

Sermon – *Freedom is Coming*

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By Joyce Ramay

Today is the last day of our Summer Program on ***Singing the Journey***. Throughout human history, music, rhyme and rhythm have always played vital roles, by expressing our heartfelt visions, hopes, and dreams for a brighter future.

While Nelson Mandela and many other members of the African National Congress were in prison, they kept their spirits and hopes alive by singing freedom songs together. Today's song, ***Freedom is Coming***, is one of those songs that originated in South Africa during the long, hard years of their struggle to end apartheid. The story of South Africa is the story of oppressed people everywhere.

Nelson Mandela was born a hundred years ago at the end of the first World War. His father died when he was 9 years old. He was educated in Methodist schools, and he had an appreciation for the language of the prophets and democratic principles. He was educated and became a successful lawyer.

In 1953, Mandela gave a speech in which he adapted some earlier words from Nehru, first president of independent India, saying, "**You can see that there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere,**" and then added, "**and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountain tops of our desires.**"

In 1964, just before Mandela received the sentence that condemned him to die, he explained from the dock that, "**The Magna Carta, the Petition of Rights, the Bill of Rights are documents which are held in veneration by democrats throughout the world.**" And he then said, "**Political division based on color is entirely artificial and, when it disappears, so will the domination of one color group by another.**" Like Gandhi had done in both South Africa and India, Mandela sought to connect with his oppressors, and called upon them to honor the visions of their own declarations of human rights. We would do well to remember that message, as we make decisions today about who matters, who is included, and who benefits from the many rights and resources that could and should be shared with others. Mandela spent 27 years in prison for leading the resistance to the government's apartheid policies. Some of those times were spent in solitary confinement, and he related that he found himself tempted to talk to cockroaches for company.

In 1985, Mandela was offered his freedom on certain conditions, but he rejected the offer because he wanted freedom for all. He told the government representatives, "**I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom. I love life no less than you do, but I cannot sell my God-given right, nor am I prepared to sell the God-given right of my people to freedom. ... Only free men can negotiate. Prisoners cannot enter into contracts. ... Your freedom and mine cannot be separated.**"

Through all the long years of personal suffering, he retained his compassionate humanity, and often made friends with the wardens. When he was released in 1991, he entered into negotiations with the white President F. W. DeKlerk, which led to the free and fair elections of 1994. Mandela said, "**To make peace with an enemy, one must work with that enemy, and that enemy becomes your partner.**" He and DeKlerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. Reflecting on Mandela's earlier words, DeKlerk said, "**Mr. Mandela has walked a long road and now stands at the top of the hill. A man of destiny knows that beyond this hill lies another hill, and another. The journey is never complete. As he contemplates the next hill, I hold out my hand to Mr. Mandela in friendship and cooperation.**"

In 1994, Nelson Mandela was elected President of a new provisional government with a 62% majority. One person invited to attend the inauguration and seated in the VIP section was one of his former wardens who had treated him decently.

The 1994 elections marked a major step forward towards freedom for the blacks who had been subjected to gross discrimination and humiliation during the long years of rule by the white government that imposed laws that totally separated the races, and left industries, businesses and the vast majority of land in the hands of the whites.

Yet Mandela emphasized, “**The message of the ANC ... is plain and simple and for all South Africans, the time for one South Africa, one nation, one vote, one future, is here.**” He had no intention of imposing reverse racism and discrimination, and offered instead the hand of cooperation, forgiveness and reconciliation. You may recall the Truth and Reconciliation commission that was established with the aim of healing the wounds.

Following the end of apartheid, other countries lifted sanctions and South Africa was admitted to the British Commonwealth of Nations. My Pakistani husband, Haneef Ramay, served on the Executive Committee of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. In April of 1996, we went to South Africa to welcome them back and to participate in ongoing discussions about the drafting of a new permanent constitution.

One evening, we had a small dinner gathering, which included some members of the Constitution Committee headed by Cyril Ramaphosa, an ANC compatriot of Nelson Mandela. I sat next to him during the dinner. He told me he had been at Stanford in California. He said that they were studying various constitutions, including those of the U.S. and Canada. He believed that a reformed parliamentary system would suit them best. Ramaphosa just became the 5th President of South Africa in February this year.

Across the table from me was Graça Machel, a humanitarian and widow of the President of Mozambique, who had been killed in a mysterious plane crash. She was engaged to Mandela at that time and soon became his wife. She talked with me about how honored she was to participate in the birth of democracy in South Africa. And about how important it was for African nations to receive the support of the Commonwealth and other democratic organizations in their pursuit of justice and freedom, because no country can succeed alone.

