

WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS THE FOURTH OF JULY?

FREDERICK DOUGLASS
1852

TEXT

To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, lowering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down....”

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What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

HISTORY

In 1852, Frederick Douglass delivered the keynote address at the Ladies' Antislavery Society's celebration of Independence Day in Rochester, New York. Douglass, who had escaped from slavery at the age of 20 and published his autobiography detailing the brutality of slavery, was one of the nation's leading orators and the nation's most prominent abolitionist.

At the time of Douglass's speech, the Mexican War (1846-1848) had expanded U.S. territory to the Pacific Ocean, adding all or part of what became nine Western states. Their addition precipitated a conflict over the westward spread of slavery, which led to the Compromise of 1850, a series of five laws addressing slavery in the newly acquired territories. One of these laws, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, provided for returning escaped slaves to the South without trial and required citizens to assist in apprehending runaway slaves.

Within this historical context, Frederick Douglass took to the podium. He was aggrieved not only by slavery itself, but also by the corrosive effect of hypocrisy. To observe a ritual celebrating “freedom” in a time of rampant oppression was to treat the country's core ideas cheaply. Therefore, in his remarks, he turns July 4, the day which our nation celebrates the signing of the Declaration of Independence, into a confrontation with the country's failure to live up to the ideals espoused in that document.

PRE-SESSION QUESTION

In what ways are national rituals like the Fourth of July similar to religious holidays? Why does Frederick Douglass make this comparison?

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VALUES TO APPRECIATE IN THE TEXT

- Freedom
- Equality
- Honesty

INTRODUCTORY ICE-BREAKER

How did you celebrate the Fourth of July when you were growing up?

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Begin with the pre-session question: In what ways are national rituals like the Fourth of July similar to religious holidays? Why does Frederick Douglass make this comparison?
- Why was the Fourth of July so painful for Douglass?
- Why does calling out hypocrisy in ritual have such rhetorical power?
- How does Douglass's separation of himself from his audience ("This 4th of July is yours, not mine.") impact his message? Is it effective?

POSSIBLE GROUP ACTIVITIES

- Break into small groups and have each group choose a national holiday (New Year's, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Memorial Day, Labor Day, President's Day, Juneteenth, Martin Luther King Day, etc). Identify and list the similarities and differences between the American observance of the holiday and the intended message of that holiday.
- Design a Fourth of July celebration that would make Frederick Douglass proud.

RELATED SCRIPTURE

CLOSING REFLECTION QUESTION

What about how you celebrate the Fourth of July do you now want to be more mindful of?