

Following God, Finding Freedom

September 17, 2017

Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: Exodus 12:29-31,13:17-22; 14:5-14, 15-31; 15:1-2, 20-21 (Scripture is at end of sermon)

At last we've arrived! Well, kind of. We've finally arrived at the point of departure, at least. Although a lot more of important things will happen in the Exodus journey, this is the centerpiece, this is the point, the Exodus, this is the leaving, the freeing, the no-longer-slaves-but-free-men-women-and-children. This is freedom. And I would argue that freedom is one of the top three themes in the Bible, along with creation and love.

Aside from the story of creation, the three major stories that are told, re-told, and referenced in the Bible are freedom stories: the Exodus story, the story of Judah's exile and captivity in Babylon and subsequent freedom, and the story of Jesus, who comes to free the captives, and frees people from sin and illness. But as we know, he doesn't free Israel and Judah from occupation by Roman Empire.

In the first sermon by Jesus in his hometown, he begins by quoting Isaiah, saying

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Freedom is at the center of what he is announcing his mission to be. And Paul, again and again, describes the freedom that he has found in Christ.

What is the freedom that comes in Exodus?

Clearly, in the literal reading of the story, the people of Israel gained their freedom from slavery in Egypt, and were free to return to the Promised Land. They were free to worship and serve YHWH, the god of their ancestors. So on a literal level, they gained physical freedom, economic freedom, national freedom, and spiritual freedom. And in a couple of weeks, we'll hear about God giving them the Ten Commandments, so that they might retain their freedom.

But for thousands of years, this story has been used metaphorically as well—as a reminder that God desires freedom for all of us, and is committed to helping us find that freedom. In the first and second centuries of the Common Era and ever since, both Jewish and Christian thinkers reflected on the plagues that preceded the Pharaoh's release of the Israelites and saw in them analogies to the stages people often have to go through to find freedom of one sort or another.

For just as Pharaoh was ambivalent about granting the children of Israel their freedom, so too are we often conflicted about gaining our freedom from circumstances or behaviors that have us trapped, or enslaved, or unfree in one way or another.

What kinds of things am I talking about? I am talking about any number of things –many of which could be described as sin, and all of which could be described as brokenness. Let me digress for a moment here: many of us are uncomfortable with the word “sin”—it seems so very judgmental and negative, and fails to capture the complications and nuances around some of our poor choices. Sin seems to imply evil, and bad intent, and we all know that a lot of the unhealthy behaviors we have are not that easy to categorize. This is why I prefer the term brokenness – all of us humans are broken in some ways. We struggle with anger; debt; shame; hatred; prejudice; anxiety; or addictions of one sort or another: alcohol, drugs, food, pornography. Or perhaps we don’t think we struggle with any of these issues, and we judge those people who do – so we have a problem with self-righteousness. Maybe we have an issue with trust—so we don’t enter into relationships with vulnerability and authenticity. Some people have a real difficulty with forgiveness—they hold grudges, and will not release others, or themselves, from the past. Perhaps we are closed-minded, and unwilling to consider ideas that we think are wrong. That is just another form of self-righteousness and pride.

Sure, there are sins that we all are comfortable calling sins: murder, stealing, and so on – but in general, many of us are uncomfortable with the word. Funny that we’re comfortable with the word “crime” but find “sin” to be awkward. Perhaps because we know we all sin, but most of us have some distance from crime. Nonetheless, I think we can all agree that there are all kinds of ways in which we can be “unfree”—and I hope we all understand that this is not God’s intent for our lives. And these various conditions of brokenness create problems for us, problems that make our lives less whole, less balanced, less integrated, less free than we could be.

So what is our problem getting free? Most of us don’t have a Pharaoh holding us back, do we? Actually, as I suggested a minute ago, we sometimes seem to serve as Pharaoh to ourselves. Our addictions, our dysfunctions, our sins serve us in some ways, just as the children of Israel served Pharaoh. So, like Pogo, we have met the enemy and he is us. In some way, while we might like the idea of freedom, we actually like some dimensions of our slavery too.

