

“MAKING OF A PEOPLE: NOT AN END BUT A NEW BEGINNING”

Exodus 14:5-31; 15:1-18

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The Israelites, Jacob’s family, entered Egypt about 400 hundred years before the events described in today’s reading. Joseph was the first to enter, and he came as a slave because of the treachery of his brothers. But after a series of trials, Joseph rises to power and is managing Egypt’s economy when his brothers seeking food in the midst of a famine. The broken relationships are healed and the whole family is welcomed into Egypt as honored guests.

But they stay a long time and as they become more numerous, their honored guest status deteriorates into slavery. The family becomes a people, but they become an enslaved people. As slaves, they endured the murder of their children, forced labor with its accompanying violence. Their liberation has occupied us for the last two weeks and is again our focus today. The plagues and the Passover event have persuaded Pharaoh to “let the people go.”

But freedom is never easy. Masters are reluctant to give up their servants. In the end, they prefer their slaves dead to being free. So Pharaoh sends the army. The Israelites are somewhere between the end and a new beginning. Either they will break free or they will die.

Faced with the seriousness of their dilemma, the people complain to Moses. They make two claims which of interest to us today in the church where we clearly stand between endings and new beginnings as well.

First they accuse Moses of leading them quite literally down a dead end. Just in my lifetime, I’ve heard this complaint when the church decided to open ordained ministry to women, when we began to include gay and lesbian people in leadership positions, when we expanded our understanding of marriage to include same-gender couples. A lot of white congregations made this charge when their pastors joined in the Civil Rights movement. I heard this when the church took positions on certain social and political issues of the day: being pro-choice on abortion, encouraging divestment during apartheid, lifting up the suffering of the Palestinians, affirming the reality of climate change, and speaking out against racism.

Congregations are becoming smaller and older. So there’s a lot of fear and anxiety floating around the church these days. We feel Pharaoh’s army nipping at our heels. And (according to some) it’s all the fault of our leaders who have brought us out into the wilderness facing the impassable sea while our enemies chase us down. This is a dead end, Moses!

Second, the Israelites pine after the good old days... when they were slaves in Egypt... where they at least had enough food to eat... when our sanctuaries were full and the nominating committee had an easy time of it... when there were always plenty of volunteers, and youth made their connections at church instead of on the soccer field.

We conveniently forget that those were the days when divorce turned you into a social outcast, when some pastors took advantage of vulnerable women and children, when abused women were told to stay with their husbands.

This is not to say that the church is so much better today. At best, we have only loosed some of the chains that have bound us in slavery. We are still up against the sea with Pharaoh's army chasing us down.

"Do not be afraid, stand firm and see." That's what Moses says to the people as they prepare for the wonder God is about to make happen. It would be too simple to see this counsel as a solution for what ails the church today, but it is helpful in the movement toward liberation, helpful in building community.

Fear can be healthy. It's that feeling that undergirds our fight or flight instinct. But too often it just makes us freeze. When we're afraid, paralysis often sets in, and we just wait for the trouble to go away. But it doesn't because people use fear to control others, to stifle protest. We've known for a long time that fear gets in the way of growth and liberation. Roosevelt told this country that as he tried to steer us out of the depression. Had people not set fear aside, there would've been no end to slavery, no end to Apartheid, no challenge to Hitler, no Civil Rights movement, no suffrage movement... no freedom and no community of faith, no people of God.

The Red Sea crossing was a participatory event. God used the wind to divide the waters, but it took courage for the people to step between those walls of water. It took their walking to move into what is essentially a new creation. The Israelites had to march their way to freedom. They had to let go of their fear.

And they had to stand firm. Now obviously Moses didn't mean this quite literally. He didn't mean for them to plant their feet and not budge. But they did have to stay the course. They'd begun their march toward freedom and when trouble came they needed to keep on going.

It took a long time for Presbyterians to acknowledge that God speaks to women too, that God calls all kinds of people to ministry, and that love between two people is a beautiful thing, no matter what their genders or orientations. And we only got there because there were faithful people willing to set aside their fear and to keep on marching on that road to freedom.

And they were rewarded. They got to see the wonders of God. They got to experience the parting of the waters of chaos. Don't be afraid! Stand firm. And see!

That's why we gather to worship, why we sing and pray, and hear the Word... so we can see the mighty works of God. That's why we come together as a community of faith to nurture one another, to train each other in seeing God at work in the world. That's why we reach out to the homeless and the hungry, why we support AIDS education in Malawi and campus ministry at Western... to be a partner in the things that God is doing in our world. That's why we welcome all in this sanctuary and invite people to serve according to their gifts without regard to their orientation.

The church is up against it in this troubled world. We've an ocean to cross and the planes are grounded and not enough boats to be had. The only way through is to part the waters. Maybe in the night, God will raise a mighty wind to clear the way to a new beginning.

There's no sense in blaming those who have brought us here. We are as we have always been on the verge of freedom, and that's right where we should be. And there's no sense in wanting to go back to Egypt, back to some supposedly golden age. Pharaoh's army stands in the way. So the only way is forward, through the sea. And there are those, who with the help of God, will lead us.

All we need to do is let go of the fear, stay the course, and keep on marching. There'll be plenty to see because God is interested in freeing slaves. That's what this journey from Joseph through Egypt has been all about. We don't know yet what things look like on the other side of the sea, but we do know that it's time to be done with Pharaoh. It's time for the church to be done with all those attachments that have kept us from seeing God at work. We need to let go of that theology that has wreaked havoc on the health of the earth. It is not there to be used up for our personal conveniences. We need to let go of a male-centered hierarchy that has shut down the voices of women. We need to cast aside our white privilege that has separated us from brothers and sisters of different color and ethnicity. There is a sea to cross and this baggage can do nothing but insure our failure if we do not turn away from it.

The waters have parted. We have leaders who are calling us forward. The time to walk to freedom is now. There is an ending here, but it's really about the new beginning. Come and see the mighty power of God. Amen.