

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Epiphany 6, February 13, 2011, dedicated to Kennedy Bassett Thompson on her baptismal day, to the people of Egypt who hunger for freedom and acted upon it and now stand ready to embrace true democracy, and always to the glory of God!

“The Moral Arc of the Universe Bends Toward Tahrir Square”

Exodus 2:23-3:12

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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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A theme running deep in the Holy Scripture from Exodus - like an underwater aquifer in the desert - is the biblical story of freedom. In fact, the translation of the title Exodus from the Hebrew language is “the Book of Departure from Egypt.” In Exodus 2:23ff, we read: *The Israelites groaned under their slavery in Egypt and cried out. Their cries for relief from their hard labor ascended to God. God listened to their groaning, remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw what was going on with Israel, God understood.*

God’s people cry out. Their cries ascend to God’s ears. God hears, remembers his covenant with them, understands their pain, and sends a liberator named Moses. People crying. God hearing. God noticing. God remembering. God understanding. God liberating. This movement that leads to freedom.

As a prince of Egypt - now a fugitive from the Pharaoh - Moses is chosen and sent by God to save God's people. He is a shepherd in Midian (the southern region of the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt). One day, while tending the sheep, Moses sees a burning bush that doesn't actually burn and hears God's voice (which burns in his heart) and Moses remembers his people and his roots. He understands what his role is to be in liberating the slaves of Egypt. He travels across 500 miles of desert paths to the court of his half-brother Ramses II and even though he is afflicted with a severe stutter, Moses proclaims, **"Let my people go!"** Ten plagues later, Ramses finally listens - having lost his son to the plague of death - and he sends the slaves out of Egypt!

Fast forward 3,310 years. The reign of the last pharaoh of Egypt is in its 29th year. A new president from America goes to Cairo University and gives a speech. It is June 4, 2009. President Obama cries out to the Arab and Muslim world to forge a new beginning. After speaking about history, science and technology, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the religions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, President Obama finishes with these words:

All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort – a sustained effort – to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings.

It is easier to start wars than to end them. It is easier to blame others than to look inward; to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path. There is also one rule that lies at the heart of every religion – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This truth transcends nations and peoples – a belief that isn't new; that isn't black or white or brown; that isn't Christian, or Muslim or Jew. It's a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the heart of billions. It's a faith in other people, and it's what brought me here today.

We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning, keeping in mind what has been written. The Holy Koran tells us, "O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another." The Talmud tells us: "The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace." The Holy Bible tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God's vision. Now, that must be our work here on Earth. Thank you. And may God's peace be upon you.

President Obama's cry to the world was heard by young men and women in Cairo University and across the globe. When I was in Egypt in last August and September, everyone talked about this speech as pivotal to their growing understanding of the USA and the Arab world. With understanding, the cries of the young began to be lifted and they ascend to God. Twittering, tweeting, Facebooking, emailing and texting and connecting with their deepest desires for freedom and to find one another, young people begin to groan about the 21st century pharaoh named Mubarak. They begin to discover one another.

An Egyptian-born Google marketing executive named Wael Ghonim started a Web site - "*We are all Khaled Said.*" Khaled Said is an Egyptian businessman who died in police custody in Alexandria last year, the page played a crucial role in organizing the protests. His bruised, bloodied and dead face appears on the Web site. The "*We are all Khaled Said*" site becomes a rallying point for a campaign against police brutality. For many Egyptians, it reveals details of the extent of torture, imprisonment and fear in their country.

The young people of Egypt took over Tahrir Square on January 25. In a non-violent protest against Pharaoh Mubarak (who calls this youth movement against him "my little children" – language harkening back to Pharonic times), over 8 million

Egyptians (one out of 10!) show up on the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Luxor, Aswan and beyond!

In what is truly a non-religious movement in a very religious country, Christians, Muslims and secularists join arm to arm and cry out, "Mubarak must leave now!"

Three of the most powerful images for me - having been to Tahrir Square several times - are: the men in Friday prayer being fire-hosed by the riot police while they are praying with the faces to the earth (reminiscent of Birmingham, Alabama, 1963), the crescent and the cross together on a huge flag, and the service of the Coptic Christians being held in Tahrir Square at the insistence of the Muslims there!

