

**Sermon: September 10, 2017 Exodus 12: 1-15**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

I'm going to start today's message, the third in our series on the book of Exodus, with a quote not from Exodus but from the gospel of John (10:10, MEV) where Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly".

These words from Jesus stand right beside his two-fold great commandment (Matthew 22: 36-40) – to love God with your heart, soul, and mind, and to love your neighbour as yourself – as the basic checklist for what it means for us, as Christians, to really embrace God's gift of life. If I treat something other than God as "the god" of my life, then I am cutting myself off from the full potential of that holy gift. If life gets misaligned, with my needs being met at the expense of others, it might look like the good life - but it isn't. Loving God, and loving my neighbour – especially my marginalized neighbour – open me to the possibility of a life infinitely more abundant than I can achieve on my own.

I begin with this framework, because I need some framing to help me as a Christian understand the love that God was expressing in the deeply Jewish event called Passover. Standing where I am, two thousand years removed from Jesus of Nazareth, and more than three thousand years removed from the life-or-death urgency of Passover, it is hard for me to hear what this account of God's "passing over" the Israelites has to say. So I invite you, with me, to come close to the account of the first Passover, with our faith framework of love of God, love of neighbour, and life in abundance, helping us to embrace and be embraced by this ancient story.

Last Sunday, in the wild and wondrous story of Moses and the Burning Bush, the voice of God articulates the condition of the Hebrew people in Egypt, with these words (Exodus 3: 7-8, CEV) "I have seen how my people are suffering as slaves in Egypt, and I have heard them beg for my help because of the way they are being mistreated. I feel sorry for them, and I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians. I will bring my people out of Egypt into a country where there is good land, rich with milk and honey."

The urge to leave Egypt as soon as possible, then, begins with love of neighbour - concern for the plight of the oppressed –and ends with a beautiful articulation of new life, abundant life, in a land rich with milk and honey. God is most definitely taking sides, in exactly the way that we are directed to take sides: in favour of those who are being abused or excluded, and in direct, disruptive opposition to the people or systems who would make their lives a misery. But it goes one deeper than that.

When that quote from Exodus 3 talked about how "my people" were enslaved and "my people" would be brought out of Egypt, this wasn't just "my people" in a collegial, folks-you-like-to-hang-out-with sort of way; these were God's children who were being messed with. And whether it's in nature – where we see Mama bear at her full height and power if we interfere with one of her cubs – or in our own human experiences as parents or children, the speed and level of response ramp up exponentially when someone is mistreating one of your kids.

God's relationship to the children of Israel leading up to Passover is that same kind of protective, gut-level response: God was gonna do whatever was necessary to protect the kids. Generations of Israelites had been suppressed by their Egyptian overlords and by Pharaoh's absolute decrees and God said, "enough is enough." Pharaoh had targeted the Israelites for too long and now it was time for an end-times accountability to break into the present. The slave labour provided by the Israelites was not going to be released easily by her overlords, and as ugly as it looks when we read the escalating plagues visited upon Egypt, God's kids were in danger and God was going to keep moving the line until Pharaoh, who regarded himself as God's equal, relented and the people could go free.

The final plague – the horrifying death of the first born animals and sons of the Egyptians– signifies a substantial change in God's relationship to God's people. In the first nine plagues, in the words of conservative Christian scholar Nicholas Perrin (pp.177-8), "the Israelites did not have to lift a finger

to be spared” but now God gave them a non-negotiable signal by which they had to stand up and declare their commitment to being children of God. In today’s reading from Exodus we hear extensive instructions as to the killing of a sacrificial lamb or goat, a family meal, and the smearing of blood on the door frames. If you did this, the spirit that brought destruction would pass over your household, because you had visibly expressed your trust in God. If you did not do this, *even if you were an Israelite*, you were basically saying “I prefer what I have here” and the consequences of that choice would be stark.

