

Are you ready to leave Egypt? (Exodus 12:1-14)

Last Sunday we heard the story of Moses and the burning bush, and we were reminded of the way in which God is present in the midst of the ordinary, if only we can learn to pay attention long enough to behold the miracle.

In the burning bush God spoke to Moses, saying *“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”* (Exodus 3:7)

Today we skip nine chapters to Exodus 12 where we hear the fulfilment of God’s promise to deliver the people of Israel from Egypt. I’m sure Moses would have preferred to skip those chapters between the burning bush and the Passover too. For in those nine chapters Moses had to return to Egypt and confront both Pharaoh and the past that he had been running from.

God instructs Moses and his brother Aaron to appear before Pharaoh and request that Pharaoh let God’s people go. But the first time they approach Pharaoh with this request, he is so enraged that he commands his slave drivers to work the Hebrew people even harder *“You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves...they are lazy; that is why they cry, Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.”* (Exodus 5:7-8)

Things go from bad to worse for Moses and the people of Israel, and God’s promise of freedom begins to feel like a bad joke. Over and over again, Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh demanding that he let God’s people go, and over and over again, Pharaoh hardens his heart and refuses to do so. In plagues of blood, frogs, insects, darkness and destruction, God meets Pharaoh’s stubbornness head on, but there is much at stake here for Pharaoh, granting Moses’ request would mean not only losing his slaves but also acknowledging the presence of a power beyond his power and divinity besides his own.

Finally God tells Moses and Aaron *“I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here.”* (Exodus 11:1) Then God gives Moses a set of instructions for the Hebrew people, instructions for a ritual of preparation and of celebration. *“This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.”* (Exodus 12:14)

We know this ritual as the ‘Passover’, one of the central traditions of Jewish faith, and a ritual which is given a new layer of meaning in the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper, but for Moses and the Hebrew people this ritual is simply about a new beginning, freedom from slavery, and what they must leave behind.

In Exodus 12, God tells Moses that every family must slaughter a lamb and mark the doorposts of their homes with its blood. Then they must eat the lamb, roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They must eat with their loins girded, their sandals on their feet and their staff in their hands, they must eat hurriedly and they must be ready.

This meal marks the birth of a new identity for this community, *“This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.”* (Exodus 12:1)

This meal marks a new year, a new beginning, a fresh start. It is the first step in the transformation of the slaves of Egypt into the people of God.

Do you ever wonder how the Hebrew people felt when they received this strange set of instructions from Moses? They had heard God's promise; they had watched Pharaoh's stubbornness, and caught in the middle, they had continued to suffer. Perhaps they had never really allowed themselves to imagine what freedom would be like, now all of a sudden Moses was telling them to get ready because God was about to lead them out of Egypt.

I imagine they must have felt excited, eager, joyful; but I imagine they also felt afraid, uncertain and even ambivalent. For generations they had suffered as slaves in Egypt. It wasn't a good life but it was one they knew and understood. On the one hand they were being offered the promise of freedom – a dream they had barely allowed themselves to imagine, but on the other hand they were being asked to leave everything they knew behind, in order to follow the God of their ancestors to an unknown destination.

When they were given the instructions for the Passover ritual the Hebrew people had to make a decision: were they willing to pack up everything to follow the promise of God? Were they willing to walk away from Egypt, even though they didn't know where they were going?

Marge Piercy expresses something the courage this decision would have required:

*The courage to let go of the door, the handle.
The courage to shed the familiar walls whose very
stains and leaks are comfortable as the little moles
of the upper arm; stains that recall a feast,
a child's naughtiness, a loud battering storm
that slapped the roof hard, pouring through.*

*The courage to abandon the graves dug into the hill,
the small bones of children and the brittle bones
of the old whose marrow hunger had stolen;
the courage to desert the tree planted and only
begun to bear; the riverside where promises were
shaped; the street where their empty pots were broken.*

*The courage to leave the place whose language you learned
as early as your own, whose customs however dangerous
or demeaning, bind you like a halter
you have learned to pull inside, to move your load;
the land fertile with the blood spilled on it;
the roads mapped and annotated for survival.*

*The courage to walk out of the pain that is known
into the pain that cannot be imagined,
mapless, walking into the wilderness*

(Maggid © Marge Piercy from *The Art of Blessing the Day*)

God promises the Hebrew people a future in a land flowing with milk and honey, a future of freedom and hope – but to arrive at that future, the people must first let go of the past. They must leave Egypt.

In Egypt, the Hebrew people were slaves of Pharaoh. As miserable as it was to be a slave, it was all they knew. It was their home. It was who they were. It was where they had been, and because of that it was difficult to leave behind.

Torn between familiarity and promise, the Hebrew people had to wrestle with one question **'Are you ready to leave Egypt?'** and this question still echoes in our lives today.

Our Egypts come in many different shapes and sizes. They are the things, people or patterns in our lives that are dangerous or demeaning, and yet which have a familiarity and security about them which makes them hard to change or leave behind.

Your Egypt may be the way you spend your money, or the way you view yourself, it may be a pattern of relating in your family, or a particular habit or addiction. Your Egypt may be your fear, or the way that you respond to criticism, your judgementalism or your self-doubt.

Like the Hebrew people, these things hold us captive, and prevent us from being all that God has created us to be – but as miserable as these things make us, captivity is somehow less scary than the wildness of freedom.

It can be hard to let go of the places, relationships, or habits that enslave us; even though they are dangerous or demeaning, their familiarity and strange security can make it hard to leave. It takes incredible faith and courage to *“walk out of the pain that is known into the pain that cannot be imagined”* – to journey mapless into the wilderness.

Like the Hebrew people, we are tempted, more often than we would care to admit, to abandon all hope of change, to dismiss all talk of transformation, and to stay put in Egypt. But here's the catch: like them, we all have our own promised lands too. They're there waiting for us. But in order to get there we have to let go of what is holding us back.

Torn between familiarity and promise, the Hebrew people had to wrestle with one question **'Are you ready to leave Egypt?'** I wonder how you would answer that question today.