

October 29, 2017

Exodus 1: 1-14; 3: 1-15

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Freedom and Accompaniment

We have been spending these past many weeks in the book of Genesis, the stories of creation and the beginning of civilization. Today we leap past the central figures of Abraham and Sarah who bravely left their home to follow the call of God to a new land and the job of building a nation. We jump over the interesting and challenging stories of their children, and their children's children: Isaac and Rebekah, the twins Esau and Jacob and in turn their children: Joseph, his brothers and eventually their families. These ancestors of Abraham and Sarah, the Israelites, eventually found their way to a land known as Canaan where they lived and worked the land until a drought forced them to flee to Egypt for relief.

This is where we pick up the story today in the book of Exodus where these exiled people have become slaves in a foreign land.

According to the research of Brian D. McLaren about the ancient world, there are traditionally four ways that people become slaves: When people suffer terrible misfortune like sickness, accident, flood, debt, theft, or famine and find themselves in danger of death, starvation or homelessness. Their circumstances then drove them into slavery.

Secondly, when nations won a war, the surviving enemies were either killed off or kept as slaves.

Thirdly, refugees or other vulnerable minorities might be enslaved by the dominant majority.

And finally, babies born to slaves were destined to be slaves.

(We Make the Road by Walking by Brian D. McLaren; Pg. 36)

Slavery goes against everything we believe about what it means to be created in the image of God. It goes against everything we believe about God pronouncing creation as good and blessed.

It is so counter to our built in longing as human beings to be free to determine the course of our lives, and to be able to work and enjoy the rewards of our own hands and minds.

The creation of slavery is **not** God's doing – it is ours. It is an example of our struggle as human beings to live from a place of competition, violence, and scarcity **rather** than a place of blessing and abundance.

While it is true that people die from slavery – slavery in all of its varying forms - **has not ultimately killed the light of God that keeps calling forth people that resist it.**

In today's readings it is Moses who is called into the **resistance movement** in Egypt. God asks him to motivate and guide the Hebrew people out of Egypt; towards freedom and true aliveness.

This fall we have been talking about the difference between simply surviving and being truly alive. This longing to be truly alive is a deep part of us. I think of it as part of what God "breathed" into us in the very beginning. Those who step up to resist oppressive systems like slavery are committed to being fully alive for the sake of others, not just for themselves.

Slavery – so counter to being "truly alive" - took many forms in those ancient days and it takes many forms today. Some examples are:

The cycles of verbal or physical abuse, addiction, sex trafficking, overwhelming debt, the ism's of our society that keep people locked in poverty and isolation.

Slavery (addiction...abuse...overwhelming debt...) tries to snuff out the light and the blessing of God.

It seeks to deaden and oppress.

And God keeps breathing courage and tenacity into people like Moses who step up to encourage and accompany people towards hope and freedom. I am reminded of one of my favorite Mary Oliver poems called "The Journey" that gave me encouragement on one of my own paths towards freedom. Oliver writes: *"One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice...you knew what you had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations...little by little you left those voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own...and so you strode deeper and deeper into the*

world determined to do the only thing you could do...determined to save the only life you could save..."

Moses kept hearing the voice of God calling out his name. Moses, though reluctant, stepped forward to save his own life and the lives of his fellow Israelites, bound by slavery. **This is how God works in the midst of our destructive systems. God prepares those who can both lead and accompany.**

On Thursday in the Seattle Times newspaper there was a disturbing article about the common practice of Boko Haram extremists in Nigeria who use girls as human terrorists, sending them into Nigerian camps with bombs strapped to their waists with instructions on how to detonate the bombs at camps for Nigerian civilians. **Some of these young girls are standing up and saying no and in turn**, are showing other girls how to do the same. These young girls, most under the age of 15 are refusing to let this form of slavery, snuff out their beautiful light. They do not want to die and they do not want to kill others. (The Seattle Times, Nigerian girls, strapped with bombs, defy captors and live to tell about it by Dionne Searcey, 10/26/17)

Their courage, like Moses, is inspiring and a living reminder of the longing that God breathes into each one of us to survive and to thrive and the power to resist the systems that seek to threaten it.

I cannot read the story of Moses and the early Hebrew people fleeing Egypt in search of freedom, safety, security, and hope, without thinking of how this God-given longing is found in the stories of so many of the immigrants and refugees who have fled their homeland due to war, poverty or other various forms of current day "slavery" such as this story from Nigeria.

We know how incredibly complicated immigration issues are. While I am not equipped to unpack it, currently, one of the most pressing concerns in front of us in the U.S. is what will happen to those we call the "young dreamers" who came to this country as infants or children with their parents who were fleeing their homeland for one reason or another.

The ramifications of undetermined, confusing and expensive immigration issues which surround these young people are creating **a deep level of fear and anxiety** in their daily lives and in the lives of their extended families.

Fear and anxiety prohibits true aliveness. It prohibits clear thinking and can force people into hiding.

As people inspired by the stories of our Judeo-Christian ancestors, the teachings of Jesus, and the stories of some of our own parents and grandparents --- we can certainly understand the longing for hope and freedom that played a role in the arrival of these “dreamers” and their families to our shores. And inspired by our faith, we are challenged to consider how we might accompany them on this difficult journey.

How we extend our care for them will vary for different individuals and communities.

You may remember that last spring we started the conversation about how we might be able to provide some kind of support in this area. Chuck Cox found out about a new staff position being formed at the Seattle Church Council for a person whose job would be to oversee an Immigrant and Refugee Support Faith Network in the Seattle area. After conversation, we voted to take the additional \$5,000 benevolence/outreach funds that were raised at last year’s Salmon Dinner to help support this position.

I am grateful that our congregation chose to share its resources in this way. It is an act of compassion and care that ultimately increases true aliveness of our whole society and it is a way to ensure companionship and accompaniment for those whose future is unknown due to immigration issues.

This morning we have the opportunity to briefly hear from this new staff person, Briana Brannan and the work she is doing on behalf of refugees and immigrants in this area.