The ideals of Life and Liberty are at the core of Christian teaching. God created human beings, breathed life into them, and gave them the power of free will. Jesus echoed this when he said he came to give us life in abundance and to give us freedom, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36)

In many ways, these ideals are universal and have been sought after throughout human history. Often, people have had to fight for them against tyranny. This is how this country came to be: fighting an oppressing monarchy that denied Life and Liberty to many.

This week we celebrate that occasion by commemorating Independence Day, also called the Fourth of July. This holiday observes the passage of the Declaration of Independence by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, making the U.S. a free and independent nation from the British empire.

However, even as a free nation, there were still severe disputes regarding freedom for all people, for some were denied life and liberty and kept as enslaved people based on their skin color. This led to the next generations of freedom fighters (Statesman Frederick Douglass and President Abraham Lincoln, among many others) that led the newly born nation to truly live into those ideals of Life and Liberty for all.

One of the greatest American heroes during the abolition of slavery leading up to the Civil War is Harriet Tubman. Ms. Tubman escaped slavery in the South to become a leading abolitionist before the American Civil War. She led hundreds of enslaved people to freedom in the North, including family and friends, using the network of antislavery activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad.

Harriet Tubman was known as the “Moses of her people,” leading them to freedom all while carrying a bounty on her head. She was also a nurse, a Union spy, and a supporter of women’s suffrage.

One of her most famous quotes is “There are two things I’ve got a right to, and these are, Death or Liberty – one or the other I mean to have.” (Harriet Tubman to Ednah Dow Cheney, New York City, 1859.)

Harriet Tubman was a freedom fighter willing to die for liberty—I will have liberty or death, she said. She knew what it meant to be enslaved and was unwilling to return to it no matter what. She refused the shackles with all her being.

We can reflect on many things about Ms. Tubman’s life and experience. Perhaps one that can speak to us is the idea that only those who have experienced oppression or fought it (e.g., American Civil War and European Nazism and Fascism) can truly appreciate the gift of liberty and are willing to do everything to obtain it, keep it, and not lose it.

It would be a disservice to compare the struggles and battles Ms. Tubman experienced to our challenges and needs nowadays. However, we can use the wisdom and learn from her courage to help us reflect on whether we genuinely appreciate the gifts of life and freedom or take them for granted.

Today’s message is about refusing the shackles to be bound to anything that robs us of Life and Liberty. In the Bible, this is often called sin, that which enslaves the mind, body, and spirit. However, sin is not the only thing that can enslave us, there are also traumas and memories of pain and suffering, perhaps passed onto us by previous generations, that keep us in shackles. Think of them as chain links; the more we give in to them, the bigger, longer, and heavier they get around us.

A disciple of Jesus is a learner of the teachings and ways of Jesus, of course. But a disciple of Jesus is also one that has been set free from sin and burdens by faith through grace in the power of the Holy Spirit to live a fulfilling life. Jesus explains it this way,

“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” (John 8:31-34)

These Jews thought that because they were descendants of Abraham, they did not need anything else to experience the gift of life and freedom. They believed their blood lineage granted them the right to Abraham’s blessing, and nothing else was required from them. Some of these people did not like Jesus, nor they cared what he had to say, as explained in verse 37, “I know that you are descendants of Abraham, yet you look for an opportunity to kill me because there is no place in you for my word.”

Nevertheless, Jesus still challenged their belief by saying, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” In other words, Jesus is declaring that life and freedom are not simply tokens passed along from person to person, but the choices we make in life to refuse to be bound by old broken behaviors and experiences. By knowing the difference between good and bad (the truth Jesus reveals) and choosing the good, we are set free.

Isn’t this something we struggle with too? I am talking about our hesitation to break away from the shackles of burdens. While we may know the difference between good and evil, we don’t always choose the good.

It is like the birth of this nation; on paper, we were declared free, yet there were still serious issues within that needed to be healed to truly experience the Life and Liberty God wants us to have.

This becomes obvious when we acknowledge that even as we experience God’s grace, we still carry with us scars of deep hurts, painful memories from the past (whether lived by us or passed onto us), resentments, and even broken behaviors that need to be let go. The issue is not a lack of faith or knowledge of God or the Bible but keeping old broken ways of living that bind us to our past.

Imagine you are Ms. Tubman, a free person from slavery that keeps putting the shackles back on even as they have been broken. Senseless, right? That would make as much sense as someone asking God to deliver them from harmful behaviors but keeps returning to them.

Sadly, we often do that to ourselves. Jesus sets us free, yet we keep putting back the shackles. We have the gifts of life and liberty, yet there is still slavery within ourselves. Remaining a victim by choice is something no one can help us with.

There is a story in the Bible that I believe can speak to us today about this and show us the way into a new life and freedom. It is a story in the Hebrew Scriptures that tells us about the Exodus when the people of God were set free from slavery in Egypt after 400 years of oppression. For many years they prayed and cried for freedom. Exodus 2:23-25 describes this moment by noting,

“After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.”

It was then that God answered their prayer and sent them a liberator, Moses. And, after many acts of power and miracles that God performed through Moses to overpower Egypt’s power, Israel was released, reluctantly let go by Pharaoh.

However, not long after that, they grumbled and complaint often,

“What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone so that we can serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” (Exodus 14: 11-12)

Repeatedly, these people who were set free complained about Moses’ leadership, the hassle of journeying through the desert, and not having the kind of food they had in Egypt. Even as they had been set free and were being led to a place of their own, they were dwelling in the past, wishing they were back in Egypt because at least there they had meat and graves to die in.

One would think that people who had been enslaved for generations would appreciate the gift of new life and freedom, so it is hard to comprehend why they were complaining about being set free and given the power to choose a life for themselves and their children.

If anything, this shows that even though they were physically free, their minds and hearts were still bound to Egypt. Even though the shackles were broken, they still cast them upon themselves.

Can you relate to this? Are you still holding onto shackles even after God has broken them? Could it be lying? Judging others? Lack of compassion and love? Generational trauma? What about abuse, violence, or addictions? Those shackles keep us enslaved, but we often keep putting them back on.

My friends, we need to stop going back to that which God saved us from, that which has already been forgiven and healed.

I know we all live in the constant tension between leaving behind Egypt and trusting Jesus to lead us into a new life. And it is even more challenging when we need to let go of a life that was bad to our ancestors or us, but for some reason, we are still clenching onto it.

So, don’t go back to that which God already saved you from. Why would you keep opening the wounds God has already healed?

With all this in mind, here is the invitation and the good news for all of us today: refuse to be bound by brokenness, addictions, destructive behaviors, past traumas, and thoughts. God wants to put all that behind us. God is ready and desperately willing to give us a breakthrough in our lives. God wants to fill us with life, joy, laughter, peace, and love.

You can be free every day from all shackles and burdens in your life, just trust your life to Jesus and then do what he says because by trusting we are saved and by doing we are changed.

Refuse the shackles and trust and follow the greatest abolitionist that ever lived: Jesus.