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“Leaving Pharaoh Behind”
Exodus 14:5-7; 10-14; 21-29

Parts of the book of Exodus, the second book of the Old Testament, read like an apocalyptic nightmare. I’m thinking specifically of the plagues.

But let me back up.

You might remember Moses – the Hebrew (Jewish) baby sent down the river by his mother at a time when Pharaoh was killing all male Hebrew babies. He was found by Pharaoh’s daughter who adopts him as her own. Much later in life, Moses receives a call from God, by way of a burning bush, to free the Hebrew people from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. Moses is reluctant, but he accepts the challenge.

When Pharaoh refuses to let the people go, God sends ten awful plagues. They are plagues that show just what kind of a powerful God Pharaoh is dealing with. They are plagues that exhibit strength and intimidation. They are plagues that leave Pharaoh no choice but to let the Hebrew slaves go. Water turns to blood, it rains frogs, plagues of lice, boils, locusts descend. Livestock are diseased, there are thunderstorms of hail and fire and, in the worst of the worst, the death of the firstborn son of every family EXCEPT that of the Hebrew slaves, for the angel of death passes over their homes because they have marked their doors with the blood of the lamb. And thus we have the holy day of Passover for our Jewish friends – commemorating freedom from Pharaoh and slavery in Egypt.

After surviving these ten plagues, after witnessing the power of Yahweh, Pharaoh sends the slaves away. Go. You are free. And they go.

But Pharaoh changes his mind and send his soldiers after them while they are camped by the Red Sea. And this is when God does one more act of salvation and destruction – the Red Sea is parted – giving safe passageway for the Israelites, and death to the Egyptians.

Water turned to blood, the angel of death, boils and locusts – you can probably see why I refer to this as a terrifying apocalyptic nightmare. Even *if* you were on the winning side, it would still be terrifying.

And, like an apocalyptic story, it is indeed the end of the world as they know it for the Israelites.

The end of the world as they know it.

And they love to complain about it.

One of my favorite parts of the story of Exodus, of the 40 years of the Israelites wandering in the desert is how much they complain. They complain all the time. And I supposed I love this because it is so believable. I can hear truth in their complaints. I can hear us in what they say. It’s so true to life.

And yet they complain because they're scared.

What, they say to Moses, were there not graves enough in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die?

Much later, wandering in the wilderness, they will mourn the great food they ate in Egypt, believing they will starve to death. We should have stayed, is what they keep telling Moses. We should have stayed slaves rather than enduring this struggle. We should have stayed slaves rather than coming out in the desert to die. We should have stayed slaves rather than starving to death. We should have stayed slaves. At least the one who we served was predictable. At least Pharaoh was a known entity. This Yahweh figure is way too sketchy.

We should have stayed slaves.

You see, mentally, emotionally, spiritually - they are still under Pharaoh's power.

We see this in groups of oppressed people. They internalize the oppressor. They have internalized oppression which often shows up in self-hate. The way of the oppressor becomes normalized. So that white supremacy becomes the truthful social norm and racism the acceptable lie that non-white people are inferior to white people. For people of color who internalize this oppression, they begin to believe this themselves.

Or patriarchy becomes the social norm so that women begin to believe the lie that they are inferior to men. Their experiences are discounted. They are not believed. They are not trusted. And this is internalized so that women don't believe other women. So that they too begin to doubt themselves.

Or economic elitism is a social norm so that people who are poor begin to believe that they are inferior to rich people – internalized oppression.

Believing that Pharaoh is really in charge.

That the way of Pharaoh is the truth – believing that lie.

We should have stayed slaves.

Which is why Yahweh needs to take them out into the desert so that they might be re-formed as the people of God. It takes 40 years. But they need to be the people who serve God and not Pharaoh. And it's gonna take a while to act like it. It's gonna take a while to think like it. It's gonna take a while to spiritually re-center on the living God rather than the tyranny and oppression of Egypt.

We should have stayed slaves. it would have been easier. These kinds of things are only said when Pharaoh is still ruling over one's heart. Wait until you see what's on the other side. Wait until you see the freedom waiting for us.

