November 12, Ordinary 32A (Matthew 25:1–13)

The Bible, so often used as enslaved people's yoke, became their cry for freedom.

by Dorothy Sanders Wells in the November 2023 issue

> *Keep yo' lamps trimmed and a-burnin',*
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> *The time is drawin' nigh*.

The sound of voices rose from the cotton field, from the tobacco harvest, from the worship gathering spot, from the wooden shanties that made homes. Enslaved people were singing, introducing a nation to what later would be called American Negro spirituals.

Mostly, the spirituals became a way for enslaved people—who had been stripped of their own identities, traditions, customs, and homes—to learn a new language as well as a new religion. That enslaved people embraced the scriptures and religion of their enslavers is itself mystifying. Why should they adopt the religion of those who preached the biblical justification of slavery, the inferiority of enslaved people, and the God-ordained separation of races?

Yet in the scriptures—even in what may have been carefully selected scriptures that they were allowed to hear—something captivated them, drew them in, made them question, and ultimately made them say, as Ruth tells her mother-in-law, Naomi, "Your God will be my God" (Ruth 1:16). As enslaved people formed their own understanding of the Christian God, the Bible, so often used as their yoke, became a cry for freedom in the spirituals: "Go down, Moses, / Way down in Egypt land. / Tell ol' Pharaoh, / Let my people go."

For the enslaved people from whom the spiritual “Keep Yo’ Lamps Trimmed and A-burnin’” originated, these words from Jesus’ parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids must have brought more comfort than concern. In their labor, in their struggle, in their abject poverty, it must have been easy to identify with the bridesmaids who, with oil-lit lamps, were ready for the Son of man to return in glory.

Surely he would see them and save them. Surely the true coming of God’s kingdom would signify the day on which the world order of the empire would be replaced by a world order in which suffering would be assuaged and peace and justice would be brought to God’s people. On that day, surely there would be balm for their troubled souls, healing for broken bodies and spirits, comfort in their mourning, and freedom from cruel bondage.

But scholars have also suggested that this spiritual—like many others—might have held hidden meaning. It might have been a clue that on a given night, enslaved people should be prepared to flee to a stop along the Underground Railroad and on to freedom. Scriptures had prepared them for escape, too: just as the people called Israel readied themselves on the night before they left Egypt, so the enslaved people prepared to run, knowing the danger in the attempted escape. “Keep yo’ lamps trimmed and a-burnin’ / The time is drawin’ nigh.”

Abolitionists worked to stoke antislavery fires, encouraging support for those who sought freedom. Isabella Bomfree, who later changed her name to Sojourner Truth, escaped to abolitionist supporters, who bought her freedom in 1827, and she became an empowered voice for freedom. After making her own way to freedom, Harriet Tubman made an untold number of trips back to help guide other enslaved people to freedom. William Lloyd Garrison published an antislavery newspaper, the *Liberator*, and helped create the New England Anti-Slavery Society to demand an immediate end to slavery in this country. Frederick Douglass became one of the most persuasive of abolitionist voices.

> *Children, don’ get weary,*
> *Children, don’ get weary,*
> *Children, don’ get weary,*
> *While the work be done*.

The journey to freedom was an arduous and dangerous one. The enslaved people escaping with hopes and prayers of freedom traveled by night, led by a “conductor”

of the Underground Railroad to its next stop. The stops were preplanned places of shelter, where ardent abolitionists—at risk to themselves—had created safe havens to hide enslaved people until they could travel farther north toward freedom. Capture could mean beatings, separation from family, death. Those who chose to risk the journey to freedom could not grow weary before reaching the next safe stop along the way. “Christian, journey soon be over, / The time is drawin’ nigh.”

The closer to Pennsylvania and Ohio, the closer to freedom. Delaware was the last state before freedom in Pennsylvania, which began its gradual abolition of slavery in 1780. Thomas Garrett, a Quaker, opened his Delaware home as a stop on the Underground Railroad, to help enslaved people prepare for that last leg of the journey to freedom. “Keep yo’ lamps trimmed and a-burnin’, / The time is drawin’ nigh.”