

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – February 28 2021

Hymns: 420 – Praise, I will praise; 196 – Throughout These Lenten Days;
Lamb of God; Go now in peace

Scripture: Exodus 6:28-7:5; Luke 22:7-8; :14-20

Sermon Title: “The Way Out” – Communion

Exodus 6:28-7:5 (NLT)

When the Lord spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, he said to him, “I am the Lord! Tell Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, everything I am telling you.” But Moses argued with the Lord, saying, “I can’t do it! I’m such a clumsy speaker! Why should Pharaoh listen to me?”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pay close attention to this. I will make you seem like God to Pharaoh, and your brother, Aaron, will be your prophet. Tell Aaron everything I command you, and Aaron must command Pharaoh to let the people of Israel leave his country. But I will make Pharaoh’s heart stubborn so I can multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. Even then Pharaoh will refuse to listen to you. So I will bring down my fist on Egypt. Then I will rescue my forces, my people, the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with great acts of judgment. When I raise my powerful hand and bring out the Israelites, the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.”

Luke 22:7-8; :14-20

Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread arrived, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John ahead and said, “Go and prepare the Passover meal, so we can eat it together.”

When the time came, Jesus and the apostles sat down together at the table. Jesus said, “I have been very eager to eat this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins. For I tell you now that I won’t eat this meal again until its meaning is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.”

Then he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. Then he said, “Take this and share it among yourselves. For I will not drink wine again until the Kingdom of God has come.”

He took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

After supper he took another cup of wine and said, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you.”

Two weeks ago, we heard about how Joseph, and then Joseph's whole family, ended up in Egypt. Last week, we heard that what had been intended as a temporary stay had turned into 430 years, and how Joseph's family, once honoured, had now grown into the hundreds of thousands, and along the way, had been enslaved. They cried out to God in their suffering, and God's answer was Moses.

"Who, me?" Moses says, and God says "Yes, you," and tells Moses he has a job for him to do, at which point Moses does what we all do, and gives a long list of excuses as to why he would like to help, he really would, but not at this time, thanks anyway God, but be sure to keep me in mind next time another opportunity arises.

Moses soon discovers that excuses don't work very well with God, who tells Moses that he, God, has taken note of the suffering of his people, and therefore he, Moses, should march right up to the Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the most powerful nation on earth, and tell Pharaoh to "Let My People Go." And despite the fact that Moses thought this was a terrible plan that would never work, and that he, Moses, was the wrong man for the job, he does what God commands him to do; he makes an appointment, is granted an audience, waits in line, and finally stands before Pharaoh and stutters out, "Let my people go."

And it is a good thing Pharaoh is sitting down, otherwise he, Pharaoh, would have fallen flat on the floor, laughing. As it is, he sends Moses away armed only with a promise that he, Pharaoh, would send orders for the Hebrew slaves to be made to work even harder, lest they come up with any bigger ideas.

Which, as you can imagine, did nothing for Moses' popularity among his Hebrew brethren. Or sisteren. "Who told you to go to Pharaoh anyway?" the people asked Moses. "God did," he said. "Yeah, right," they said. But while Moses was discouraged, God was not. "Go tell Pharaoh again," said God. "Yeah, right," said Moses, getting all the old excuses ready again. "No, really," said God. "Take your brother Aaron along to speak on your behalf."

"Will Pharaoh listen this time?" asked Moses. "No," said God, "but he'll soon wish he did."

So Moses went. And Pharaoh didn't listen, either to Moses or Aaron. Not even after Aaron threw his staff on the ground, where it became a snake. The Pharaoh's magicians somehow managed the same trick. So Moses touched the Nile

with the snake staff. The Nile turned blood red. This had Pharaoh's attention, all right, but once again Pharaoh's magicians managed the same trick, the end result of which was no change in the Pharaoh's hard heart, and misery for the people, just like politics today.

So now God took the gloves off, and, no more fooling around, sent a series of plagues upon the Egyptian people. Even Pharaoh's magicians gave up, and told Pharaoh that after careful study and taking into considerations the findings of a Royal Commission, it appeared that the hand of God was behind it all, and maybe these Hebrews had a point, and perhaps it is time to cut their losses and let Moses' people go. But hard-hearted Pharaoh said "No." Nine plagues, nine No's. Finally, the Pharaoh had enough of Moses. "Get out of my sight, once and for all. If I ever so much as get a glimpse of you, you're a dead man."

