

“The Costs of Liberation”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

We gather this morning, with the start of Passover just days away.

Our Jewish friends, within our congregation and throughout the world,
will gather Friday evening with loved ones
to take part in the annual celebration of the Passover Seder.

It is a festive, though somewhat complicated ritual for the Jewish people:
a remembrance of the suffering and enslavement of their ancestors,
a commemoration of God’s leading them out of captivity,
and a celebration of the journey to freedom in the promised land.

It is a ceremony filled with powerful symbols,
each conveying an important element
of this defining moment in the history of Judaism:
a thrilling tale of hope
told with salt water and wine, bitter herbs and matzoh,
the unleavened “bread of affliction.”

In story and song and symbol,
Jews relive their forebears’ struggles against oppression
and savour the sweet promise of freedom.

It is an enduring story that has crossed cultures and time itself.

Raised as a Christian,
the details of this story were forever imprinted on my young mind
by two dazzling and unforgettable sources:

Miss Polly, my kindergarten Sunday School teacher,
and Cecil B. DeMille, in his dramatic take
on the Ten Commandments.

In case it's been a while since you've seen the movie,
or if you didn't have the benefit of a Miss Polly of your own,
allow me to offer a quick refresher on *The Book of Exodus*.

It all begins when the infant Moses
is placed in a basket and hidden in the reeds down at the river by his mother,
who was hoping to save his life
after the Pharaoh called for the killing of all newborn Hebrew sons.

As luck would have it, the Pharaoh's daughter
discovers Moses in the reeds and rescues him.

She raises him as her own, knowing that he is a Hebrew,
and he grows up a prince in the Egyptian royal family.

She sees to it, though, that he has a Hebrew wet-nurse,
and, Moses' birth mother volunteers for the job.

As he grew up, Moses came to recognise his true identity
and wrestled with what it meant to see his own people enslaved.

One day, as a young man out watching his people hard at work,
he witnessed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew man.

Thinking there was no one watching,
Moses intervened, killed the Egyptian, and buried him in the sand.

But, by the next day, Moses realized that there had been witnesses.
When the Pharaoh finds out what he had done, he wants Moses dead.

So, Moses flees to Midian, finds a wife,
and takes up a life tending his father-in-law's flock of sheep.

Years passed and everything seemed to have blown over—
that is, until the whole thing flares up with the infamous burning bush.

One afternoon, out with his flock, Moses' curiosity gets the best of him.
He wanders over to inspect the flaming shrub and, lo and behold,
hears the voice of God, who urges him to confront the Pharaoh
and demand the release of the Hebrews
who had been enslaved now for generations.

Moses has his doubts. Deep ones.
He tells God “no” quite a few times, and asks lots of impertinent questions.
“Who am I to bring this up?”
“What if they don’t believe me?”
“What if nobody listens to me?”
“How about sending someone else?”

God basically tells Moses to stop whining and get over himself.

With an assurance that God has his back,
Moses reluctantly, finally, does what he’s told.

He marches up to Pharaoh and demands: “Let my people go!”

Now, of course, as Moses suspected, Pharaoh wasn’t so keen on this plan,
since he’d come to depend mightily on the cheap labour
that a workforce of 600,000 men can supply.

Not thrilled with threats from a foreign god,
a contest of wills quickly ensues
between Moses and the Pharaoh’s magicians,
with wooden staffs being turned into serpents and so forth.

As is often the case in such biblical showdowns,
things escalate from there.

The ten plagues are visited on Egypt to try to convince the Pharaoh.

First, the rivers are “turned to blood,” killing off all the fish.
Then came an awkward abundance of frogs,
followed by irritating swarms of first gnats, and later flies.

Still, the Pharaoh wouldn’t budge, so in short order,
the Egyptians’ livestock were wiped out by disease,
and everyone was walking around with nasty boils that wouldn’t heal.

To add insult to injury, then came fire and hail from the heavens,
followed by a devastating infestation of locusts to kill off the crops.

To get the point across, for good measure, God threw in three days

of complete and overwhelming darkness.

Throughout it all, we are told the Pharaoh's heart was hardened—
by God, no less, which is a very troubling detail in this story.
If God could control Pharaoh's heart, why not just make him free the slaves?

Anyway, it was only with the tenth plague—
the sudden death of the first-born sons of every Egyptian family—
that the Pharaoh decided he had had quite enough
of the Hebrews and their over-protective God.

He was only too happy, at that point, to see them go.

And, so go they did.

Packing up so quickly,
that the unleavened matzoh of Passover,
to this day is known as the “bread of haste.”

With his slaves suddenly gone, though, the Pharaoh changed his mind
and sent out his armies to retrieve the fleeing Hebrews.

I suspect we all remember how the next scene turns out.

Stalled at the Red Sea,
the freed slaves facing certain danger as the Egyptian army approached,
Moses lifts his staff to part the waters,
allowing the Hebrews to pass through on dry land,
as the Egyptians in hot pursuit
with their horses and chariots meet a watery end,
just as the Hebrews reach the safety of the opposite shore.