So if our issue is debt, we might want to be free of debt, but we don’t really want to stop spending. If our issue is anger, we might want to be free of the problems this causes in our relationships, but we’re not ready to exercise restraint when we’re frustrated. If our problem is drinking, we might want to be free of alcoholism, but we don’t want to give up our beer after a hard day. If our problem is unforgiveness, we might want reconciliation, but we are not able to face our own part of the problem. You get the idea.

Jesus said “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” See—Jesus was trying to lead us to freedom, too. We need to be honest with ourselves about the way our sins/brokenness/whatever is serving us – even though overall, these addictions (and most of them are addictions of one sort or another – addiction to anger, addiction to being right, addiction to shopping, addiction to our own reputation and status, addiction to whatever is helping us manage our anxiety in life, our pain in life, our stress in life). So it turns out that we are not only

Pharaoh, we are also the children of Israel, who at the first challenge on the way out of Egypt turned to Moses and complained, “Was it because of an absence of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness?! What is this that you’ve done to us to bring us out of Egypt? Isn’t this the thing that we spoke to you in Egypt saying: Stop from us! And let’s serve Egypt. Because serving Egypt is better for us than our dying in the wilderness!” We may want to live in the Promised Land, but the journey through the wilderness looks just too hard. And so even as we start the journey to freedom, we may turn back.

Maybe we are saying to ourselves, “It’s not worth it—I don’t want to have to go through the cravings to get to the place where cigarettes don’t rule me anymore. I’d rather just smoke. Everyone dies of something anyway.” Or, even after our anger has cost us our marriage when our spouse couldn’t take it and left, or our eating has cost us our health when we developed diabetes or coronary issues, or our need to be right has cost us our job, or our alcoholism has cost us thousands of dollars after a DUI—getting free just seems too hard. We’ll stay and serve Egypt. And that’s especially true when it hasn’t gotten that bad. But even so, our brokenness, our addictions, our sin always costs us our freedom. We may not realize the freedom we’ve lost, but we’ve lost something. Maybe we aren’t even aware of the brokenness that is costing us the most—maybe we don’t hear ourselves bragging to others so we don’t realize the friendships that don’t go anywhere; maybe we don’t think our judgmentalism towards others is a problem – after all, it’s not like we tell people what we think about them...but our judgment creates separations.

And we should be aware that not all brokenness is bad behavior or “sin”—perhaps the brokenness that we are dealing with is a self-limiting belief that has kept us from breaking free and becoming who we could be. Maybe it’s a fear that has been easier to avoid dealing with. Or maybe it’s our disinterest in reaching beyond ourselves to make a difference in the world—so we can tell ourselves honestly that we’re not hurting anyone...but who are we helping? Are we just taking from life and not giving? We were meant for more than that. And even with these kinds of benign brokenness, finding our way to freedom can be challenging but if we don’t, we’ll be missing the fullness of life, the joy and freedom in life that God intends for us and that Jesus came to give us.

So how do we get free? Rabbi Zaslow, in his book *Reimagining Exodus: A Story of Freedom*, writes that the children of Israel when they found themselves on the shore of the Red Sea with Egypt in pursuit had four different reactions—we’ve read them before, we just haven’t identified each reaction.

And the children of Israel raised their eyes, and here was Egypt coming after them, and they were very afraid.

So some of them prayed. It says: *And the children of Israel cried out to YHWH.*

Others of them resigned themselves to martyrdom in the desert – they prepared to die. *And they said to Moses, “Was it because of an absence—none!—of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness?!”*

Still others wanted to return to Egypt. They said: *And let’s serve Egypt. Because serving Egypt is better for us than our dying in the wilderness!”*

And Rabbi Zaslow suggests that yet another group suggested fighting the Egyptians, because what happens next is Moses tells them not to fight, but to wait for God: *And Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid. Stand still and see YHWH's salvation that He'll do for you today. For, as you've seen Egypt today, you'll never see them again, ever. YHWH will fight for you, and you'll keep quiet."*

But then God speaks to Moses and God says, don't pray—GO! *And YHWH said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the children of Israel that they should move!"* Zaslow says that the word which Friedman translates as "they should move!" means to "go forward" or "journey on" – God says, don't fight, don't return, don't die, don't even pray – go forward! God will save them, but they have to take the first steps and move.

