

## 1) “And the Lord Said: Go Down Moses, Way Down in Egypt’s Land, Tell Old Pharaoh: Let My People Go”

Simone Weil wrote that Christianity is a religion of slaves, and that “only slaves would belong to it.” She said this to its credit. On Saturday, I saw an old man hunched over at the bottom of the steps of the Mission. He had once had a prestigious job requiring a lot of education and taste. When I spotted him, in the middle of the day he was eating wieners and pancakes out of a Styrofoam container. There was also a toothless man nearby, hoarding garbage and covered in wasps on one side of him. It was for this second man that I had initially come. The older man caught my eye, though. He was part of a crowd that had gathered at the foot of the stairs, because they were delayed by Covid restrictions. I wondered what had brought him to this environment.

He told me about his situation, which was full of fear and uncertainty for him. He had made a great waste of his life and health. Now his life was in danger on many fronts. As he described his situation, his eyes glazed over with a lost, heavy stare. It seemed as he had been walking in a trackless wilderness for a great time, and had come to a viewing point from whence he saw only more trackless wilderness stretching out for as far as his eye could see. Why go any further? Where is there to go? “I don’t know why I’m here,” he said, hinting that there is nothing we can really do for him, I suppose. “I guess, this is St. John the Compassionate, and I was just looking for compassion,” he finishes. Then he begins to sob. We’re sitting close together on the bottom steps. The volunteers are moving up and down the steps bringing people meals and coffee. People are walking by on sidewalk a couple of feet away. Wasps are gathering on the hot dogs in his Styrofoam. It seemed somehow indecent for him to be pouring out his despair in such a strange public environment, though, at the same time, no one seemed to be paying attention to us.

As the autumn day grew colder, we shuffled around the edge of the building and sat in the dark chapel amidst the sainted slaves. Words came slowly bubbling up like water in a fountain with a weak pump, slowly edging upward, and then, perhaps, spilling over the edge. He wanted to live but was unsure where to go. Escaping his situation required drastic action and great risk for him. And he was a cautious man. It meant severing violent relationships, with unpredictable results. Who knows what might happen? Many slaves did not make it to freedom-land, after all. Sitting in the dark chapel, we were surrounded by people who had walked such a road to life and freedom. Out in the narthex and on the steps, there were people walking the same way. Father Nicolaie has talked about some martyrs (witnesses) he had met at the Mission who had endured indescribable things in their lives, yet had kept their conscience pure. “These are people,” he said, “who had decided for goodness, no matter what.” People who are forced into making such a decision, however painfully, seem fortunate to me. This man sat on the edge of the cliff having to make just such a decision; it had become a choice between life and death for him, slavery or freedom — no matter what. His eyes remained vacant and lost but, sitting together in the church, there was the presence of a path stretching forward through the dark, not only to safety, but to triumph.

## 2) Simon, do you see this woman?

There is a homeless woman who comes to the Mission’s the breakfast program, who pushes a heavy cart. She talks to herself and sometimes wanders, shouting, into the middle of the street. At the same time, she is a queenly presence among us. She glides through the Covid checkpoints that catch everyone else. The Mission is her home, and we all know it.

One day, we were having a meeting with the volunteers. I thought the door was locked. We were drinking tea, and answering a question as to “what our least favorite food was.” The question made its way around the circle, one person at a time. Suddenly, there she was, though she had been there all along, and I hadn’t noticed her. She wasn’t carrying her cart or lying on the floor, she was gaily drinking tea and eating a cracker. I can still see how her face was beaming. When it came to her, she softly said that she had never liked “innards.” This drew a lot of sympathetic murmurs from the group. She seemed so ‘normal’ and at ease in this environment. It was just such a beautiful and unexpected thing, that she who carries such unimaginable suffering and alienation also carries such a simple joy. Our radically-different worlds connected for a brief period. We all shared something simple and joyful together, which seemed to come from God.

He who lifts the poor from the dust and . . . makes them companions of princes.