Nicholas Perrin also opened my eyes to another reality (p.180). The underclass in Egypt weren’t just Israelites. There would have been migrant workers from many lands, and Egypt’s own working poor, and more than a few of them would have already trusted the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, rather than bowing down before Pharaoh. So later in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus, verse 38, we are told that many other people left Egypt after this first Passover, not just those who were Israelite by birth. And with this, I find myself on more familiar ground, for now I can hear the Passover instructions as *an invitation by God to all whose lives are suppressed by others*. Anyone who was tired of being pushed around by Pharaoh and his minions had access to a new way, a way of abundance, a road to the land of milk and honey, accompanied by the creator of the universe who wants us to live free from all manner of bondage. God’s love was at this moment extended to Israel and any neighbours willing to hear, and act, and live.

An invitation was extended... and a response was needed.

As much as I believe that every person on this earth is born a child of God, there are pivotal points in life when we need to explicitly take a stand in favour of God’s agenda of love. We take a stand when we pursue right relations with our indigenous sisters and brothers, when we provide safe space for the LGBTQ community, when we resettle refugees, when we find space for the needs of Young Adults in the Bow Valley, when our Children’s Church shares God’s words of love with a new generation. And we reiterate our trust in the God of the ages each time we set aside an hour for Sunday worship, and when we share communion, our Christian ritual which has such strong echoes of the Passover ritual.

As we say yes to *loving our neighbour* in these many ways, *we also affirm our love of God*, and that is the other side of what happened at Passover. As we will hear a few weeks from now, at the giving of the ten commandments, the first commandment is to place nothing else in our lives higher than God. We are, as Jesus said, to love God with all our heart and mind and strength, not as a theoretical add-on when convenient, but as the first thing we can count on in life. Yes, in two places the book of Exodus (20:5 and 34:14) does come right out and say that God is jealous of anything else we put in first place, but I would suggest it is more about liberation than about jealousy – God knows that lesser choices in top spot will simply lead to more bondage.

If something else has first claim on my life – whether that is the soul-destroying power of addiction, or the soul-eroding power of unresolved woundedness, or the constant distraction of envy, or the pursuit of ease and/or wealth, or my job or my hobby or my favourite sports team or anything else that gets first claim on my time and my thoughts and my heart – I shut myself off from the being set free to God’s abundance, choosing instead to be shackled to something else. God yearns for us to seek life in all its fullness, to choose the liberty of selfless, wide-seeking love over all else. But back in Egypt, the choice was literal, not figurative: you could choose to follow THE God, creator of the universe, source of love and life, or you could bow down to Pharaoh, who viewed himself as god, embodying aspects of the many gods in their religion. In a nicely-turned phrase, Nicholas Perrin (p.176) figures the Passover gave a clear contrast: you could leave with God on a road leading to a land of milk and honey, or you could keep travelling Pharaoh on the highway to hell. And at that moment, the choice became bleak, and hard, and unrelenting: you were with Yahweh, creator God, or you weren’t.

At Passover, the people of Israel made a decisive choice in favour of God and the uncertainty of life in a new land, transforming them, in Perrin’s words, from “a mass of dejected humanity” into “a

people – the people of God.” And they would remember this repeatedly, forever, through the festival of Passover, with its series of questions from child to adult bringing them back to their unfolding story with God, the symbolic foods of the Seder plate reminding them of the bitterness of slavery and the loving, protective God who saved them. And when I stand at table, when you receive bread and cup, we, similarly, reaffirm our connection to a God who wants to bring us to safety. In gathering here today we affirm our belief that the path to abundant life is found not in selfishness or self-centeredness or by relegating God to the sidelines, but by keeping our eyes fixed on what it means to love God and love our neighbour in all of life’s circumstances.

Jay G. Williams, a professor of Religious Studies, wrote these words (p.106) about Passover many years ago: “Passover re-enacts the last moments before the departure for freedom. The new year is to begin not only with a remembrance of things past but with an eager expectation for the exodus which is coming. It is to be a moment of rebirth, when Israel leaves the death of captivity and is born into a new life of freedom.” In continuing to observe Passover in this day and age, our Jewish ancestors step back into the moment before freedom, to remember just how important God has been to their quest for justice and liberty and new life. As we ponder this ancient story, as we receive our sacred meal of communion, as we as a congregation renew our commitment to God and neighbour, may we find ourselves in that same place: on the precipice of freedom, from which we can see God’s promise of love and life for a world made new. Thanks be to God, Amen.

Sources cited:

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See also

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