

Last week we found Joseph in slavery in Egypt at Potiphar's house. The Joseph narrative links the ancestral promises given by God to Abraham to the Exodus story of oppression and liberation. Among God's promises to Abram were to make a great nation, bless them and provide a land inheritance. Joseph, after getting out of jail, eventually became second in command under Pharaoh at the age of 30. Joseph and his brothers eventually reconciled and they all moved to Egypt. For a while things were good for the Israelites. However, we get a clue in the first chapter of Exodus that soon another Pharaoh comes to power who didn't know Joseph (v. 8). He was threatened by the Israelites. Soon the Israelites became the Egyptians slaves (v. 13) and this went on for four hundred years. But they still kept growing in number and Pharaoh said that any sons born to the Hebrew women must be thrown into the Nile River (v. 22). One Hebrew mother hid her baby for three months after his birth and when she couldn't hide him any longer, she put him in a reed basket, sealed with black tar. Then the baby's sister, Miriam, stood watch nearby as her brother, Moses, floated down the Nile River right into Pharaoh's daughter, who was taking a bath. Moses was eventually adopted by her and grew up as that Pharaoh's grandson- he had one foot in the Hebrew world and one foot in the Egyptian world. Years later, that Pharaoh died and another one rose to power. The Israelites remained enslaved in Egypt. "They groaned because of their hard work. They cried out, and God heard their cry of grief, remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (and Joseph)" (2:23-24). Moses meanwhile had grown up and married before God called him, much like Abram, except for the

burning bush part, and told him that God had heard the cry of injustice of God's people. The "I Am Who I Am" sent Moses- but not before he made every excuse in the book to not go- to negotiate with someone who doesn't negotiate. Make no mistake. This was a battle between the God of Israel and Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods. I wonder what took God so long to act? Moses met with Pharaoh and told him about the God of the Israelites, but Pharaoh stepped it up a notch, making the slaves lives more miserable. Moses, discouraged, asked God why this was happening, and God assured him that the Israelites would soon be free. Truth be told we don't know what if any relationship the Israelites had with God, seeing as it had been many generations since Joseph. Moses went back again and Pharaoh didn't budge. Thus began the Ten Plagues, the last of which culminated in the first Passover, when the angel of death passed over the houses and killed all first-born males whose house didn't have lamb's blood smeared on their doorposts and the beams across their doors. The Israelites ate what is known as the Passover meal- lamb along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. These widespread deaths happened under Pharaoh's watch and this time Pharaoh's own son died- even the first-born animals of the Egyptians died. That night Pharaoh called for Moses and his brother, Aaron, and said, "Get up! Get away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go! Worship the Lord, as you said! You can even take your flocks and herds. Just go" (12:31-32)! Meanwhile the Israelites didn't think twice and immediately fled from Egypt, with Moses, as God leads them all by the roundabout way of the Reed (or Red) Sea desert. "Moses took with him Joseph's bones, just as Joseph

had made Israel's sons promise when he said to them, 'When God takes care of you, you must carry my bones out of here with you'"(13:19). God had a plan and wanted the Egyptians to know that he is Lord. And this is where we pick up in today's story, which is one of the most well known stories in the Bible. **PRAY. READ. Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29.**

I am very uncomfortable with all the violence before and during today's story. I wish there could've been another way. I have so many questions that may remain unanswered until I meet God face-to-face. I am not going to try and justify this violence, as this passage through the Red Sea portrays slavery's end in Egypt in vivid, violent detail. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not believe that violence was the way to resist injustice. He believed that at the center of nonviolence stood the principle of love. King also said, "Freedom is never given voluntarily from the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed." And Pharaoh wasn't giving in to God's demand. The freedom of God's people did not occur in a vacuum. There were consequences. There was truth-telling. And there was a disturbingly costly justice. God, who is faithful to God's promises, has a preference for the poor and for freeing those who are oppressed. And God's demonstration of saving power leads to Pharaoh finally relenting- so we thought- until Pharaoh talks himself out of his initial decision to let the enslaved Israelites go. But dictators like Pharaoh desperately hold onto power even though they're destroying their own people. And at the end of the day, for Pharaoh, the economic benefit of having slaves outweighs the death of

the Egyptians, even his own son. Often times economics are put above the well-being of people. This is who God is fighting against. And this still goes on today as slavery is not over. “The intrusive grace of the liberating God to break these structures of oppression isn’t over but ongoing all over the world” (workingpreacher.org, podcast). Think child labor, human trafficking, or the women of Iran...just to name a few. Just as in today’s story, the Lord acts and speaks and saves.