If any of you have ever been a slave to addiction, you know exactly what I'm talking about. If any of you have ever been in an abusive relationship, you know exactly what I'm talking about. If any of you have ever been a slave to mental illness you know what I'm talking about. It takes a long time to re-center your life not around the strong hold of addiction, not around the abuse you've endured, not around your illness. It takes a long time to re-discover yourself as free, and not only free, as God's beloved.

This story, of the Exodus of the slaves, of the parting of the Red Sea, is one of the biggest stories in the Jewish faith. And it's a beautiful and powerful, albeit a bit frightening, story. But our Scripture asks of us, over and over again, what does this have to do with us today? How does this story of the Israelites huddled on the beach, scared out of their wits at the approaching Egyptian army, wishing they had just stayed in slavery – how does this story relate to our lives today?

Maybe you're already making connections. But if you're not, let me ask you: Who is Pharaoh for us today? Who or what are we serving instead of our God? Whose tyranny are we living under? And how do we need to be re-formed as the people of God? Are we living under the lies of racism and patriarchy and economic eliteism and ableism, the lies of “not good enough” or “not rich enough” or “not man enough” or “not smart enough” or “not important enough” – or are we living the true story of God's calling on our lives?

Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann, in his excellent book *Truth Speaks to Power*, asks the following important questions that we need to ask today:

1. Who plays the pharaoh in our current performance of the drama, the one who acts in anti-neighborly, exploitative ways and operates a political-economic system that is organized for greedy acquisitiveness?
2. Where are the cries from exhausted laborers who, in their exhaustion, break the silence because their bodies will no longer lie?
3. Where is the holy power of God operative in ways that subvert or jeopardize established power in the interest of the aggrieved?
4. Who are the human agents who carry holy alternatives that are intended by the Lord of emancipation? (*Truth speaks to power*, Bruggeman, 37)

Bruggemann suggests that our story from Exodus gives us a map forward. He emphasizes the steps that the Israelites took. First, they tear themselves away from “Pharaoh's system.” Next they go through the deep waters of recreation where Pharaoh's people could not follow. They come out the other side and they dance, celebrate, and praise God for their new-found freedom.

Bruggemann suggests that we might imagine a church that follows the same pattern. A church that sounds the cry against whatever is the Pharaoh of our day. Sounds the cry against the oppressive forces in our life. And not only sounds the cry, but also seeks an alternative. A new vision away from the tyrannical rule of Pharaoh. A church that acts out the alternative – begins to live out a new way of life. And finally, a church that dances out beyond slavery. That gives thanks to God for freedom and new life.

What would it look like to be a church that is naming the tyranny under which we live *and* showing an alternative? that is anti-racist? That actively fights sexism in all its forms? That exposes the lies of our economic system?

Bruggeman warns that the church's ability to follow in the footsteps of the ancient Israelites will not be easy. He writes:

“This is a narrative that we keep reperforming as we have the courage to do so. We are, for the most part, timid and inured in Pharaoh’s narrative. His system has such a grip on us that we stay fixed on the endless quotas of exploitation, quotas of production and consumption.” (Bruggemann 39)

How do we tell the truth about the grip Pharaoh’s rule has over us (whatever Pharaoh is to us right now – whether it’s addiction or capitalism or internalized sexism or thinking we’re not good enough or smart enough or rich enough)? And how do we begin to live not according to Pharaoh but according to God? With a deep sense of our own worthiness and beloved-ness and a calling to liberate others into this truth.

Is it easier to stay slaves? Is it easier to stay with Pharaoh than to wrestle with such questions?

The people do not know the amazing things that God will do for them. They complain and doubt because they are scared. The status quo is much more comfortable. They are stuck on the shores of the sea and they have no idea how God will ever help them. And then, God does the impossible. And then, God shows them a new way. And then, God re-creates them as God’s own beloved community, leaving Pharaoh behind.

And we too might stand on the shores, we too might want to flee the tyranny of Egypt, we too might want to leave the rule of Pharaoh behind – and we might be very very scared. And have no idea how we will move forward towards this new life.

Because it’s hard to imagine an alternative.

And so we wait, hoping and trusting that God will do the impossible. And when God does, we will risk it and cross into new life on the other side of that Sea. And when we make it, we’ll be there dancing and praising God and ready for the journey ahead into a liberated future.

May we be so brave.

May we be so bold.

Amen.