view the film with us next Saturday evening at 6:00 here at Plymouth; I’ll be doing a short presentation of our part of the story, the aspects that Spielberg neglected.

So, what is so important about this incident? Why is it that 165 years later we still have “Amistad Sunday” in the UCC? It was the first time that our forbears linked social action and theology, which has been an enduring hallmark of who we are as a denomination. It is a grand story of liberation, the type of story that echoes the narrative of God liberating the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt. Imagine reading Psalm 27 if you had been captured and were being sold into slavery: “God will hide me in God’s shelter in the day of trouble; God will conceal me under the cover of God’s tent; God will set me high on a rock.” The images of God as defender and as liberator are embedded

deeply into the narratives and poetry of the Hebrew Bible. (So, for those of you who don't read the Old Testament, I'd ask you to try again!)

In the Haggadah, the litany for Passover, the participants don't just recall the flight out of Egypt as a distant historical event, they say, "**We** were slaves and now are free." It brings a 4,000-year-old story into the present day, and it puts us in the middle of the action. So, it is for us, the spiritual descendants of the Amistad committee. We can regard this less as a distant historical event, and put ourselves in the story.

The United Church of Christ helped fund the construction of a new replica of the Amistad, built at Mystic Seaport as a freedom schooner, which goes from port to port telling the Amistad story and also serving as a floating classroom for multicultural education. (You can read more about it on the back of today's bulletin.) That's one endeavor that helps put us in the story today.

Last Sunday, I spoke about domination systems and the use or abuse of power, and the Amistad incident informs us about one aspect of the most hideous domination system in our history. And the Amistad story beckons us to ask ourselves where in our world today are the world's domination systems at work, and where are we blind to their presence?

So, I'd like you to consider this question on a macro-level, in which large-scale domination systems are at work: ***Are we able to see where God the liberator and the defender would be active in our world today?*** And how do we respond?

How does God see us in regard to the planet that has been entrusted to us? How does God perceive the culture of consumerism that has such a strong grip? How does God judge the ways we use our military might? Are we a force for liberation and defense of God's people? Are we more like the slave traders, the Amistad captives, or the Congregationalists on the Amistad Committee? How does our faith affect our behavior, or is its impact negligible in our lives?

Domination systems are able to work because we are willing to be co-opted and participate in them, and to put other things before God: we miss the fact that God (and neither bread nor power) is to be our priority. And I'd like you also to consider this question on a deeply personal level: ***what is it that is enslaving you?*** What aspects of your own life are you putting before your commitment to God? Are you overcommitted to work? Do you love money and the things it can buy more than you love God? Has your attachment to alcohol grown to become an addiction? How might God be trying to help liberate you? What kind of personal transformation is God calling you to? Lent is an important time to take account of such things.



Liberation is an important characteristic of the God we know and love. And the notion of God as liberator and defender goes back to our primordial past. God as the defender of the powerless in society is repeated again and again in the prophets and in the life and teachings of Jesus. How do we help God liberate us and others? We name the powers, we engage the powers, we transform the powers. And that starts with a rigorous examination of our own lives and the ways we are complicit in domination systems.

As a congregation, as a denomination, as a religious tradition, we are a people committed not to domination, but to liberation. May it be so this day and always. Amen.