

“Wisdom from a Story of Liberation”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, April 5, 2020

Passover is a festival of liberation. A remarkable story of liberation – a story so powerful, oppressed peoples millennia later still find solace, hope, and inspiration in the ancient words. A story of plagues and survival, and the story of a community, a community of Israelites – enslaved, escaped, wandering, saved.

This biblical story of Exodus, from which Passover arises, details how God saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God acted through two men – Moses and Aaron. Moses and Aaron hear from God that they are to go to Pharaoh – go to the leader of Egypt – and demand that the Israelites he has enslaved be let free. God liberated the Israelites from slavery by inflicting a series of plagues upon their Egyptian captives. Only after the plagues would Pharaoh release these slaves.

And so Egypt suffers from a series of plagues. The country is plagued with swarms of gnats, followed by a mass of flies, then all of the Egyptians livestock were killed, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, the flocks. And still, Pharaoh does not let the Israelites go. And later came a plague of festering boils, followed by thunder and hail. And still, Pharaoh did not let the Israelites go. The land was next filled with locusts, sent to devour every tree and plant, and then the land was covered in a darkness so dense it could be felt. After the first nine plagues, God threatened that every first born in Egypt would die.

Think about this – plagues. While today we are not surrounded by gnats or facing the pain of hailstorms or surrounded in a blanket of thick darkness, we see other signs of a plague, of this

pandemic. We see facemasks, we see a world where a hug is dangerous, where proximity is dangerous, we see streets once filled with throngs of people instead empty – we see our own plague, this virus, devouring our culture and our world as we have known it thus far. And this is scary. Pictures of Times Square, a tourist hotspot in New York City once filled with flashy gadgets, advertisements galore, people hustling and bustling caught up in the thrill of New York City – now silent. Desolate. //

In the story of Passover these plagues affected the Egyptians and led to freedom for the Israelites. Under the threat of the tenth plague, the death of the firstborns, Moses spoke to the enslaved Israelites, instructing them to kill a lamb and put the blood on their doors. God said, “The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.”¹

The houses of the Israelites would be passed over! They would not lose their firstborns. In the text 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.”

² The Israelites were passed over – saved.

This story tells of God saving an oppressed people – and this story of divine intervention on behalf of the marginalized is one that has been repeated ever since. While this story tells of the saving of a chosen people – our parallel story need read of a saving of each and every one of us. Think about this – liberation. This story tells of liberation of a chosen people. Today – for that liberation we seek – to overcome our own plague -we need everyone. We need global

¹ 12:13

² 12:14

cooperation and this begins with each and every one of us. Each and every one of us working together towards liberation; working together towards freedom from this pandemic. This cannot be understood as liberation of a certain people, of one group or another, but a societal liberation, a global liberation, a liberation of old and young, healthy and ill, rich and poor, sober and addicted, happy and unhappy. As we heard in our Story for All Ages this morning, when we all work together, we can accomplish anything. Our liberation is bound so tightly to that of each and every person around us, and it takes holy cooperation and sacred commitment to liberate our world of this plague.

And in this pause, let us return to the story of Passover. In Egypt at the time of this first Passover, the Israelites fled! They fled the land of Egypt, and they fled so quickly their bread could not leaven. In their haste they took their unleavened bread and this unleavened bread became a symbol of this liberation. And this plays a role in the holiday we are honoring today. They fled. As Rev. Safford writes, “They had no idea where they were going, when they left that night, in the dark, without lights, without shoes, without bread, their children smothered against them so they would make no noise.”³

And yet throughout any obstacles they faced, they remained a community. As a community they were enslaved. As a community, they fled. And as a community, they walked in the desert for 40 years. They faced hardship, they faced miraculous feats from God. As they were chased by the Egyptians, God parted the Red Sea – The Israelites escaped on dry ground. Bitter water

³ *Walking Towards Morning: Meditations* Victoria Safford (51)

was made sweet to quench their thirst. Bread, called manna, and quails came from Heaven to fill their aching stomachs. And it was said, “The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan”⁴ They were saved! Through all of this – community. Through fear and flight and decades of wandering, community. The community was in flux; the community celebrated birth and the community suffered losses. But the community made it, after forty years, to Mount Sinai.

A story of plagues, a story of liberation, a story of a community surviving. Reverend Safford writes, “they had no idea where they were going” – and I say, to a large extent, neither do we. Safford writes, “There they wandered forty years, which in those days was a lifetime. Forty was a good, old age, so many of them died before getting anywhere, and many were born in the desert and grew into adulthood knowing nothing but the journey - not slavery, not freedom, just the going.”⁵

And this going, this escape from slavery, this act of God that created plagues against the captors and liberated a whole nation of people from the confines of slavery, this is celebrated every year! Every year folks of the Jewish faith gather together as families and faith communities to honor this sacred story and this tale of liberation – a joyous occasion! An occasion celebrating family. Faith.

⁴ 16:35

⁵ *Walking Towards Morning* Victoria Safford (51-52)

Rev. Safford writes, “In springtime we remember: the promised land is not a destination - it is a way of going.” She writes, “The land beyond the Jordan, that country of freedom and dignity and laughter - you carry it inside you all the while. It is planted in your mind and heart already, before you ever start out, before it even occurs to you that in order to leave that life in Egypt, the intolerable bondage of that life, what you need to do is stand up and walk forward.”⁶

What is our way of going? We have a sense of our destination, but what we can really focus on is our journey, our way of going. Surrounded by our own plague, working together for this liberation for all – each one of us following guidelines to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and countless strangers. They young and healthy staying home to protect, not only themselves, but the more vulnerable. Liberation for each of us means liberation for all. And to reach this liberation, there is a “way of going.” Our way of going means love – this has served as a reminder to so many to connect or reconnect with those we hold dear. Our way of going means being proactive – staying home, staying physically separate. Our way of going means helping each other, making sure folks receive a phone call, or an assurance of having two weeks of food. Ultimately, our way of going means continuing to celebrate joys in our lives! To continue to notice the beauty of nature all around us. To delight in our interactions with our loved ones or our communities. Our way of going involves laughter and love and gratitude. Our way of going embraces community, just as we learn from this story. The Israelites had their own miraculous experiences – water from stone and bread from the heavens. What do our

⁶ *Walking Towards Morning: Meditations* Victoria Safford, 52

miracles look like? A budding tree outside our window. The call of a friend from long ago. Reconnections with those we love. The good health of a loved one. The knowledge that we, as a community, will make it through. We will be ok.

As a community, the Israelites survived. Everyone on this call is a part of this community. As a community, they made it from Egypt to Mount Sinai, a journey that took 40 years.

Channing Memorial Church is a sacred community. Every one on this call is a part of this community. And as a community, we will survive. As a community, we will make it through this pandemic. There will be hardship and there will be miracles. Ultimately, each of you is loved. Each of you is held in sacred community. Liberation means each and every one of us doing everything we can to protect and strengthen our sacred web of which we are all a part. Each and every one of you is loved. As a community, we will be liberated. As a community, we will survive.

May it be so, and Amen