And that's true for us, too. God isn't just going to bail us out of our issues. God's love is a gift—a constant flowing gift—but our transformation, our journey to freedom takes some work. We may to deal with some personal history, or some suppressed feelings, or the rawness of life without our dysfunctions. The things that have held us captive have also protected us, but they've kept us from growing. Remember, in the case of the children of Israel, it took forty years of walking in the wilderness to get to the Promised Land. It didn't have to – as we'll hear in a few weeks, the Israelites could have been in Canaan very early in the journey. They were afraid to go and thought they should wait. Again, God expected them to GO! And they didn't, and so God spent forty years doing work in them to get them ready – and a whole generation died before reaching the Promised Land. Our full freedom isn't guaranteed. We can live and die without ever fully living. God is invested in our freedom, but we have to be willing to GO! To take the steps forward in the journey. To risk, to do what needs doing, and then do the next thing.

And remember what we heard a couple of weeks ago—when God told Moses his name, he also promised, "I will be with you always." Jesus made the same promise, "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age." We are not in life alone. And God is willing to guide us, but we need to do some of the work too, of approaching God, of seeking to know God, to listen for God's Spirit, to recognize the nudges that come from God. Jesus said to Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came at night to meet him, "God's wind-breath-Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the wind-breath-Spirit." We're all in the same boat – we have to learn to pay attention moment to moment in order to catch a word from God. In a couple of weeks when we learn about Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, we'll hear that "The people stood at a distance while Moses approached the thick darkness in which God was present." Moses had to enter the darkness to seek God's wisdom, and so do we. We have to be willing to engage the unknown, to enter the darkness, to journey through the wilderness. God is committed to our freedom if we are willing to undertake the journey. And it is in that journey that we find our freedom and find our full selves.

Brené Brown, in a talk she gave called *Rising Strong as a Spiritual Practice*, says that the people she knows who have been able to get past the shame, get past the sense of imperfection, get past the crippling whatevers that hold us back to what she called "wholehearted living" have all had some kind of spiritual practice. She defines a spiritual practice as "... recognizing and celebrating that we are inextricably connected to one another by a power greater than all of us and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and belonging." We are never

alone. In our Judeo-Christian spiritual practice, that recognition and celebration is expressed in the great commandments: Love God, love one another.

We can't make this journey on our own – we need to be connected to that larger love, and we need a tribe. And it turns out that we can learn something about that from the forest. Peter Wohlleben, a European naturalist, has shared in his book *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World*, that trees, too, function in tribes. Very much like us, each one needs to stand somewhat alone against the winds and storms that come from time to time, but trees connect with one another underground, nourish one another, and indeed, keep one another alive in amazing ways. If we are to stand tall and flourish, we too must forge those deep-rooted connections with one another as we stand in the light.

We are never alone. God is with us, and we are connected to one another as well. Go forward. Journey on. Amen.

Translation of today's scripture, as translated by Richard Elliott Friedman and published in his *Commentary on the Torah: with a New English Translation and the Hebrew Text* (New York: HarperOne, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, 2001)

Exodus 12:29-31,13:17-22; 14:5-14

And it was in the middle of the night, and YHWH struck every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who was sitting on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was sitting in the prison house and every firstborn of an animal. And Pharaoh got up at night, he and all his servants and all Egypt, and there was a big cry in Egypt, because there was not a house in which there was not one dead. And he called Moses and Aaron at night, and he said, "Get up. Go out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel, and go, serve YHWH of which you spoke. Take your sheep also, your oxen also as you spoke, and go. And you'll bless me as well!"

