

Sermon September 10, 2017 Moving toward Freedom Cara B. Hochhalter

Exodus 12:1-11 and Matthew 18:15-20

(Note to those who were not attending this service: in the bulletin we shared this responsive reading from *Psalm 149*:

Sing to the Holy One a new song!

***Let us praise God with dancing, with tambourine and lyre!***

God takes pleasure in all people,

***offering forgiveness, hope, and a Way;***

when it seems there is no way.

***Let us live in God's freeing presence, now!***

***Thanks be to God!***

Amen!

***Amen!***

And....with the children, I talked about how other religious traditions have great festivals with music and dancing as they remember their faith stories. While we celebrate Christmas and Easter with music...I think we have forgotten how to dance in this kind of festive way! I will offer them the chance to dance in praise of God as we remember God's love for all children, not just the Hebrew children of our Exodus story, but all children, praying particularly for children and families who are in the path of Hurricane Irma.

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It was such a joy to be with the choir at Alice Parker's home as she taught with such flare and joy some of the new pieces Esther has picked out... She shows us how to sing our faith stories with delight! As we were leaving she handed me a little book entitled, God, you made all things for singing by Thomas H. Troeger. How I would love to see an event here in this church with this preacher/poet/musician and Alice Parker!

As we think about moving our bodies....I know this is hard for some but I have seen New Englanders really swing it, at dances around the area.... So listen to this

wonderful poem by Thomas Troeger that might inspire us to move to the rhythms of God's creation:

First find a steady beat

First find a steady beat.  
Your pulsing heart will do.  
Mark how the sounds repeat, repeat—  
a drum that drums in you.  
Then whistle, sing or hum  
melodic, flowing lines.  
You are a woodwind and a drum  
whose music intertwines.

Next harmonize with birds,  
with ocean, wind and shore,  
whose hymns and anthems use no words  
but waves that beat and roar.  
Now cross beyond the sea  
where songs unlike your own  
reveal the world's diversity  
in rhythm, mode and tone.

Through all the varied songs  
earth's many voices raise  
hear how the whole creation longs  
to sing the *artist's* praise  
who tunes the world for sound  
and sets our hearts to beat,  
and with a music more profound  
makes *all our songs complete*.

Let us be in prayer: God of our own heartbeats, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Native Americans dance their prayers. Africans dance their prayers, too. Melody was just telling us at Bible Study, how her three children are able to sing their deepest worries and joys, too...through the rhythms and rhyming of rap music. Molly has recently participated in a workshop where she talks about *embodied sound and resonance*. Why don't we sing and move... when we pray?

The story of Passover that tells of the Exodus of the Hebrew people to freedom...can be seen as rather gruesome...putting blood from the sacrificed lambs on doorposts...and then the killing of innocent children! But I believe it was the injustice of the times that brought on the deaths, and what is being celebrated is God's ability to move people towards freedom. I do not believe that God brings down wrath on anyone...it is the injustices themselves that lead to devastating consequences.

A writer for our *Seasons of the Spirit* material, Rabbi Adam Morris, says that this Exodus story tells us something very important about what Jews believe about God, Source of Life....and that is that the power of redemption/forgiveness and of freedom is a vital and vibrant part of who God is...no matter the circumstances or setting. One might say that God is synonymous with life-giving freedom in relation to one another! L' Chaim! To Life!

Morris writes that in Judaism, freedom is not something done *to* us or *for* us...we have a responsibility that stems from our profound encounter with this aspect of God: to work *toward* the freedom (and redemption) of others in the world.... He says "whether it is those enslaved by hunger, natural disasters or by government forces...it is the stories that we tell that remind us who we *were*, who we *are*, and who we want to *become*."

Is this the story that we want to tell today? That this Sacred life-force that beats within all hearts, has always had the ability to lead people towards freedom? Perhaps our own society has forgotten the value of knowing and telling these powerful faith stories. Morris again says that this story of the Hebrew people being freed from enslavement...remains to one of our most powerful and precious stories."

The Hebrew people were given specific instructions (did you hear it?) as they had their last meal before fleeing for their lives... Very specific instructions, almost like a *Joy of Cooking* recipe-- take the lamb, or goat, the one without blemish, cook it over the fire and on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month, prepare it and roast it over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs...not raw or boiled but roasted... and do not eat any of it that has been sitting around until the next day!

And furthermore, eat it with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, your staff in hand and ready to get out of there....and in this way, you will be spared the wrath of the gods on the firstborn of both human beings and animals...that is the gruesome part.

We have our own kind of human exodus right now...I couldn't sleep last night as I saw in my mind those thousands of people trying to flee to some kind of safety in the wake of the biggest hurricane ever...They were given instructions, too...did you hear

their governor? *Leave now, go to one of the shelters, if you have not left yet, leave now.* I kept hearing those words in my mind.

I got up in the night, I was part worrying and part praying and wondering how my prayers might possibly be helpful....I came downstairs and found an article on PBS where the people who were fleeing the storm were asked what they were bringing with them...

I couldn't find the article again this morning...but one guy was bringing a number of hot tubs in his truck, another had a python, turtles and all manner of other animals; many had their rifles, and of course, also their wives and children! We can only imagine what *their* last meals were like before they piled what they cherished in their vehicles and took off, not knowing for sure where they were going... some certainly left in a hurry with the clothes they had on!

We can celebrate the Exodus story for one that promises freedom and a new beginning for a people of faith... I believe there is an infinite and compelling love for every human being and even all of creation, a love who walks with us through all life...and in this love, we find our freedom. Freedom from prejudice, freedom from fear, freedom from oppression, freedom even from environmental disasters.

Personally, I believe we carry some human responsibility for the ways we are warming our atmosphere and the oceans. This creates more moisture and greater energy that propels the storms....we will need to come to a place where we see that we are all in this together and need to take responsibility for the ways our climate is changing.

What is the story we are going to be able to tell into the future...and how is God a part of our story??

There was another article in the New York Times this morning..., this one was about families in Texas who are helping one another recover from Hurricane Harvey...I'm not sure if the writer found it quaint or was just unfamiliar with the practice, but he dwelt on the ways people in Texas were coming together to pray. This farmer, wife, extended family and neighbors, 17 of them circled up, holding hands or with their arms around each other, and prayed before they began their work of mucking out the soggy materials left from the storm... "carrying away the putrid, sodden remnants of 50 years of life," it said. And yet they were framing their work with prayer.

Maybe that is the story we need to remember....that God leads us to freedom as we invite an infinite grace and enduring love...into all the ways we live and serve one another.

I want to close with this beautiful benediction by John O'Donohue:  
On the day when the weight deadens on your shoulders...and you stumble,

May the clay dance to balance you.

And when your eyes freeze behind the grey window and the ghost of loss gets into you, may a flock of colors, indigo, red, green and azure blue, come to awaken in you a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays in the currach of thought and a stain of ocean blackens beneath you, may there come across the waters a path of yellow moonlight to bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours, may the clarity of light be yours, may the fluency of the ocean be yours, may the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so. may a slow wind work these words of love around you, an invisible cloak to mind your life.

Amen...