

A sermon by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, delivered at St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, N.Y., September 21, 2008, at the MAAFA celebration dedicated to the honor of the Rev. Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood and the congregation of St. Paul, and always to the glory of God!

“Fear Not! I Will Sustain You and Your Children!”

**Genesis 50:15-26;
Romans 8:28-30**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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I bring you greetings from First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio. Four years ago, Dr. Youngblood graced the pulpit of First Congregational Church as our 2004 Washington Gladden lecturer. As you may know, Washington Gladden was one of America’s great prophets of the social gospel and our pastor for 36 years. What you may not know is Dr. Gladden started as a preacher in 1860 here in Brooklyn at the State Street Congregational Church. At that time, Brooklyn was called the City of Churches.

Brooklyn is still one of America’s greatest cities! And in the galaxy of churches in this STILL great city of churches, this congregation, St. Paul Community Baptist Church and your pastor,

the Rev. Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood stand as the bright morning stars among the galaxy of great churches. Now Pastor David K. Brawley enters this city of churches as new, bright and shining star in God's galaxy of greatness! What a blessing! It is an honor to be in your church for the 2008 MAAFA!

The scriptural text of the MAAFA for 2008 comes from Genesis 50:20 – “*While you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good, so as to bring about at this very time, the survival of many people.*” Continue on to Genesis 50:21 – “*And so, **fear not. I will sustain you and your children.***”

But, as you know, we cannot get to Genesis 50:20 or 21 without beginning in Genesis 37:1. As I learned five years ago in the MAAFA, “*The way out is back through.*”

The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:28-30:

We know that all things work together for good, for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first born within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified, and those whom he justified, he also glorified.

Loving God and loved by God. Called according to his purpose. Foreknown. Conformed to the image of God's son. The first born within a large family. Predestined. Called. Justified. And finally, glorified as God is working his purpose out in EVERYTHING!

Except for the first-born, it is as though Paul is writing the story of Joseph that we find beginning in Genesis 37. Hold on to Romans . . . we shall return!

Genesis 37 opens with “this is the story of Jacob's family.” This is the story of a large nomadic family, with a powerful patriarch, who end

up being saved by a former slave – a slave they have sold from their own family into servitude.

That slave is named Joseph. Joseph is Jacob's eleventh son, his favorite son. Jacob loves Joseph so much that Jacob makes Joseph, his amazing dreamer, an amazing technicolor dream coat!

But to his brothers, Joseph is a brother from a different mother. They see how well he's treated, because of his mother, and they despise him.

One day, Joseph goes out to into the fields to watch the flocks with his big brothers. There amid the sheep and the goats, the sheaves of wheat and the stars of night, the greatest dreamer in holy scriptures starts dreaming! He's only 17 at the time, but, Joseph has big dreams! He dreams a dream that sends his brothers into orbit with jealousy and rage.

Little Joe tells his 10 half (big) brothers:

Listen, brothers, pray to this dream that I dreamed. And look, we were binding sheaves in the fields, and look, my sheaf arose and actually stood up and look, your sheaves drew 'round and bowed to mine.

They responded: "Do you mean to reign over? Do you mean to rule us?" Big brothers do not like to be told by a little brother that they are to be subservient to him. If there was any doubt how much they hated him before the dream, they are seeing red now! But hatred by dream-crushers never stops a great dreamer from dreaming. Joseph has ANOTHER dream. He recounts it to his brothers again.

Look, I dreamed a dream again, and look the sun and the moon and the 11 stars were bowing to me.

They've heard enough! Away from the shelter of daddy's delight, the brothers haul Joseph off and throw him into a pit. This fratricidal crew wants Joseph dead. But, thanks to Reuben's intervention,

Joseph's life is spared because most certainly death awaited him in the desert pit. He's saved but sold into slavery to Ishmaelites (remember the other son of Abraham – here is his progeny saving Isaac's progeny – quite ironic). Saved only enough to be sold in slavery.

Can you see the slave Joseph reaching out of the pit of despair and grasping the hand of an Ishmaelite brother who pulls him to the safety of slavery from the dangers of death in the pit? **He grabs hold of hope from the pit of despair.**

Once in Egypt, Joseph serves as a house slave. His master's wife puts the moves on Joseph and they are caught in a compromising position. For this, he is thrown in jail. **There – again – in a pit of despair, he begins again to interpret dreams.**

As Joseph lingers in his second pit in a short time, words like those of Psalm 51:25 must have come to mind:

“Have mercy on me O God, according to your steadfast love (vs. 1) . . . You desire truth in the inward being, therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart (vs. 6) . . . O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.(vs. 25)”

As I consider the enslavement of Joseph dreaming of freedom, the words of Langston Hughes' in his poem *Freedom* come to mind. These are words that harken to African-Americans facing slavery and dreams of freedom!