"Now what?" Moses asked God, in the silence of his heart. "This will take but one more plague," said God. And perhaps remembering Pharaoh's earlier heartless order that every Hebrew baby boy should be killed as soon as it was born, God sent upon the land of Egypt a plague of similar gravity. The sound of it almost stopped Moses' heart right in his chest, but he managed to speak it aloud to Pharaoh:

"This is what the Lord says: At midnight tonight I will pass through the heart of Egypt. All the firstborn sons will die in every family in Egypt, from the oldest son of Pharaoh, who sits on his throne, to the oldest son of his lowliest servant girl who grinds the flour. Even the firstborn of all the livestock will die. Then a loud wail will rise throughout the land of Egypt, a wail like no one has heard before or will ever hear again. But among the Israelites the plague will not come. And then you'll beg us to go."

And upon hearing this, all Pharaoh did was turn his face away in scorn. Moses, upon realizing how Pharaoh's stubbornness and pride was going to bring such misery upon Pharaoh's own people, "left the Pharaoh," we are told, "hot with anger."

Moses instructed the Hebrew people to be ready, as their time of slavery was soon to end. He told them how the Angel of Death was going to visit the land, and take the firstborn of every household, of every creature. He told them, too, how to prevent such a horror visiting their own homes. Each family was to slaughter a lamb, and take the blood of that lamb, and mark the doorframes of their houses. He told them how the Lord had said to him these words (Exodus 12:12-14):

On that night I will pass through the land of Egypt and strike down every firstborn son and firstborn male animal in the land of Egypt. I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt, for I am the Lord! But the blood on your doorposts will serve as a sign, marking the houses where you are staying. When I see the blood, I will pass over you. This plague of death will not touch you when I strike the land of Egypt.

And then, one of the saddest verses in all the Bible, a verse so sad, so heartbreaking, that to this very day, some 3200 years later, Jewish tradition commands that when it is read, anyone with a glass of wine has to pour a little onto the ground, to lessen their own happiness, as they remember the suffering of the Egyptian people:

That night at midnight, the Lord struck down all the firstborn sons in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sat on his throne, to the firstborn son of the prisoner in the dungeon. Even the firstborn of their livestock were killed. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the people of Egypt woke up during the night, and loud wailing was heard throughout the land of Egypt. There was not a single house where someone had not died.

And Moses and Aaron receive a summons, in the middle of that very night: they are dragged off to the throne room itself, into the presence of the Pharaoh, whose hard heart, it seems, has finally shattered at the death of his eldest boy. “Fine,” he says. “You win,” he says.” “Get lost, go. And take your nation with you – men, women, children – take them all. Take the sheep. Take the goats. Take everything that’s not nailed down. Then take that too. Just go.” And they do go, every Hebrew in Egypt; 600,000, says our reading, plus all the kids. And that “going,” that “leaving,” that packing up their troubles in the old kit bag and vacating Egypt to head back to Canaan, that delivery from the bondage of slavery, is called the Exodus. “The Way Out.” And even though it takes them a while to get back to their ancestral home, this is how the journey begins, one foot in front of the other, children, teenagers, newlyweds, young families, empty nesters, seniors, ancients, all heading out together, marching to the Promised Land.

There would be obstacles. There would be doubts. There would be complaints, there would be rebellions, even a sea to somehow cross. But every step of the way, God was with them. Every step of the way, God was before them, behind them. Every step of the way, including through the Red Sea itself, God led the way, step by step, closer to the Promised Land.

It is a story still re-enacted by faithful Jews the world over, as the Passover and the Exodus are retold and remembered every year around the time of our Easter. It was this story, it was a Passover meal, which Jesus and the disciples had gathered to celebrate, which became the Last Supper. It is a story remembered by oppressed people the world over, praying for a deliverance from their slavery, from their oppression, from the impassable deep waters which bar their way. It is a story which Martin Luther King invoked, as he inspired his people with the rallying cry, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we're free at last. And it is a story which resonates for us, for each of us today.

"Sacrifice a lamb," said God. "The blood will save you. Death will pass you by." And 1200 years later, gathered around a table in an upper room, Jesus was reciting the story, as faithful Jews had done for centuries, and still do today. But, to the surprise of the disciples, Jesus changed the script. "That lamb?" he said. "That lamb, sacrificed for the people? That's me. That blood?" he said. "That blood which saves you? That blood which causes death to pass you by? That's me," he said. "That's me. This is my body. This is my blood. Given for you. Remember. This meal is a reminder of what I've done for you. A reminder that I will be with you. I will deliver you not from the Egyptians, but from the power of sin and death itself. I will be before you, behind you. I will lead you, step by step, to the Promised Land, to Salvation, to the very Kingdom of God."

That's what we remember, this and every Communion. Remember. Remember that the Exodus, the deliverance, the crossing of the Sea, is not just a story. It is your story. You are there. And through Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world – yours, mine - together we walk through the storms and waters of life on dry ground, secure in the love and care of the God and Father of us all. Walk with us. Come, let us journey together, and see the salvation of the Lord.