And it was, when Pharaoh let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the Philistines—because it was close—because God said, "In case the people will be dissuade when they see war, and they'll go back to Egypt." And God turned the people by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up armed from the land of Egypt. And Moses took Joseph's bones with him because he had had the children of Israel *swear*, saying "God *will take account* of you, and you will bring up my bones from here with you."

And they travelled from Succoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness. And YHWH was going in front of them by day in a column of cloud to show them the way, and by night in a column of fire to shed light for them, so as to go by day and by night. The column of cloud by day and the column of fire by night did not depart in front of the people.

And it was told to the king of Egypt that the people had fled, and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people. And they said, "What is this that we've done that we've let Israel go from serving us?!" And he hitched his chariot and took his people with him. And he took 600 chosen chariots—and all the chariotry of Egypt—and officers over all of it. And YHWH strengthened the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he pursued the children of Israel. And the children of Israel were going out with a high hand. And Egypt pursued them, and they caught up to them—camping by the sea—every chariot horse of Pharaoh, and his horsemen, and his army—at Pi-Hahiroth, in front of Baal-Zephon. And Pharaoh came close! And the children of Israel raised their eyes, and here was Egypt coming after them, and they were very afraid. And the children of Israel cried out to YHWH.

And they said to Moses, "Was it because of an absence—none!—of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness?! What is this that you've done to us to bring us out of Egypt? Isn't this the thing that we spoke to you in Egypt saying: Stop from us! And let's serve Egypt. Because serving Egypt is better for us than our dying in the wilderness!"

And Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid. Stand still and see YHWH's salvation that He'll do for you today. For, as you've seen Egypt today, you'll never see them again, ever. *YHWH* will fight for you, and *you'll* keep quiet."

Exodus 14:15-31, 15:1-2, 20-21

And YHWH said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the children of Israel that they should move! And you, lift our staff and reach your hand out over the sea—and split it! And the children of Israel will come through the sea on the dry ground. And I, here, I’m strengthening Egypt’s heart, and they’ll come after them, and I’ll be glorified against Pharaoh and against all his army, against his chariots and against his horsemen. And Egypt will know that I am YHWH when I am glorified against Pharaoh, against his chariots and against his horsemen.”

And the angel of God who was going in front of the camp of Israel moved and went behind them, and the column of cloud went from in front of them and stood behind them. And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness [for the Egyptians] while it [the column of fire] lit the night [for the Israelites], and one did not come near the other all night. And Moses reached his hand out over the sea, and YHWH drove back the sea with a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry ground, and the sea was split. And the children of Israel came through the sea on the dry ground. And the water was a wall to them at their right and at their left. And Egypt pursued and came after them, every horse of Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen, through the sea. And it was in the morning watch, and YHWH gazed at the Egypt’s camp through a column of fire and cloud and threw Egypt’s into tumult, and He turned the chariots’ wheel so that it drove it with heaviness.

And Egypt said, “Let me flee from Israel, because YHWH is fighting for them against Egypt!”

And YHWH said to Moses, “Reach your hand out over the sea, and the water will go back over Egypt, over his chariots, and over his horsemen.”

And Moses reached his hand out over the sea, and the sea went back to its strong flow toward morning, and Egypt was fleeing toward it. And YHWH tossed the Egyptians into the sea. And the waters went back and covered the chariots and the horsemen—all of Pharaoh’s army who were coming after them in the sea. Not even one of them was left. And the children of Israel had gone on the dry ground through the sea, and the water had been a wall to them at their right and at their left.

And YHWH saved Israel from Egypt’s hand that day. And Israel saw Egypt dead on the seashore, and Israel saw the big hand that YHWH had used against Egypt, and they trusted in YHWH and in Moses His servant.

Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to YHWH. And they said, saying

Let me sing to YHWH , for He *triumphed!*
Horse and rider He cast in the sea.
My strength and song are Yah,
and He became a salvation for me.
This is my God and I’ll praise him,
my father’s God, and I’ll hail him.

And Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a drum in her hand, and all the women went out behind her with drums and with dances. And Miriam sang to them

Sing to YHWH for He *triumphed!*
Horse and rider He cast in the sea!