

Let My People Go
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
October 4, 2020

Exodus 13:1-8, Luke 22: 14-16

The book of Exodus tells the story of the freeing of God's people from slavery. It begins about four hundred years after the story of Joseph, saying: "*Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.*"

This new king, as you may recall, feels threatened by the Hebrew people who have grown exponentially, and he seeks to subdue them by enslaving them. They were a good work force to build roads, buildings and infrastructure – they were a cheap!

It doesn't really make a lot of financial sense to decrease their number, but Pharaoh decides to do it anyway by increasing their workload and the violence with which he rules them. When this doesn't work, out of fear, he orders that all newborn Hebrew male babies be drowned in the river.

If you remember your Sunday School stories, this is when Moses' mother puts him in a basket and floats him down that river. That's when, ironically, pharaoh's daughter finds and rescues him. Because of his older sister Miriam's cleverness, the princess even hires Moses' mother to be his wet nurse!

The child is raised in the lap of luxury in Pharaoh's palace, as a member of the royal family. As a young adult, he encounters an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite within an inch of his life, and he kills him - a death penalty crime, for sure. Moses flees to Midian, where he marries Zipporah. Through the miracle of the burning bush, God calls Moses to return to Egypt to free the Hebrew people from slavery.

But Pharaoh does not listen, and Egypt is subjected to nine plagues: the water was turned to blood; then there were frogs, lice, flies, diseased livestock, boils, a thunderstorm of hail, locusts and darkness for three days.

You may think 2020 is bad, but it's nothing compared to what that time must have been like!

Finally, they experience the tenth and final plague: the death of the firstborn of all living things. This particular plague echoes the original killing of all of the male children of the Hebrews ordered by the pharaoh. By passing over the houses of the Hebrew people, marked by the blood of the Lamb, God

depends the Pharaoh's power. In his personal grief at losing his firstborn son, the pharaoh relents and lets God's people go. But then he changes his mind and tries to chase them down so that he might bring them back, resulting in the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. God was with Israel.

This is the story that Jews remember in the celebration of Passover.

Jesus' actions at the Last Supper, depicted in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, take place at Passover. So they are forever bound together, this story of the Exodus, and of Jesus at the Last Supper. They remind us today that God is about the business of freeing God's people.

That freedom is not just limited to people's spirits, but includes freeing people from all kinds of oppression. God takes action on the side of the oppressed against the powerful, demanding justice for those on the margins: the widows, the orphans, the strangers, the poor.

You could say this is something the prophets have been speaking about all along—that's what Moses meant when he said, "Let my people go."

And belonging to God means serving as God's voice, joining Moses in saying, "*Let my people go,*" raising up issues of oppression and injustice wherever they arise. Serving God means serving, as Jesus said, "*the least of these.*"

How do we serve God by serving the least of these? It begins with listening.

Listening means that I do not tell you what your experience is, I let you tell me. The fact that your life and history is different from mine reinforces that it's your experience. Listening doesn't mean I should try to solve your problem, esp. if that is not what you are asking me to do.

That's a hard one for me, to be honest. Our children know if they want a list of suggestions or solutions on how to fix a problem, call your Mom (and prepare to buckle up for a long conversation)! But if they are looking for someone to just listen and sit in it with you for as long as you need, call your Dad.

Sometimes, as adults, we rush tell the one who is hurt that they are wrong, they aren't hurt, that it doesn't count, that it doesn't or shouldn't matter, that they are making a big deal over nothing, that they should get over it, or maybe say it better, differently, at another time, to another person because right now we just want them to get over it.

God calls the Israelites to remember. To celebrate Passover. To teach their children to be compassionate to the strangers among them. And being compassionate to those who are hurting, means listening. After you have

listened, find one little thing to do in solidarity with the one you have heard, and go do it.

We live in a time of trauma. In these times of pandemic, economic recession, racial tension, partisan division and the rise of militant groups, it is easy to be discouraged. In fact, it is damn hard not to be!

But this is not the first time God's people have been discouraged. After years of hard labor in Egypt and experiencing plague after plague they were worn mighty thin, and hope seemed distant. Would anything ever end this?

Then God acted in a mighty way. Each family was to mark their home with the blood of a lamb as a sign that they were in on God's plan. Everyone else in Egypt would be at risk. The night when the call to action was given, death poured over Egypt while the Israelites fled to freedom. God had acted in the midst of struggle and they were given a new lease on life.

Then God instituted the Passover, a celebration in which the people would be encouraged year after year. No matter what was happening, they would pause and celebrate that God always acts to bring life and salvation – not always on our timeline, but still. This gathering over a meal would mark the Jewish people as people of hope – hope that sustains them no matter what else may be happening at the moment.

For followers of Jesus, God's ultimate saving acts are embodied and remembered in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the trauma of the cross, God in Christ was subjected to the pain of the world and Jesus' own blood would be the blood that would mark God's people for life.

In the eating of bread and drinking from a cup together, God comes among us in communion, not just encouraging us to remember what God has done, but also to hear from One who is truly present in the midst of the meal, saying *"I'm here for you. I know life is hard right now. But we've been through struggle before. Resurrection always wins."* Amen.