“Through Heaven’s Eyes: Bearers of God’s Promise”

Exodus 12:1-14

The Rev. Katie Day

September 6, 2020

So, when last we left Moses, he was standing before the burning bush, hearing the words of God, YHWH, I AM, calling his name, calling him to lead the Hebrew people, the Israelites, his own people, God’s people, out of slavery.

A fair amount has transpired since then. Moses, along with his brother Aaron,

have met with Pharaoh multiple times to request that he release the Hebrew people from slavery. Pharaoh refuses, and God through Moses unleashes a series of plagues on Egypt, affecting humankind, animals – all of creation.

Pharaoh still refuses.

Pharaoh is an incredibly cruel person, and I would describe his reign, and the imperial system in Egypt at that time, as evil. From the enslavement and domination of the Hebrew people, who were only in Egypt because of Joseph, son of Jacob, who was himself sold into slavery – Joseph had served the pharaoh during his lifetime and guided the Egyptian empire into prosperity.

The descendants of the children of Jacob became numerous over the centuries,

and those in charge – a string of Pharaohs - began to get worried about power and the Egyptian people being “outnumbered” and so enslaved, oppressed, and abused the Israelites, until one Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all Hebrew boys, which failed, and eventually ordered all Egyptians to throw any boy child into the Nile River, all for the purpose of maintaining power and a way of life, Egyptian control over the Hebrew race.

This is evil – we name it as evil.

When Moses and Aaron came asking the latest Pharaoh to release his work force, I’m sure he thought it was laughable – why would he give up all he had “worked so hard” for? His heart was hard, and he refused, plague after plague after plague – *9 plagues* – witnessing the suffering of his own people and land, and Pharaoh still would not agree to release those he had enslaved. But God’s covenant – the promise to bless all descendants of Sarah and Abraham – will not be thwarted by human evil. The covenant holds.

And the final plague is announced, the one after which Pharaoh will relent and release, the one that returns the horror of the slaughter of the Hebrew children

to the Egyptians, “freedom, at a terrible price.” (Lundblad)

Today’s story isn’t that plague; it’s the instructions for the plague, the liturgy for the plague. Liturgy is a church word for all the pieces of our worship service, it means “the work of the people”. Today’s story, this liturgy, illustrates yet one more way in which the covenant holds, the covenant – the relationship between God and God’s people – that still holds today.

This is the liturgy for the moment of their liberation.

God begins by rearranging the calendar. From this moment forward, God says,

this is the first month of the year, the month of your liberation from slavery. From this moment forward, the way you measure time will be different, because you will count from the month of your freedom.

That’s big, to rearrange the calendar for an entire community, an entire people.

Have you done that before, as an individual? Marked time from the day a family member died, or a spouse left, or from the day you began your sobriety, or decided that you would stay, after all? We reset our calendar after surviving a trauma, an accident, a terrible illness, a disaster.

It’s happened for our nation throughout our history, time seemed to restart following the Civil War, again after World War II, reset again in the Civil Rights movement, and after September 11th. Of course, in all these cases, the event happens, and then, looking back on the experience, time is reframed.

It’s the opposite here – God tells the people ahead of time what is going to happen, that the calendar will be rearranged, that, from this coming moment on, for the Israelites, time starts anew, for they will be free. Why did God do this? Why did God tell them to remember what is about to happen before it even happens, so carefully and distinctly?

It’s almost as if God is calling attention to the gravity of the situation, saying,

“Pay attention. This will happen once. You must be ready, and you will never be the same.”

You must be ready. What a gift – to be told clearly how to prepare for the moment of your freedom. It will happen all of a sudden, in the middle of the night, so when you eat, the same meal, the whole community, you must eat quickly, with shoes on, dressed for a journey, walking stick in hand.

The instructions, for choosing a lamb, for families who are too small for a whole lamb must go in with neighbors, instructions to slaughter and prepare the lambs at the same time, eat with the same side dishes, clean up completely after, the instructions united the community, even though they were all in their own homes.

The community wasn’t gathered for this Passover. They were apart, in their own homes, but they knew that they were all doing the same thing, the same act of faith, of worship.

And the blood on the doors – God said that it was a sign “for you,” for the people. It wasn’t a sign for God, to tell who were Egyptians and who were Hebrews. The blood was a sign for the people, to look out across their neighborhoods, to see a sign - visible, tangible - on the homes of the people,

a sign of trust, of hope, of belief in a different future.

And at the end of this liturgy, these instructions to the people, God says,

“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.”

These words are the promise of a future, the promise of liberation, of a free future in which generations would be able to remember, celebrate, perpetually,

world without end. This command from God to remember is another sign of trust, hope, belief that things would, in fact, be different. This memory will carry them into the future.

In Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha tells his students, “You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory…. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may sometime be the means of saving us.” (Dostoevsky)

One good memory can save us.

By commanding the Israelite people to remember this moment of their liberation, God was ensuring that they would have one good memory that could continue to save them, could carry them through exile, wars, occupation, holocaust.

One good memory.

We Christians, grafted into the covenant by God’s wildly inclusive grace, we need this, as well. We never put blood on the door posts, but we mark ourselves, and all members of our community of faith, with water in baptism, making the sign of the cross as we publicly claim and celebrate our identity as children of God in that sacrament – our sacraments are signs and seals of God’s grace, markers and memories.

In a phone conversation this week, I reminded someone that they are a beloved child of God, and their response was rote: “yeah, yeah, I know.” I think that’s how many of us feel – “Yeah, yeah – I’m a child of God, they told me that in Sunday School, I get it.”

But I believe this – that every day, we need to remind ourselves that we are children of God, heirs of the covenant, blessed to be a blessing to the world,

and that covenant holds. Our identity as members of God’s living, breathing family can be that one good memory, a remembrance for us, sustaining us in the days, weeks, years to come.

After the hurried Passover meal, the terrible plague struck, and the Hebrew people were ready. Pharaoh called in Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night and said “Go. Go, leave now, take the people – go and worship your God.”

The people were ready, and they went, set free from slavery, set free for this next chapter in God’s story, free to live, to worship, to struggle, to strive, free to remember where they came from.

And we remember, too. That is our work as people of faith – our liturgy, the work of our worship together. We remember the stories of God and God’s people, we rememberwho and whose we are, and in that remembering, we are bound in our liberation ever closer to God, ever closer to one another.

# Works Cited

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. New York: Vintage Books, 1950.

Lundblad, Barbara K. "Proper 18, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word, Year A Additional Texts*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.