*Freedom will not come
Today, this year,
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear. . .
Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.*

*I live here too;
I want freedom
Just as you.*

Buried in the bowels of Pharaoh's city prison, Joseph still dreams. He still interprets the dreams of others. It is his dream interpretations that eventually bring him to the feet of the King - The Pharaoh of Egypt. There he hears of Pharaoh's nightmares and turns his interpretation into gold - becoming prime minister of the nation - a saving Egypt and Israel in the process! **From the pits to the pinnacle, Joseph rises to the top!**

Fast forward 90 years and 13 chapters in Genesis. Now 110, having forgiven his brothers of their sins years before, having witnessed to the hand of God in all of it, and now having just laid his father Jacob in his grave, Joseph is alone with his brothers - the politics of the family are all scrambled again!

New possibilities and new dangers arise among the brothers in the absence of their father. They are faced with their guilt and shame one last time. These brothers who sold a brother into slavery 90 years before, are still alive and facing their sins. 90 years have passed and they are still dealing with the sins of enslaving another brother! They are still facing and confessing their sins. They lay down prostrate before the man they sinned against.

Ninety years later, Joseph still holds power over them - this slave risen to lead a foreign nation out of despair. And what does he do with the power he still has? With his brothers once again lying prostrate before him, what does Joseph do? This slave turned prime minister forgives them for a lifetime of pain and sin. Not only does he forgive them, he offers **SUSTENANCE** to them! He bends down low to lift them up high! He speaks with tears in his eyes.

He speaks from his heart as he says:

"Who am I that I should play God? While you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good, so as to bring about at

this very time, the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children.”

As he had before, that man once again forgives them, just as God has forgiven them. He acknowledges that while they meant evil toward him, God had a plan and God’s plan was good. God’s plan is always good! God’s plan was for the salvation of the nation. God’s plan was to sustain the evil-doers, turned forgiven sinners, and their families. This is beautiful! This is the POWER OF GOD!

The psalmist recalls that our God says, *“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from their way and live!”* God reigns over the just and the unjust!

As we come to the end of Genesis, **I HAVE A DREAM!**

My dream is a dream for all of us! I dream that the Joseph story of Genesis could shape our American story for the 21st century! I have a dream! I dream that the sins of those who enslaved others will be washed away through confession of sins, laying down before God and man and asking for forgiveness, that reparations would be made (remember, Joseph saves all his people!), and we would rise as one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all! This is my dream!

But, I know to get to my dream, we have to purge the long nightmare of our collective past. To get to my dream, we have to believe and practice this principle of MAAFA - THE WAY OUT IS BACK THROUGH!

If only the slave-trading sinners confessed the evil they had perpetrated. If only reconciliation and reparations were made to the hundreds of millions affected by the evil of the slave trade. That’s a lot of “if onlys!” I want this Genesis story to shape our Genesis of our new beginnings in America. But, I am having such a hard time seeing my dream become reality.

But I feel like America has not reached the point where our dreamers can speak truthfully and with love to power and not be slain in the process. Our way out must be to go back through. And yet, not enough of us have gone back through to get out.

As I “go back through” there is one nightmare that keeps rattling around in my mind and spirit. As much as I have read volumes, and listened and learned from you and many of the African-American experience, I cannot shake this one story, this one imagine from my mind! I am sure you know this story.

It is not a Biblical story. But, it is a sacred story. It is a story which makes me cry every time I tell it. It is story that speaks of the unspeakable economic evil of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is the story that the ghosts of the millions have left as physical evidence of this spiritual and economic evil. The millions have left this story for us on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

A few years ago, while diving off the coast of Africa, scuba divers discovered a slave ship buried in its watery grave. As you know, not many of these ships have been found because the motivation for finding them is low. They carried no gold. Their treasure was human cargo. Like pirate ships, they carried few records or logs. In the watery grave the divers discovered many things, including tiny little bracelet-like shackles no more than one inch across. The story concludes: *“Historians noted they finally had evidence of what they thought to be true – African babies and infants were brought from to America in shackles.”*

This image of shackled babies as slaves always overwhelms me when considering the 380-plus-year experience of African people on American soil. Stealing people from their homes, shackling, transporting, selling and enslaving free men, women, children and BABIES from Africa’s west coast to America’s east coast was the most treacherous and evil industry ever conceived and perpetrated by humanity against humanity.

As we all know, it was largely a crime of white men perpetrated against black humanity and it continued for hundreds of years. As Douglas A. Blackmon tells us in his book, *Slavery By Another Name*, this evil continued from the end of the Civil War until the beginning of World War II. That is only 65 years ago!

I know I am preaching to choir when I tell you that 80% or four of every five men, women and children brought from Africa died in the transport ships. All told, at least 10 million deaths at sea in more than 200 years of this heinous and genocidal economic mission. If we were to drain the Atlantic Ocean, the bones of the millions who died in transit would guide the path from Africa to our American coastline. There we would find shackles of babies.

From my reading of history, the first African slaves arrived here in New York as property of the Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam in 1626, 382 years ago. By the time the words of the Declaration of Independence were being crafted, there were 450,000 slaves in America who were not counted as “free men.” There were more Africans on American soil than any other single group of immigrants.

Although we in America would like to bury all the chains and all the memories of slavery, we cannot! We must deal with this horrible heritage which will not rest in peace until we face the ghosts of our past.

