

Remembering the Original Fast Food

Sermon by Rev. Rachel Knuth

Community Church of Sebastopol, 9.6.20

Exodus 12:1-14

I.

Good Morning to you on this very hot Labor Day weekend. In pre-pandemic times, this is the weekend that many of us might be at Camp Cazadero, for our church's great tradition of Family Camp. And I know what you are probably thinking right now-- you are probably thinking that very cold swimming pool would feel perfect today. I also know how grateful we all are that Camp Caz was spared during the wildfires of the past couple weeks. So, amidst heat and fire advisories, pandemic, the beginning of a school year to remember, a country grappling with racism and an election-- our Lectionary offers up the story of Passover.

We usually hear a version of the Passover story during Holy Week, in the form of the Last Supper. That's also when our Jewish friends and neighbors celebrate Passover seder meals. But the Lectionary offers the story this week because we are traveling through the Book of Exodus, and Passover is an important part of it. So, go ahead and raise your hand if you have been a guest at a Passover Seder before. It's a beautiful meal, right, with roasted lamb and bitter herbs, and wine. The whole story of Jewish liberation is told as you move through the evening: from oppression by the Pharaoh, to the plagues, to crossing the Red Sea into freedom. Some seders are more solemn than others. At a seder I attended a few years ago, to remember the plague of frogs, the parents threw gummy frogs onto the table, much to the children's delight. But in 2020, just imagining an oppressed people, a power-hungry Pharaoh, and devastating afflictions, one after the other-- well, that hits a bit close to home. I do kind of wish we could paint our doors and have that be enough for all of the calamities of 2020 to pass over us.

But a plague is where our story today begins-- the 10th and final plague, after blood and boils, locusts and lice and frogs, the final and most horribly devastating one-- the plague of the first-born. So, to set the stage, the

Israelites are enslaved to the Egyptians, and Pharaoh's heart is hardened against them. Moses and Aaron and Miriam are there. They absolutely would have remembered how Pharaoh had issued a law that all male Hebrew children were to be killed-- because that's the whole reason Moses was placed in a basket in the river to be rescued. So in this last plague, Yahweh promises to strike down the first born Egyptian children, the first born livestock, the first born everything. It is a terrible plague of death for all first-borns. And so the Israelites are to mark their homes with the blood of a sacrificial lamb, so that Yahweh knows to allow the plague to pass-over them.

II.

The late Civil Rights Leader and Congressperson John Lewis once talked about how important it is to "tell uncomfortable truths." Well, the uncomfortable truth about this story is that Yahweh is to unleash death upon the children of Egypt. There's a part of me that would prefer scripture didn't have violent images. Why would God do something so horrible? Can this please just be a metaphor for something else? But, even then, why do we need a violent metaphor at all?

III.

Our biggest clue to what is happening in this story, is the last verse of the passage Pastor Brian read, "This shall be a day of remembrance for you." It's to be a feast for the Israelites and their children and grandchildren, all future ancestors will remember this part of the exodus story in this way. For a really long time people thought Moses wrote the book of Exodus. But actually there is considerable evidence that this story was told and re-told, and emerged in roughly the form we have now, during the Babylonian Exile, some 850-ish years later. The directions Yahweh seems to be giving, on exactly how to roast the lamb, and what to wear and to eat in a hurry, is actually told in retrospect. In other words, this is a story that an oppressed people told as they looked backward in time, as they remembered. And if they could escape slavery in Egypt, surely they would make it through the exile in Babylon. So, why the violence in the text? Why does Yahweh unleash the terrible plague of the first-born? When I think a little more deeply, I realize "that sounds so violent" line of thinking is probably my privilege talking. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that "rioting is the language of the oppressed." Well, maybe the plague of the first-borns is in that same vein, the language of

an oppressed people. After all those years of enslavement to Egypt, can't the Israelites just tell one story where Pharaoh gets what is coming to him? And although metaphor is one way to draw meaning out of a story, always reading metaphorically can take away some of the raw pain of oppression. So when we ask, "do we need violence in a story of liberation," maybe we need to look at who the "we" is, and try to understand another point of view. Now I am not condoning violence, and I don't believe God literally strikes down people who oppose God's way. But I think it's important to listen to what's beneath violent imagery. What can the violence in this story tell us? In a speech to the Peace Research Institute Oslo, in 2011, Rep. John Lewis spoke of the ways of peace as tools for justice work. And he said violence is wrong, he said, "It is wrong to wage war, wrong to kill, wrong to spill the blood of innocent men, women and children, wrong to terrorize a peaceful city. But when it rears its ugly head, it demonstrates the distance we have come and the progress we have made. It also demonstrates the work still left to be done." Violence shows us where the work is to be done. So what work is the violence in this story pointing to? It could be that removing the first-born from Egyptian society would mean a total re-ordering of their hierarchy, which potentially could bring an end to slavery. The work could also be about the important role of bystanders who witness violence.