We met with other leaders and parliamentary employees. Many of the employees were whites, and they shared with us how much they loved and appreciated Nelson Mandela. They said they had feared that there would be a blood bath at the end of apartheid, and that they would lose not only their jobs but also their lives. Instead, under Mandela’s leadership, there was a peaceful transition. They told us that when he entered the parliamentary offices, he took the time to greet and speak personally with each one of them. He told them that he needed their help in building a new non-racial democratic South Africa for all the people. He asked their names, and inquired about their families. Later, if they had told him about any problems or illnesses, he remembered and inquired how things were going. It was beyond their wildest expectations! They said that no white president had ever done that!

Our visit had started in Cape Town, which is a beautifully situated city on the southern tip of Africa, where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Indian Ocean. We toured the white part of the city, which was very much like a European city. We were taken to the vineyards and given some of their superb wines and grape juice. We saw wild zebras and lions as we drove through the countryside.

We were shown the vast black townships, which consisted of makeshift shanties built of boxes, crates, tin, and whatever people could gather together to shelter themselves. There were no toilets or sewer facilities there, and very limited water supplies. The conditions were the worst that any of us had seen anywhere in the world. Later, we saw similar situations in Johannesburg. (This is what apartheid looks like! – hold up picture from National Geographic.)

After the shanty towns, we were shown the “good” housing that the government had built for some of the black workers. These consisted of a large group of long narrow buildings, which had a

central room with kitchen, and a corridor leading to a series of bedrooms. Each room was about 10 by 10, with triple bunk beds on each wall – 12 beds per room.

I was stunned to see that not only the walls and ceilings, but also the window panes had all been painted black. I asked why they had done that, and was told it was because the rooms were used in three shifts of 8 hours each, so they had to keep the room dark. 36 people used one room every day for sleep. I noted that there were very few personal possessions stored in the rooms. There were no toilets or wash basins, and latrines were located outdoors. But they had good solid walls and roofs over their heads, and actual mats to sleep on – unlike most of the people who lived in the shacks of the townships.

Then we were taken out to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and other resistance leaders had been imprisoned for years. We were the first people to be taken on a tour there. As we traveled out the 11 kilometers from Cape Town to the Island, there were penguins riding the ferry's wake, like dolphins. When we drove around the island, we saw a large penguin colony. That's how cold that place is. And there was no heat in the prison!!

I sat on the ledge where Mandela had slept in his cell. I could not imagine how he had survived in those conditions. But the human will to live is strong. We were shown the rock quarry where he and the other prisoners had worked like slaves, breaking rock for many years.

I can't tell you how deeply we were affected by visiting the townships and the prison. We felt the pain and suffering of the people, and appreciated even more their indomitable wills and determination to survive these horrible conditions in hopes of a better future.

That was the preparation for the highlight of the trip – actually meeting Nelson Mandela himself. When we arrived in South Africa, I bought this book about Mandela for my husband, Haneef. So, when he talked with Mandela, Haneef took it from his pocket and Mandela signed it, April 25, 1996.

Meeting Mandela and being in South Africa at the end of apartheid was certainly one of the peak experiences of our lives. Mandela was a man who radiated a deep inner strength, yet kindness and humility. Nelson Mandela stands in the ranks of the world's great inspirational leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Gandhi himself started his resistance to segregation while he was living in South Africa, and he made a significant impression on Mandela. It is certainly appropriate that later, in 2001, Mandela was awarded the Gandhi Peace Prize in India.

I had written more of my own comments, but then a special event took place. Nelson Mandela was born on July 18, 1918, so when South Africa recently celebrated his 100th birthday, Barack Obama, another Nobel Peace Prize winner, was invited to give the main speech. It is one of the best speeches I have ever read. In my sermons, I don't usually include lengthy quotes, but you have to hear Obama's words. Here are a few quotes from that speech:

"There was no reason to believe that a young black boy at this time, in this place, could in any way alter history. After all, South Africa was then less than a decade removed from full British control. Already, laws were being codified to implement racial segregation and subjugation, the network of laws that would be known as apartheid. Most of Africa, including my father's homeland, was under colonial rule. The dominant European powers, having ended a horrific world war just a few months after Madiba's birth, viewed this continent and its people primarily as spoils in a contest for territory and abundant natural resources and cheap labor. And the inferiority of the black race, an indifference towards black culture and interests and aspirations, was a given. That was the world just 100 years ago. ... It is hard, then, to overstate the remarkable transformations that have taken place since that time. A second World War, even more terrible than the first, along with a cascade of liberation movements from Africa to Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, would finally bring an end to colonial rule.

