

“Out of Slavery”
Exodus 1 – 14
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The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

If we know no other story in Scripture, it should be this one. On the exodus, Jewish identity is based; from it the Christian faith emerges; through it we glimpse the liberating hand of God (Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 1*, p. 690). Without understanding exodus, we can never appreciate Easter.

And yet ... and yet there is so much that’s deeply troubling in this story. Why did God harden Pharaoh’s heart? Why did God kill the firstborn of the Egyptians? Why did God drown the entire army of Pharaoh? Why did so many people have to die? It is an unsettling image of God – vindictive, even manipulative. We are so used to worshiping a God of love; it’s hard to mesh this vengeful God with the God we know.

It’s especially jarring on the heels of our lesson from last week. Joseph, you’ll remember, was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. But God used even the evil his brothers intended and turned it into good. When famine was about to strike the land, God put Joseph in a position of power to insure there would be bread enough to eat for everyone – the Israelites, the Egyptians, everyone. God used Joseph and the Israelites to be a blessing – not just to guarantee their own future, but to save the whole world.

But when we get to Exodus, everything changes. Instead of the Israelites being a means of grace for the Egyptians, the Israelites have become the means of their destruction. What is going on?

The key, I believe, is found in the opening lines of our worship, the opening lines, indeed, of Exodus: “Now there arose a king of Egypt who did not know Joseph.” There arose a king of Egypt who did not know Joseph. The Pharaoh Joseph knew, the Pharaoh at the end of Genesis, was an enlightened king. He sought out help, listened to wise advice, welcomed the leadership of foreigners, appointed people of integrity to positions of power. But between then and now, between Genesis and Exodus, the wheel of history

has turned. Generations later, it is a very different Pharaoh who's in power. A Pharaoh of hubris, and violence, and oppression. And that changes everything.

Long before the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh's heart is already frozen solid. Pharaoh has enslaved the Israelites as forced labor, economically bound, indentured servants. Afraid of their growing numbers, he reacts ruthlessly. He expands their work, from the fields to his building projects, making their lives bitter with his endless need for more bricks and mortar. When they complain, he punishes them by making them gather their own straw and clay. He piles on hardship after hardship, a powerful king with his powerful army doing whatever he wants to control a powerless people. It is a story repeated through time: of dehumanizing societies and dictatorial hegemonies, of ruthless control and economic servitude, of killing fields and genocides. And when hardship fails to break this people, Pharaoh commands the Hebrews to kill their own male infants: the slaughter of the innocents at Pharaoh's hand.

It is into this context that God appears – hearing the cries of his people, seeing the pain of his broken and pitiful children. God intervenes -- with a mighty hand and outstretched arm -- to strike against Pharaoh with all his power and wonders -- not because God is ruthless, but because it is the *only* way that Pharaohs like that will allow his subservient chattel to leave.

With chilling predictability, Pharaoh dismisses the warning voice of Moses; and so the plagues start coming. The Nile River turns to blood; frogs and gnats and flies invade, diseases plague livestock and people, a hailstorm and locusts destroy the crops, and darkness covers all of Egypt. Each plague is worse than the last, wearing Pharaoh down bit by bit. By the fourth plague, Pharaoh agrees to let the Israelites go. But as soon as there is respite from the plagues, he changes his mind, and reneges on his word, because his heart is hardened.

Notice too that it is not only Pharaoh's heart that's hardened. The Israelites' hearts need softening too, coaxing to follow God's lead, convincing to escape into freedom. Through Moses, God promises: "I will free you from the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers." But the people will not listen to Moses – they *cannot* listen to God – because, the Scripture tells us, "because of their broken spirit and cruel slavery." They can't afford to trust when their leader calls to them, "I have a dream" – for a people who are brutalized cannot imagine freedom. They are defeated; they are crushed; they are hopeless.

Until the last plague comes. When God commands the people to slaughter a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts, so that God will pass over them, they finally believe God's promises. God *will* save them; God *will* lead them to freedom. So they enact what God instructs: to kill the Passover lamb, and put its blood on the door as a sign for the angel of death to pass over them. They are to eat the Passover lamb quickly; and to make bread without yeast – there is no time to wait for its rising. And so they do, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, until they reach the shores of the Red Sea.

Even then they are not out of danger. For tyrants do not easily loosen their grip of power, and the economies of slavery are not casually set aside. So Pharaoh pursues them, with the full force of his chariots and army, determined to crush the huddled masses that dared to try to flee him. But the Lord -- the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob – the Lord is more powerful than even the armies of Pharaoh himself. And God will not let his people be deserted to their foes.

This is the story of the exodus ... the foundational story of the people of God. From ancient times God's people have rehearsed this story to remember who we are and by whom we are saved. The song of Miriam that closes our passage is likely *the* most ancient text in all of scripture: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." Not far behind it is the ancient creed found in Deuteronomy:

“A wandering Aramaean was my father. He went down to Egypt and dwelt there, few in number; and became a populous nation. The Egyptians treated us harshly, and imposed cruel slavery upon us. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our cry, and saw our toil and our oppression, and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 26:5b-9).

So crucial is the exodus that the Passover became the defining ritual among the Jewish people. To this day the children at Passover Seder will ask, “Why is this night different than all other nights?” And the answer is this story: “Once we were slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, in his goodness, brought us forth from that land with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” Notice that in all of these recitations, ancient and modern, the pronoun “we” is used – not “they.” Every generation of Christian and Jew must look upon ourselves as though we personally were among those who went forth from Egypt.

Why is it so important to rehearse and remember and relive this story, the story of the exodus? Scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests:

“The community of faith is a community of memory, working at its precious identity in a culture devoted to amnesia. ... Those who neither remember nor hope are profoundly vulnerable. ... Thus when [our] community says, ‘This do in remembrance,’ it is not engaged in a mere history lesson or a simple act of piety. It is, rather, engaged in an act of resistance against an ideology that will destroy [our] humanness” (pp. 786-7).

Over and over and over again, through Scripture and beyond, Jews and Christians will be tempted to forget our story – especially in times of ease and privilege – and when we do, we risk becoming inhuman. When we forget that it was God who intervened for us, and we did not save ourselves, then we begin to act like demigods, like little pharaohs. When we forget what it was

like to be enslaved, oppressed, impoverished, humiliated, then we begin to humiliate others and treat them as less than we are, less than human. Above all, when we forget who our God really is, and substitute our culture's gods of prestige and power and status and wealth, then we cease to worship the Lord our God: the Lord, who remembers the weak and up-ends the strong ... the Lord, who claims victory over unholy and despotic powers ... the Lord, who lifts up the oppressed to overcome their abusers ... the Lord, who crowns us with hope in the midst of our deepest despair.

It is no accident that Jesus gathered his friends on *the night of Passover*, and he took unleavened bread, and said, "take and eat; do this in remembrance of me." When he died on the cross, and was raised up at the resurrection, he made for us a new exodus, freeing us from bondage to death, freeing us from captivity to sin, freeing us from hell's destruction, landing us safe on Canaan's side. Whenever a little one is baptized, we remember again how Christ brought us safely through the waters of death, from every evil that pursues us, so that we might live in newness of life.

This is the story of the exodus ... the first and crucial story of God's act of resurrection. And God will keep liberating his children from death ... God will keep freeing us from despair ... God will keep intervening against evil's power ... until all are saved. Until all of God's children can pass through the waters ... until all of God's children can come safely home. Amen.