It's a complicated story, with many uncomfortable twists and turns.

It's been long debated by historians and archeologists and theologians alike.

Happily, for the Egyptians, there's no historic proof
that any of these events actually ever occurred, which is significant,
given that theirs was a culture with a passion for extensive written records.

Surely more than 600,000 slaves held for 463 years

would have gotten a mention somewhere,
let alone the story of the horrible plagues visited upon them.

Yet as the formative narrative of a people who overcame great hardship,
the story, whether taken literally or metaphorically,
has stood the tests of time and, arguably, speaks to us still.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow explains that:
“The traditional Passover Haggadah teaches
that in every generation some pharaoh will arise to destroy
and that in every generation, every human being—not just every Jew—
must look upon herself or himself as if it is we,
not our ancestors only, who must go forth to freedom.”¹

“As if it is we. . . who must go forth to freedom.”

What might that mean to us,
seemingly so far removed from this ancient story?

What might that mean to us,
a congregation of Unitarians in 21st century Toronto,
many of Jewish heritage, most not,
but all of us, probably feeling ourselves to be free already?

Does this story actually have anything to do with us?

I believe it does.

Because we are not as free as we often think we are.
And because freedom can be so much more difficult to achieve
than we ever imagine.

The enduring message of this story is universal,
because it speaks to the human journey
so many of us are called by life to make at some point—
the arduous journey from slavery to freedom,
from captivity to liberation, from death and despair to life and hope.

¹ Arthur Waskow, “Passover as If Earth Really Matters,” *The Nation*, March 24, 2008.

So, I wonder where you find yourself in this epic story?

Do you identify with the slaves yearning to be free
and ready to walk to the promised land at a moment's notice?

Or are you the slave who knows that the status quo isn't great,
but who is reluctant to give up the relative safety of captivity,
fearful of the uncertainty that freedom might bring?

Or are you the slave who has already found your way to greater freedom
but is now having deep doubts? Do you find yourself second guessing
the desire for freedom in the first place, and longing,
like many of the slaves did once on the other side of the Red Sea,
that they could return to the creature comforts they knew in captivity?

Maybe you identify with Moses, who finds himself in a place of relative
privilege but is seemingly uncertain of what to do with his power—
and at other times simply unwilling to do anything.

Maybe you are like Moses who encounters a bush all ablaze—
a startling, irreversible moment of deep awareness
that causes you to see the world as it truly is—
and yet you remain reluctant to take up the role to which you seem to be cast:
to speak up and speak out, to demand freedom for others,
and risk something of yourself to make it happen.

Maybe you're the Moses who does finally summon the strength
to do what he's being asked and grows into the role over time.

Perhaps you connect with Moses' mother or the Pharaoh's daughter who
adopted him—the women who showed great courage to protect a life they
knew to be precious—even at risk to themselves.

Or, might it be that you identify with the Pharaoh—
who, though the master of hundreds of thousands of slaves,
found himself in a desperate struggle for his own freedom.

Erich Fromm, the famed 20th century psychiatrist,
offered up a compelling analysis of this part of the Passover story, which

he felt depicts “one of the most fundamental laws of human behaviour.”²

“Every evil act,” he said, “tends to harden [one’s] heart, that is, to deaden it. Every good act tends to soften it, to make it more alive.

The more [one’s] heart hardens, the less freedom [she or] he has to change; [and] the more is [she or] he determined already by a previous action.

But there comes a point of no return, when [one’s] heart has become so hardened and so deadened that...the possibility of freedom [is lost, and a person] is forced to go on until the unavoidable end which is, in the last analysis, [her or] his own physical or spiritual destruction.”

Freedom rarely comes without a cost.

It involves courage and risks.

It involves recognizing that things “as they are” are no longer acceptable.

It involves summoning the strength of will, to take the next small, deliberate step toward freedom.

As spring begins to unfold around us, even with such reluctance, may we carry with us a renewed appreciation for the longing in our hearts—and in all hearts—for freedom.

May we play our part in the story of the world, to bring that freedom into being.

For as the Sufi poet Hafiz put it,

We have not come to take prisoners,
But to surrender ever more deeply
To freedom and joy.
We have not come into this exquisite world
To hold ourselves hostage from love.
Run, my dear,
From anything
That may not strengthen

² *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966, p. 101.

Your precious budding wings.
Run like hell my dear,
From anyone likely
To put a sharp knife
Into the sacred, tender vision
Of your beautiful heart.
We have a duty to befriend
Those aspects of obedience
That stand outside of our house
And shout to our reason
“O please, O please,
Come out and play.”
For we have not come here to take prisoners
Or to confine our wondrous spirits,
But to experience ever and ever more deeply
Our divine courage, freedom, and
Light!

Indeed, we have.

Amen.