

Let my People Go¹
November 2nd 2014
Exodus 7:1-6 and 12:37-42

The Exodus story: that's the story that will provide the foundation for today's sermon. While this story of God's liberation of the oppressed finds echoes in the prophets and in Jesus' life and ministry and as such underlies a lot of my preaching, I don't actually think that I have ever preached on these particular texts before.

The scripture passages that Doreen read while not giving all the details of the story of the signs and wonders and plagues that God sent upon Egypt, give us information about the point of the story that we do well not to skip over. And so I repeat:

God says to Moses, See, I have made you like a God before Pharaoh and Aaron shall be your prophet.

You shall speak all that I command you,
and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land. But

I will harden Pharaoh's heart,
and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.

When Pharaoh does not listen to you,
I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring my people the Israelites,
company by company, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment.

The Egyptians shall know that I am the great I Am, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them.
Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the LORD commanded them.

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Right at the beginning, this passage and many others in the next five chapters, make it very clear who the agent of the action is and will be. God makes Moses and Aaron who they are. God commands them to speak to Pharaoh. hardens Pharaoh's heart multiply's signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. lays God's own hand on the nation of Egypt and brings the people God claims as God's own, out of the land by great acts of judgment.

And this passage in chapter 7 is not the only passage where God repeats to Moses and Aaron, what's about to unfold.

The story at this point has already had several twists and turns, including the fact that Moses and Aaron had already gone to Pharaoh and asked him to let the people go into the wilderness to have a festival and worship God.

Pharaoh's first response was to say that he did not know this God that Moses and Aaron name to him.

Second, he made the people's work even harder by not giving them any straw to make their bricks, but did not at the same time decrease his expectations for their productivity.

And then when Moses tells the people of Israel what God still plans to do for them,

even the people won't listen to Moses because of their broken spirit and cruel slavery.

It's a great old story, right? It really doesn't have much to do with us. Or does it?

The people are enslaved and discouraged. The Pharaoh has a hard heart. Moses, the one God has chosen to lead the people, says more than once to God, "why did you ever send me?" And the signs that God is about to unleash on Egypt are the stuff of horror story and I have a really hard time with horror stories – bloody rivers, swarms of frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and death.

What does any of this have to do with us?

Are we enslaved/oppressed? On the surface, we are not. We consider ourselves free to live and worship God as we wish. And that is a very good thing and not something we can say about the whole world. We are free to work hard and be productive. We are free to spend as much time as we want – after work - with our electronic gadgets, TV, internet, video games....

And yet, and yet, I sense among us unease that all is not right with the world as we know it.

How free are we, really?

I feel inadequate this morning to do justice to the complexity of the mix of freedom and enslavement that I think we all live with.

In matters of degree, we are certainly not enslaved, as some in our world are – enslaved by lack of hope for the future, really enslaved by low paying jobs, or no pay at all in unsafe garment factories or mines for example, enslaved because freedom of movement is restricted and the demands for basic survival have become inhuman. But we've looked at all those things before in sermons as we considered what to do about helping those who are trying to survive the experience of human trafficking.

But there are other much more subtle forms of enslavement that destroy souls, lead towards depression and feelings of hopelessness and in fact chip away at us all, threatening even in their subtlety to break our spirits. What would be the equivalent of our hard-hearted Pharaoh today, the hard-hearted Pharaoh that affects us all?

I offer as a possibility that it could be an impersonal economy, which seems to have eerily personal rights over us, where financial bottom lines and expectation for limitless growth create impersonal rationales for job cutting, downsizing and yet at the same time increase the pressure for increased productivity with fewer resources. (a contemporary version of less straw, and even more bricks). Beyond that there is the unrealistic expectations our economy has of the earth itself and its ability to sustain this kind of limitless growth. So many of the earth's resources are finite, not infinite in the way that the rules of our economy want to lull us into believing.

I know that a lot of you in this congregation care very much about how we are treating our earth and its ability to sustain what we are doing to it and care very much about the ways we are all implicated. From the natural gas and electricity that keep our homes at temperatures well above zero during these cold months that have begun to the cars we drive and the plastic that is part of almost everything, I submit to you that our participation in a fossil fuel driven economy is itself a subtle and yet pervasive form of slavery.

I know that lots of people in this congregation care about this topic because this past week several of us gathered here on Wednesday evening to give input to a Climate Change resolution that is currently before Mennonite Church Canada General Board. (you were all invited through our announcements).

This resolution, which was initially presented at the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly this past summer, begins with two full pages of whereas statements. The first few list the theological bases for the need to act, including that God's loving will for the world is the restoration of creation not the destruction of it and that the earth is the Lord's and everything within it. The rest of the whereas statements include a long list, though not exhaustive list, of the currently known climate related impacts of a warming planet on sea and creatures and humans. One of our young people who read these whereas statements and the resolution says,

"Way to go, and keep on going! They have their facts correct, and present them in a way that neither exaggerates nor understates the problem. They get their points across and cover all the aspects of the

problem and the full implications of it." Links to this resolution can be found in several places including our announcements for two weeks in October, on the Creation Care Network website, and probably also on the Mennonite Church Canada website.