“More and more peoples, having witnessed the horrors of totalitarianism, the repeated mass slaughters of the 20th century, began to embrace a new vision for humanity, a new idea, one based not only on the principle of national self-determination, but also on the principles of democracy and rule of law and civil rights and the inherent dignity of every single individual.

“And in my own country, the moral force of the civil rights movement not only overthrew Jim Crow laws, but it opened up the floodgates for women and historically marginalized groups to reimagine themselves, to find their own voices, to make their own claims to full citizenship.

“It was in service of this long walk towards freedom and justice and equal opportunity that Nelson Mandela devoted his life. At the outset, his struggle was particular to this place, to his homeland But through his sacrifice and unwavering leadership and, perhaps most of all, through his moral example, Mandela and the movement he led would come to signify something larger. He came to embody the universal aspirations of dispossessed people all around the world, their hopes for a better life, the possibility of a moral transformation in the conduct of human affairs.”

“Madiba’s light shone so brightly, even from that narrow Robben Island cell, that in the late ‘70s he could inspire a young college student on the other side of the world to reexamine his own priorities, could make me consider the small role I might play in bending the arc of the world towards justice.

“And when later, as a law student, I witnessed Madiba emerge from prison, just a few months, you’ll recall, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I felt the same wave of hope that washed through hearts all around the world. Do you remember that feeling?

“And then as Madiba guided this nation through negotiation painstakingly, reconciliation, its first fair and free elections; as we all witnessed the grace and the generosity with which he embraced former enemies, the wisdom for him to step away from power once he felt his job was complete, we understood it was not just the subjugated, the oppressed who were being freed from the shackles of the past. The subjugator was being offered a gift, being given a chance to see in a new way, being given a chance to participate in the work of building a better world. ****

“And now an entire generation has grown up in a world that by most measures has gotten steadily freer and healthier and wealthier and less violent and more tolerant during the course of their lifetimes.

“... we also have to recognize all the ways that the international order has fallen short of its promise. In fact, it is in part because of the failures of governments and powerful elites to squarely address the shortcomings and contradictions of this international order that we now see much of the world threatening to return to an older, a more dangerous, a more brutal way of doing business. And the result of all these trends has been an explosion in economic inequality. It’s meant that a few dozen individuals control the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of humanity.

“So on Madiba’s 100th birthday, we now stand at a crossroads – a moment in time at which two very different visions of humanity’s future compete for the hearts and the minds of citizens around the world. Two different stories, two different narratives about who we are and who we should be. How should we respond?

“Let me tell you what I believe. I believe in Nelson Mandela’s vision. I believe in a vision shared by Gandhi and King and Abraham Lincoln. I believe in a vision of equality and justice and freedom and multi-racial democracy, built on the premise that all people are created equal, and they’re endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights. And I believe that a world governed by such principles is possible and that it can achieve more peace and more cooperation in pursuit of a common good. That’s what I believe. And I believe we have no choice but to move forward; that those of us who believe in democracy and civil rights and a common humanity have a better story to tell. So if we’re truly to continue Madiba’s long walk towards freedom, we’re going to have to work harder and smarter.

“Madiba teaches us that some principles really are universal – and the most important one is the principle that we are bound together by a common humanity and that each individual has inherent dignity and worth. Now, it’s surprising that we have to affirm this truth today. More than a quarter century after Madiba walked out of prison, I still have to stand here at a lecture and devote some time to saying that black people and white people and Asian people and Latin American people and women and men and gays and straights, that we are all human, that our differences are superficial, and that we should treat each other with care and respect.

“I would have thought we would have figured that out by now. I thought that basic notion was well established. But it turns out, as we’re seeing in this recent drift into reactionary politics, that the struggle for basic justice is never truly finished.

“What was true then remains true today ... It is a truth that lies at the heart of every world religion – that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. That we see ourselves in other people. That we can recognize common hopes and common dreams.”

So, what about our song, *Freedom is coming*. Substantial gains have been won. Opportunities have expanded and there is more inclusiveness. However, the struggle goes on as people in many lands, including our own, trod that long road, with hopes and dreams of a better future. And as Haneef Ramay wrote, too many people today continue to ask, “**When will that day come?**”

If you want to join on our long walk toward more freedom, equality and dignity for all, you can help by supporting and joining our All Faiths Social Justice and Outreach Teams, that are working to make a positive difference in our world, including our Racial Justice Team.