One Anglican pastor in Cairo, wrote on Thursday of one of his friends:

An Egyptian Christian friend of ours who previously had hardly a good word to say about any Muslim is in a state of real doubt about his previous convictions as he and his neighbors have discovered what they have in common through the necessity of defending their Egyptian way of life.

What happened in Tahrir Square was miraculous and breath-taking and democratic and Egyptian! This was Egypt at its very best! I dare say, this was the world of democracy at its best! The movement and changes brought about in Tahrir Square have rocked the Arab world and the Islamic world to the core - for the good!

I find it amazing that while this was all going on Friday, I turned on TV to find none of the major networks covering this world changing story. I found *The View* still running, soap operas still soaping us and meaningless talk shows still blathering about nothing! Where were major local and national news stations? (Note: I tip my hat to the Dispatch for giving front page coverage all week!). Why were we not witnessing the world changing before our eyes?

Like the fall of the Berlin Wall, this was one of the most meaningful days in human history and America was not awake and paying attention. The whole world was watching and we were asleep to the democratic revolution happening right before our eyes! I'm sorry, but if this was "shock and awe" with U.S. bombs falling on Baghdad and proclamations of bombing a nation into belief about democracy, every news network would have been showing the destruction 24/7! A peaceful revolution from the grassroots – about which CIA intelligence had no relevant intelligence – and we appeared almost embarrassed rather than ecstatic! I'm sorry, but I feel our unceasing Islamophobic and Arab-phobic tremors shaking the body of our democratic nation.

Our continuing ignorance of the Arab world and our connection to it are operative in this hour. For example, how many of us know the first country to recognize the early establishment of the U.S.A. in the 1780s? It was the Islamic nation of Morocco. In signing the Treaty of Tripoli in 1796, President John Adams wrote, "*The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims.*"

Early on Friday, February 11, having announced 12 hours before in a manipulative speech that he would *not* resign, Mubarak resigned.

Speaking on Friday night on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, E.J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* said:

Today is the anniversary of the Islamic revolution in Iran. They call it Islamic Revolution Victory Day. Perhaps from now on, February 11 will be called 'Democratic Revolution Victory Day.' My Brookings Institution colleague Steve Grand made a wonderful suggestion that we might view 2/11 as a bookend to 9/11. After 9/11, we were so inclined to see the Arab and Muslim world in light of a terrible terrorist event or a set of terrorist events. From now on, we can see the Arab/Muslim world through the eyes of brave democrats who fought for liberty. And as President Obama said in

his statement, this peaceful revolution is, in its way, an antidote for terrorism this is an extraordinary day that we should (all) celebrate.”

Amen! May you and I always remember February 11 as “Democratic Revolution Victory Day.”

What do we say to all of this? With the Apostle Paul, I say, “If God is for us, who can be against us?!” It is becoming clearer as the days go by that Mubarak was a heinous presence throughout these relatively peaceful demonstrations. Hundreds and hundreds of people were killed. Thousands were beaten and badly injured. I credit the non-violence response of the demonstrators for keeping the death toll and injury toll so low. Coupled with the tens of thousands of prisoners - one of them my friend Mohamed from Alexandria - this regime was brutal, torturous, cruel and oppressive in many unimaginable ways to their people, in addition to being negligent in caring for the needs of the poor and unemployed. “Never again!” has become the new and lasting cry of the people.

Today, which we call Racial Justice Sunday, the echoes of another young man crying to God for justice come to mind. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (age 36 at the time he spoke) cried out to Alabama and the world on March 25, 1965. Having marched and led the civil rights movement for 10 years already since the age of 26, Dr. King spoke with power and clarity!

I share his powerful words with you as I close. I will share them with every friend in Egypt, who I know will share them with every Egyptian they can find to share them with. Dr. King proclaimed these words at the close of his sermon. Please listen carefully.

And so I plead with you this afternoon as we go ahead: remain committed to nonviolence. Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"

Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" Somebody's asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?"

Somebody's asking, "When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death?"

How long will justice be crucified, and truth bears it?"

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

*How long? Not long, because "no lie can live forever."
How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow."
How long? Not long!*

As Once to Every Man And Nation - the great hymn of the church cries out:

***Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.***

How long?

Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. ("Our God is Marching On!")

March 25, 1965, delivered on the steps of the Alabama Statehouse by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

And God heard the cries of the people of Egypt. God looked upon them and God took notice of them! And God understood. God freed from their oppression. And on that day, God's moral arc of justice bent and touched the earth in Tahrir Square! Amen.

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