

This month we remember and celebrate the achievements and contributions to our society by African Americans. I was first introduced to Black History Month in elementary school and I still remember reading the biographies of George Washington Carver, an amazing and brilliant scientist and inventor, and Harriet Tubman, a woman of astonishing courage who led so many to freedom (if you haven't seen the movie *Harriet*, I recommend it).

In the church, we are indebted to African Americans in so many ways, not least being wonderful hymns and spirituals. Hymns like "I Want to Be a Christian in My Heart," "There Is a Balm in Gilead," "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." These hymns touch our very souls and capture the emotion and hope of our faith.

However, I did not know about the ways slaves used some of these very songs to communicate the path to freedom. Yes, they speak about the freedom for the Christian in Christ, but they also were about the path to freedom in this life. I recently found a reference to the website [negrospiritual.com](http://negrospiritual.com), which gives background and history on many of these songs. I recommend it to you.

Did you know that the word "home" in these hymns refers not just to our heavenly home but to the places in America where the slave could be free? Specifically, north of the Ohio River, which became in the language of the hymns, the Jordan. When you crossed the Ohio, you were free, just like when the Israelites crossed the Jordan, they entered the Promised Land. Likewise, a chariot were the paths and thickets the slaves used to travel to freedom.

So, when a slave sung the first verse of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," the message went deeper than hope for heaven: "I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, coming for to carry me home?/ A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home." There was a town called Ripley just over the Ohio River, where fugitive slaves were welcome. However, the river is not easy to cross at that point, so the one seeking freedom had to wait for help, i.e. the angels, to come from the town. The words of this song not only celebrated the freedom that awaited them over the Ohio, it instructed ones who would come and how to cross.

There are many who would like to remove the stain of the sin of slavery from our history. I am glad that every time we sing one of these hymns, I am singing that history, that God will not let me forget. The spirituals are also a reminder that salvation is not just about what happens when we die, but also about what happens here and now. Eternal life begins when we profess Christ as our Lord.

I invite you to take a minute this month to read the words of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and to reflect on the courage of the men and women who escaped the chains of slavery both physical and spiritual and crossed the Jordan to freedom.