But as we look back from the place we are right now, I wonder if the work this text is calling us to is the act of remembering itself. Maybe this sounds obvious, but the thing about remembering is that it happens after the event. I'm pretty sure nobody tells an "uplifting story of resilience in the face of hardship" while going through the actual hardship. With the start of the school year a friend texted me, "Hey how's it going?" And I just texted back a gif of a dumpster fire. (Don't worry, things have improved!) So maybe telling our story of 2020 and how resilient it turns out we are is a story for like, 2045. Our best bet now, especially when we feel worn out by prolonged calamity-fatigue, may be to re-read and re-tell stories of resilience from our ancestors, including our ancestors in faith. There have always been Pharaohs. There has always been oppression and political persecution and injustice. The people have always been exhausted and depressed along the way. But to remember with resilience may be our work right now. So, in this moment, when we are sitting in a heat wave, anxious about fires and covid and politics and all the rest, how can the Passover story help us?

- First, the text says that if your household is too small to eat a whole lamb, be the household that shares it with a neighbor. We can take this to mean that true freedom is when everyone has enough and nobody goes hungry. In covid times, it may or may not be literal sharing of food, but it could mean voting for policies that divide resources more equally.
- Next, eat with girded loins and sandals on your feet. This means to be ready for liberation at any time-- be ready to run towards freedom. And in Sonoma County terms: Have your spiritual go-bag by the front door, not just your literal go-bag, but your spiritual go-bag. By that I mean, keep restocking your spiritual life by breathing, praying, moving your body, getting enough sleep. It's easy to get depleted in a season of collective trauma. Doing the work of liberation and allyship requires sabbath rest-- and that's true in pre-pandemic, rainy season, non-election-year times. To be ready, to put on our sandals and buckle up, means we also need to rest and go a little easier on ourselves.
- And, the next piece of Passover wisdom is to eat in a hurry. Because when the opportunity comes to get empire and slavery out of your physical, spiritual, and collective psyche-- you want to be ready for that. Right now, I think eating in a hurry is actually about keeping hope alive. With the bitter herbs, it's an acknowledgment that the past has not been sweet. But to snarf down a meal with bread that doesn't have time to rise, means to hope that something better is coming. It's possible this could be the moment we look to indigenous practices of controlled burns in Sonoma County, that we vote for people who stand for equality, that the work of anti-racism we do now is laying groundwork for generations to come. Keep hoping for it, keep working toward it.
- Finally, the Passover story itself is not a story of "arrival." It's an in-between moment: it's a pause in the action between slavery and plagues, but before the parting of the Red Sea. It's a moment that teaches us to take a breath, put on our sandals and buckle up. As John Lewis said, "it demonstrates the distance we have come and the progress we have made. It also demonstrates the work still left to be done." There's a Hebrew word that fits this situation, "dayenu." It's a word that is sung at Passover Seder tables all around the world. It literally means "it would be enough." As in, to be spared from the

plagues, *dayenu*. It would be enough. To walk into freedom, *dayenu*. Or in modern times, to be a society where no child goes to bed hungry, *dayenu*. It's kind of an ironic word, because even though *dayenu* literally means "it would be enough," in context it really means, "good job--now keep going."

IV.

I close with this poem by Unitarian Minister, Elizabeth Mount:

In ancient times, they said

Dayenu

It would have been enough to have been spared after the plagues.

It would have been enough to have been freed of slavery,

It would have been enough to have had food in the desert,

Now we question, when will it be enough again?

Dayenu

Will it be enough to stay home?

Will it be enough if we are deemed essential, as we are made to work?

Will it be enough to wear a mask as we go to the grocery, to the office, to the
gas station?

Will it be enough to keep us well, in the midst of plague that has not passed
over?

Now we wonder, worry, wish for answers

Dayenu

It would have been enough. It will be enough again.

If the story of Passover is told and teaches us how to live in this time,

It will be enough.

If the stories of our ancestors bring us hope for tomorrow

It will be enough.

If we join together in remembering that we all come from people who have
survived

Again and again,

It will be enough this year, as it is each and every year.

Dayenu, it will be enough that we are together today.

Good job-- now keep going. Amen.