I wish I could tell you that, like Joseph and his brothers, we had worked out our own salvation! I wish I could say that in my country, the social constructs of race and racism no longer matter. But, as one of my great teachers, Dr. Cornel West puts it: **Race Matters.**

In this presidential campaign with Senator Barack Obama as the Democratic presidential candidate, from all that he is facing, we know the roots of racism still run deep. We would be wise to remember Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay’s *The White House*. In *The White House*, McKay lays out the intense challenges faced by African-Americans and speaks of the resentments that might just be building

in our times.

McKay writes:

*Your door is shut against my tightened face,
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;
But I possess the courage and the grace
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,
A chafing savage, down the decent street;
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.
Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
And find in it the superhuman power
To hold me to the letter of your law!
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate
Against the potent poison of your hate.*

We ALL “must keep our hearts inviolate, against the potent poison of hate.” That poison will eat us alive. That poison will destroy us from the inside and we will never find our way through such insidious destruction.

My mother is here today. Mom, how would you feel if your youngest son was shackled as a baby and carried away to slavery? My sister is here today. Deb, you were there when I was born, and can you imagine seeing me shackled as a baby and carried into slavery? My wife, Susan Sitler, and my niece Annie Roy are here! How would you feel if Luke, or Daniel, or Sarah or Thalia or Annie, your daughter, Dylan had been shackled and carried away to slavery? I know I would be angry, hurt, sad and in unimaginable pain! I would go insane! I would want to get even! **Like Rachel crying for her children who are NO LONGER, if we sink to the bottom of the Atlantic and stay there, we will drown in our sorrow.**

So how do we find our way out as we venture back through? As we return and go back through that “Gate of No Return” at Goree Island, we must hold on to the hope of that God will deliver us through the suffering. That is what the MAAFA is all about! The Kiswahili word that describes the suffering also offers hope in the face of ultimate despair.

Returning to Romans, we are reminded that **we will make it through** when we love God and feel God’s love in our lives! For we are called according to his purpose. We are conformed to the image of God’s son, our Savior, Jesus Christ! We are the first born within a large family. We are predestined as survivors and followers of Jesus to serve our Lord! We are called to be his witnesses to all the corners of the earth. We are justified by faith. And finally, we are glorified as **God works his purpose out in EVERYTHING!**

I remember a great preacher preaching one of his favorite texts, “If I Were God.” As I recall, this great preacher took me and the congregation to enlightened understanding of the story of scripture with his soaring rhetoric and theological insights for the ages. His take on the world and the universe was such that I wished he was God because he would fix the unseemly order of chaos that humanity had created and make all things work together for good in those who loved God! But, as I recall, the preacher cleared the air, near the end, and let it be known that he was not God. Dr. Youngblood, have you ever heard that preacher?

Beyond the remonstrations of any man and the obvious evil of the human heart – known most fully in the sins of slavery – **our God Reigns! Our God is Sovereign!** Our God takes what is broken, mends it and binds it back together. When the babies were thrown overboard in shackles or when the slaves’ ships sunk in their watery graves, our sovereign God was there! He was the first to weep when his beloved were drowning and dying. He has been there all along, broken hearted at the mistreatment of his many children.

Our God was there when Cinque took a rusty nail from the Amistad and used that it to undo his chains and overtake the schooner, reclaiming the freedom the was God given and always there!

Our God was there when a plain woman with a lion's heart named Harriet Tubman led hundreds of slaves to freedom and as she held guns to heads of runaway slaves saying, "Keep Moving or die here!"

Our God was there with "The African Preacher," known as "Uncle Jack." Uncle Jack reminds a lot of Joseph. He was brought to Virginia as a slave at age 7 in 1752, was taught to read at 40 by paying his owners' children in "nuts and fruits," became a preacher, then converted his owner's son to Jesus Christ, purchased his own freedom at 50, married, had a family, bought land and became the most sought after preacher among whites and blacks in Virginia. He died in 1843 at the age of 98.

Uncle Jack's enlightened values, his biblical theology and practical insights, his reverencing of all life (human and nature), his kindness in the face of the horrors of slavery and in interaction with all people, caused a book to be published about him in 1849, *The African Preacher: An Authentic Narrative*. It is said that Uncle Jack influenced Booker T. Washington and a whole generation of African-American teachers, preachers – free and slave alike – by the way he lived his life and witnessed to Christ Jesus.

Our God was there with Joseph when he looked in the eyes of his brothers and said, **"Fear Not! I Will Sustain You and Your Children!"**

Our God is here for us! Right Now! He will raise us out of the depths of despair and break the chains that bind us! He will sustain us!

Fear Not! We are called according to God's purposes!
Fear not! We are conformed to the image of God's son, our savior,

Jesus Christ! Fear not! We are predestined as survivors and followers of Jesus to serve our Lord! Fear not! Our God will lead us out of deepest despair!

Fear Not! Our God is working his purpose out!

Fear not! We are called to be his witnesses to all the corners of the earth.

Fear Not! We are justified by faith!

Fear not! We are glorified as **God works his purpose out in EVERYTHING!**

Fear Not! Our God will sustain us and our children! Amen!

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