

Sermon: Proper 19A

Title: The Exodus

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This morning, we read a little bit from Exodus about the parting of the Red Sea

This is such a familiar story. It's been depicted countless times in movies and books and cartoons! Who can forget the iconic image of Charlton Heston holding out his arms against a stormy sky in *The Ten Commandments*?

But when you read the actual text, it's a little anti-climactic. Two sentences. Three, if you include the drowning of the Egyptians.

The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ... The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

It seems like there should be a lot more to it. There certainly is in our imagination.

We make more of it in our minds, because it has taken root in our hearts.

And it has become a paradigmatic tale.

The basic elements are:

- A leader appears - only some people know him, fewer trust him
- Supernatural or unlikely occurrences begin to shift the tide of the culture, (As the frogs fall on the Egyptians, they begin to think it might be a good idea to set the Israelites free).
- The community prepares itself for liberation
- There is fear and flight
- God intervenes on their behalf.

We hear this story as heirs of the people of God, and we recognize the pattern of God intervening in our suffering and helping us. We often feel that God is taking longer than we wish. We often find that God is asking more of us in this pattern of liberation than we thought we had to give. But in the end, it is a story that gives us hope again and again in our lives: When we cry out to God, God hears our prayers. God promises freedom and justice, liberation and release.

Now imagine how this story lands in the hearts of other people. This is called “hermeneutical de-centering.” It is a big name for a very big leap of perception.

Imagine what enslaved Africans in 16-19th Century America heard when this story was whispered to them in their resting places at night. As word of the conditions of their lives reach sympathetic ears of some people, the Abolitionist movement is gradually formed, and the tide of the culture begins to shift. And then a woman comes, slight and unlikely, telling them to prepare to journey in fear and fly to the north. They fly in the night, preserved by good luck and God’s grace, to a promised land outside of chattel slavery.

Imagine what the victim of domestic violence hears in this story. She prays for release from imprisonment of a particularly diabolical nature and her cries are heard by people who can help. What was once commonplace violence in the home is no longer an accepted part of our culture. She is warned to be ready, she flees in the night and wakes in the morning for the first time in a long time, in a safer space for herself and her dependents. Imagine how her faith takes root in that moment.

Imagine what the LGBTQIA community feels when they read this story. In countries where we pride ourselves on individual freedoms, they were imprisoned by laws that told them who to love and how to be. Their cries were heard by the culture around them that began to see not only how harmless, but how blessed we are by these beloved siblings, how a God of love does not condemn love. For this community there were many terrifying nights. For this community there were innumerable flights in fear. For this community, the shift in culture made the difference and the flight in the night was a rainbow Pride parade in the bright sunlight. The walls of water were opened by a God of unconditional love.

Imagine the mind, heart and body of the person ravaged by addiction disease. He lives in a prison of his own making and has somehow lost the power to set himself free. Prisons of our own making are often the most difficult to escape from. He appeals to God for intervention; he tries again and again to flee. Years later, he will tell you that he does not know how the cycle was broken. Years later, he will tell you there was one single kind person, who reached out to him in his darkness. We know the name of that person is Jesus.

I use this “hermeneutical de-centering” to point out that this story of Exodus is still being told. It is taking place all around us and all over the globe. It has always been true that there are people imprisoned by injustice, cruelty, and all forms of sin. AND God is always working toward their liberation. AND God is always holding the way open to the promised land.

Maybe we should be asking ourselves, “How does this story speak to us? Where do we see it in our lives or the life of a loved one? Where do we see it in the world? In our communities? In ourselves?”

Maybe we should be asking ourselves, “Who are we in this story? Are we the persecuted ones? Or the oppressors? Are we the Moses characters, reaching into the darkness to hold

out a hand? Are we willing to stand up to the forces that victimize the weak and powerless? Are we preparing, are we fleeing, are we leading? Are we praying?"

And as we wrestle with these questions, let me remind you that this story of the Exodus, of God's mercy, intervention and liberation, does not end here. For our Israelite ancestors there were generations of wandering in the wilderness and centuries of war and strife. The civil rights of our enslaved siblings were not restored by law until the 60s and even today, people of color are six times more likely to be incarcerated than their white neighbors. There are 66 countries around this globe where homosexuality is still illegal. In North Dakota, crisis centers assisted 6,200 victims of domestic violence, last year. Worldwide, the World Health Organization attributes over 3 million deaths each year to substance use.

We are still journeying out of enslavement to sin. We still need to be crying out to God every day. We need to seek and to be the people who reach out to rescue and offer hope. We need to be the forces that overthrow apathy and inaction in our systems. We need to flee to freedom and help others along the way. We are the people of the God of Exodus.

We make more of this story in our minds because we have let it take root in our hearts. And the fruit for that seed, Paul tells us in Galatians, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this."

Amen.