

Spirituals and Their Double Meaning

African American spirituals were born out of both deep suffering and unshakable hope. Enslaved people, denied freedom and dignity, turned to song as a way of expressing faith, community, and resistance. These spirituals carried a “double meaning”: on the surface, they were hymns of biblical truth and comfort, but woven beneath the words were messages of perseverance, coded language of liberation, and reminders of God’s sustaining presence amid injustice.

This Sunday, we will sing “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder” together as a congregation. On its face, the hymn recalls the story of Jacob’s dream in Genesis, where a ladder reached from earth to heaven. For enslaved communities, however, the song was more than a retelling of scripture—it became a vision of climbing toward freedom, each “rung” symbolizing steps of resilience, faith, and progress toward justice. Singing the hymn together today connects us not only to the biblical story, but also to the faithful endurance of generations who claimed hope in God’s promises even in the midst of bondage.

The Sanctuary Choir will also offer Edward Eicker’s arrangement of “There Is a Balm in Gilead,” a spiritual that draws from the prophet Jeremiah’s cry, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” In the biblical text, the balm was a healing ointment from a distant land. For enslaved believers, the “balm” became a metaphor for Christ’s power to heal brokenness, forgive sins, and bring new life. In the face of despair, this spiritual declared a counter-truth: yes, there is a balm; yes, there is healing; yes, God’s Spirit is still moving. Its enduring refrain reminds us of the boundless grace of God that comforts, strengthens, and restores.

When we hear and sing these spirituals in worship, we are invited into a deeper awareness of faith as both comfort and challenge. They remind us that God is present with us in struggle, and that singing itself can be an act of courage, solidarity, and proclamation. May these songs stir our hearts this Sunday as we join our voices with those who came before us, testifying to the God who liberates, heals, and gives hope.

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