We could go over every detail in today’s story, yet I don’t want us to miss that beginnings requires endings. “Exodus, the road out of slavery to freedom, is a new creation or birth. God’s power to create from nothing, from formlessness and void, is the same power by which God saves and transforms” (Anathea Portier-Young, workingpreacher.org). The Israelites thought they were a free people but were trapped between Egypt’s superior army on their fancy chariots and the impassable Red Sea. They could not escape the situation they were in. They had hoped years ago and their hope is wavering. Yet, they had enough courage and trust to get this far on their journey to freedom. Now they are terrified and their grumbling begins. They could at least still have food to eat had they stayed in Egypt as slaves but now?! This is poignant and real, as we all know of those times in our own lives where we choose to stay in a bad situation or with a bad habit for fear that it will be worse to go and face the unknown. Often it is fear that holds us back from embracing new life and opportunities for our future. You see a little hope or belief that something is going to change is required to leave- to have an ending that welcomes a new beginning.

Once you allow yourself to believe something is possible you risk losing that hope if you leave for the unknown. It is a spiraling cycle. But God!

But God has plans nobody could have predicted. God cleared a dry path through the sea. God makes a way out of no way- fighting for justice to defeat oppression. “Death, salvation/liberation and creation are intricately woven together. In this story, death becomes the conduit of salvation and re-creation of the Israelites” (Ericka Dunbar, WP). Look at the cross. In today’s story and in our stories, “where we don’t see a way forward, God makes a way through the sea so that we can emerge from death to life” (workingpreacher.org, podcast). I highly commend Cole Arthur Riley’s book, *This Here Flesh*. In she wisely claims that “when someone has endured bondage for so long and has still found some manner of survival, they may assess the risk of liberation to be greater than the violence of their chains. When one has gone without food for so long, their stomach becomes used to smaller portions. If one has gone without a roof over their head, once you have one you may be less inclined to tell the landlord that it’s leaking. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison famously writes, ‘Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another. In pursuit of liberation, we do not need to pine after the power of our oppressor; we have to long for our own power to be fully realized- for one’s dignity cannot be chained.’” Take addiction for example. What obstacles or things stand in your way of experiencing the full life God wants for you- the abundant life that Jesus promises each of us? God can make a

way where there does not appear to be a way forward. And there is a cost to freedom. True freedom is letting go of the fear and having the courage to face the unknown, trusting that God is in charge and in the possibility of a better future despite all the evidence. Often, when we are terrified or too paralyzed to act, we are called to courage and patience. It's not an easy thing to come by when anxiety stirs us to fight, flee, or freeze. "You can't talk someone into liberation. Telling someone to just get free is like telling someone to stop grinding their teeth. Freedom requires patience with ourselves, as it takes time to feel at peace if all you've ever known is insecurity. It's the process of your soul learning to trust again- trust that it can rest and love and be still without being destroyed" (Riley).

During the Civil Rights Movement, King, motivated his listeners to fight against racial injustice and seek the freedom that their nation had promised them. King compared their struggle for racial equality to the biblical story, *Exodus*. He compares the Israelites' captivity with the plight of African Americans in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and the US Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. King wanted to reassure his listeners that they would find justice and equality if they persevered through all their hardships, just as the Israelites did. He continues, "Let us not despair. Let us not lose faith in [hu]mans and certainly not in God. We must believe that a prejudiced mind can be changed, and that [hu]mans, by the grace of God, can be lifted from the valley of hate to the high mountain of love."

Today since Jews no longer have the Temple, they no longer eat Passover sacrifices. However, they still eat the matzah, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs at the Passover Seder meal. Though the traditions and meanings behind it vary, they celebrate during the meal by drinking four cups of wine, symbolizing joy and freedom, one cup for each word of redemption or deliverance in Exodus- and they thank God for God's redeeming work through the 10 plaques. Then they take their finger and spill wine onto their plate thus diminishing the joy since their freedom came at the expense of others, even if they were deserving of punishment.

We cannot ignore the bodies on the shore "because to ignore them is to ignore the reality of death and the limits of greed, exploitation, and empire. And as we look, let us see clearly enough that our fear gives way to faith" (Young). For the promised land is on the horizon. May we trust the next chapter because we know the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. May we also heed Moses' words to the Israelites: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you only have to keep still" (vv. 13-14). Thanks be to our saving God! Amen.