There was also a call at our meeting on Wednesday night for a Soup and Sophia so more of us could talk together about what this means and what we can do.

I have very occasionally referenced the Climate Change crisis in sermons, but maybe the reason I haven't done so more often is because it's big, really big and most people who want to even begin to address it write really big books. Like Naomi Klein's latest book, This changes everything....

And when I did mention the climate change crises last spring I began with lament. But while that is appropriate and has its place, the people who gathered here on Wednesday, wanted to act and wanted to be part of a bigger action, like a voluntary carbon tax, or divestment/investment strategies that maybe Mennonite Church Canada could help organize. Certainly, we can do more together than we can do alone and in the face of this crisis we're going to have to work together as churches, as nations, as a global community for anything to change.

But what concerns me sometimes is that really, really big things, especially the kind of thing that changes everything, have the potential in their largeness to dwarf our resolve, chip away at our hope for the future, create feelings of depression and powerlessness. Is this something like the broken spirit and slavery of the Israelites in our

story? Does it make us feel like they might have felt, enslaved by our participation in systems and powers that are so big and beyond the scope of individuals to do anything about?

The implications of climate change, are really disturbing and this brings me to another connection between the Exodus story and the frightening aspects of climate change. I find it hard not to think of our groaning planet when I read about God's signs and wonders in this passage. Bloody rivers, swarms of insects, uncontrollable diseases, locust plagues, destructive hail storms, and horrific deaths of children and animals. And I really didn't want my sermon to focus on the not so child friendly parts of this story. It wouldn't be hard today to see these horrors as the inevitable consequences of some of the things that we are doing to the planet. And it wouldn't be hard to see that it was the deaths of their precious ones that finally softened the hearts of the Oppressor, Pharaoh who finally cries out to Moses, okay,

Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Great I AM, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!" If the people of God get to worship God instead of the powers of oppression, then they will also bring a blessing on others. We shouldn't miss the last part of Pharaoh's plea, "bring a blessing on me too."

And in haste, in the middle of the night, with the unleavened bread that they had prepared when God passed over their houses in the night, they wrapped the dough quickly in cloths and carried it on their shoulders as they left Egypt, in great numbers with their flocks and herds but otherwise with very few provisions. And the Great I Am kept

a vigil that night, the night of the Passover that God instructed the people to remember through all their generations.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, God was the primary agent of this whole event. Some of that agency we struggle to understand – hardening the heart of Pharaoh, sending terrible plagues including death, these we definitely struggle to understand, but the most powerful message about this liberating God is that God acts so that all may know who God is.

The people did not free themselves. Pharaoh did not even free them. God freed the people and as soon as they were freed they began their journey into the wilderness where they were going to learn and relearn and learn again over the course of 40 years - complete dependence on God – remember, of course, the water from a rock, manna, quail, and the constant complaints - why did you bring us out here Moses???

Now here's the thing. We Mennonites want to do a lot of work to free others and ourselves from the systems and powers and principalities that enslave us. But what if we get to the point where we realize that some things are really, really big, dispiriting, depressing and even paralyzing – a form of enslavement if you will. What if we've done all we can and the spirit of this age that tries to crush the hearts and souls of the people remains firm?

And while I'm never going to tell a Mennonite Congregation not to act, that would be a sacrilege, I wonder, what it would be like to prepare ourselves for the ways that God has acted and continues to act in history. The point of this story is that freeing people from slavery is God's work.

Freeing people from oppression was the core of Jesus Christ's ministry and by extension the work of the church that lives in Christ's name is to continue Christ's liberating work. Yes, we have work to do, in so far as we live as freed human beings ourselves, but what about the parts of our lives that are still enslaved?

I really struggled with where to go next with this sermon.

Where we are free, we along with Christ and the Holy Spirit must struggle to free others.

Where we are not yet free, as in our participation in systems that contribute to the degradation of the earth, like the Israelites maybe we need to prepare ourselves to enter the wilderness – where we relearn what it means to depend on God.

In practical terms, I don't mean that we all need to move to rural parts of Canada, but what practices even where we are, will remind us of our essential connection to and dependence on God our Creator and all that God intended for the earth and its creatures.

These are the things we could flesh out more at a Soup and Sophia, but I will submit a few ideas

1. Listen to indigenous persons who have not lost this fundamental connection/understanding
2. learn from those who have honed a deep connection with the creation. I think of those who have moved to rural parts of Canada and those who currently have their feet in both worlds, I am so grateful that so many of you could go to Lori and Dora's last night for their harvest festival. And we can also learn from those

among us who tend gardens and those who explore the wilderness every chance they get.

3. remember that wilderness practices can happen even here in our city homes - know where your food and the fuel to heat your home comes from, practice gratitude for same, and exercise your freedom to make positive ethical choices about these things when you can.....

This is just the beginning, and the Spirit tells me there are deeper things here to explore, like what complete dependence on God really looks like and whether or not we, that's a corporate we, may be called to go into that wilderness time for all it might have to teach us. But, my friends, all that will need to wait for another sermon. May the God who freed the people so that all would know God's name, free us too, so that we also may be a blessing.