

Sermon: Leaving Egypt Behind

Year B, Lent 3

[Exodus 13:3-10](#); [Psalm 19](#); [John 2:12-22](#)

Offered March 8, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH
Catherine Merrill

Not so many years ago, my dad went to his 50th reunion. I know there are some folks here who have probably been to their fiftieths. But it was kind of a special 50th. It was the fiftieth reunion for his Little League team. Not only were a lot of his team mates there, but his coach was there too. The town of Exeter invited them back for a game against either the high school or that year's 11 and 12 year olds. The town was celebrating the 50th year of Little League in Exeter.

Except it wasn't really the 50th year of youth baseball in Exeter. My dad had played in the years before he turned 11 or 12. The town was part of the formal organization that is Little League, you know, the people who run the Little League World Series. Someone from the formal Little League organization noticed, or was told, or, in any event, found out that Exeter had a rule that every one played in every game. Having a rule like that was against the rules of the wider Little League organization. You could play every kid in every game, but you couldn't have a rule that said you had to.

So when the officials from the wider Little League organization told Exeter that they'd need to change that rule, the town reflected. The town understood all the benefits of being in the official Little League organization. They knew it would be good for the kids to get to play a wider variety of teams. The playoff structure was really good. But it was just too important to the town to have that rule that every kid got to play in every game. So Exeter withdrew from Little League and joined a much less prestigious and far smaller youth baseball league that let them keep their "everyone plays" rule. That was what they were celebrating, the fifty years of youth baseball since they left Little League.

Dad told me that story long before the reunion. More than once. Dad wasn't a kid who would have benefitted from that rule. He was kind of a jock. He had a great team and they would have gone far into the playoffs. When he told that story, he said how proud he felt as an 11 or 12 year old to be part of a place that stood up for what they believed in.

I've never played baseball. I would definitely have been one of those kids who only got to play because the rules said I had to. But this story is one of the stories that makes me, me. Not so much the part that says everyone gets to play. But the part that says when you believe in something, you value it, you reflect on what it means to you, and you stick with it. Maybe most importantly, you explain why it's important to your children.

Our kids left the sanctuary today to begin three weeks of studying Moses and the Passover. Let's have a quick review, so everyone's on the same page. By the time Moses is born, the Hebrews, the Israelites, are working as slaves in Egypt. Even so, their population is growing so quickly that Pharaoh is afraid they'll overpower the Egyptians. So he orders all the Hebrew baby boys killed when they are born. Moses' mother saves his life by putting him in a basket in the reeds where Pharaoh's daughter will find him. Moses is raised in the palace. As a young man, he sees an Egyptian beating an Israelite. He kills and buries the Egyptian. When Moses realizes that his crime is known, he flees to Midian. He works as a shepherd, marries a local girl, has kids. One day, he spies a bush that burns but is not consumed. God speaks to Moses from the heart of the burning bush telling him to go tell Pharaoh to let God's people go. Moses doesn't want to go

(does that remind you of Abraham and Jonah from last week?), but in the end he does. When Moses starts arguing with Pharaoh, every time Pharaoh says “no”, there’s another plague, each one worse than the last. The tenth plague is one where the Angel of Death will kill the first born sons of all the households that have not marked their doorframes with blood. Those houses the Angel of Death will pass over. After that tenth plague, Pharaoh lets them go. The Israelites leave, passing through a body of water that parts to let them pass and then floods to kill the pursuing Egyptians. It is the part of the story about the Angel of Death passing over the houses of the slaves that gives the story and the holiday its name.

I love this story as a story. It’s so important to both Christians and Jews. But when you read carefully through the gospel accounts of Jesus’ last week, the week we call Holy Week, Moses and the Passover takes on new meaning. Jesus comes into Jerusalem to the shouted *Hosannas* from the crowd. He goes to the Temple and causes an uproar, putting both the Jewish and Roman authorities on notice that he is going to stay on the path that God has set him on. Jesus is well aware that it’s collision course, but he makes it clear from his arrival in Jerusalem that he will not back down.

Yet as determined as Jesus is to talk about the coming Kingdom of God, about following God’s commandments to love each other and care for the weak, he’s not naïve. Every night he leaves the city and sleep in Bethany at the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. It’s harder for the authorities to lock him in a room and throw away the room if he’s either constantly surrounded by crowds or he’s outside their reach. So every night he leaves. Until the Thursday night before the Passover. He stays in the heart of the city that is the heart of the Passover story. Because when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, he led them out of slavery in someone else’s land into freedom in their own land. Jerusalem was the heart of their new land, where they would build the Temple to worship their God who had not forgotten them in all their suffering. Their God had been with them all along as they suffered under the Egyptians. For the forty years that they wandered from Egypt until they arrived in the land of milk and honey, their God was with them. Now, under the severe repression of the Roman authorities, who were wreaking financial hardships on the entire population, God was with them still. And Jesus was not going to let anyone forget the story Jews had come from every corner of the Roman empire to celebrate. At the same time, the Jewish and Roman authorities were certainly not going to tolerate being cast in the role of Pharaoh.

So everyone knew the tension was rising. And yet that night, Jesus gathers with his disciples in the city of Jerusalem. He breaks bread with them and drinks wine. He asks them to repeat those actions and remember him. Jesus loves the Passover story so much he risks his life for it. He sits at that table with the people who would betray and abandon him in order to celebrate the story that God never betrays or abandons us, that God never forgets, that God is always on the side of the weak and enslaved. That story was so much of how he saw himself that he broke his pattern of leaving the city to step even closer into it, so that he could physically be where all those who were slaves in Egypt had longed to be. I love the story of Moses and the Passover as a story. I treasure it because it meant so much to Jesus.

When we see Jesus in the Temple in the reading today, he’s driving the animals out of the Court of the Gentiles. He’s turning over the tables of the money changers. This event occurs much earlier in the Gospel of John than in any of the other three Gospels, which you might notice because it’s from chapter 2. This image of Jesus with a whip or flail in his hand has been used to support church sponsored violence. Exploring the technicalities of this image has been used to

show Jesus as supporting non-violent resistance, even in what appears to be a very violent scene. There's a lot to see here and yet I haven't spoken very much about any of that. That's one of the reasons people have asked for time to chat about past sermons, which we'll do after grabbing some coffee after worship.

Today with the kids heading out to learn more about Moses and the Passover, I look at Jesus in the Temple and I see him making a point that everyone around him fails to understand until after he has risen from the dead. And even then I'm not sure we get it yet.

“Stop making my father's house a marketplace,” he says, probably shouts over the chaos and noise of the coins rolling everywhere and the frightened animals running into a city and the people trying to restore order. “Stop reducing worship to little more than a commodity that can be bought and sold.” Under the Romans, everything had gotten a price tag. The land that God had led Moses and the former slaves to was now mortgaged tighter and tighter. The land of milk and honey was the same as it had ever been, perhaps even more productively farmed than before, and yet the people starved. If you couldn't pay your taxes, you were sold into slavery with your children.

When the Israelites are free, Moses orders them to remember, “remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten.” (Exodus 13:3). More importantly, he tells them to tell their children, who might have been too little to remember or who were born after captivity, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.” Moses wants this devastating story of slavery to be remembered, not forgotten. He wants it anchored to something real, something physical, the unleavened bread that they would eat at a certain time of year. The unleavened bread was to be a reminder of the story, a way to step into the story. But it was the story that was important. It was the story that was key to their identity as a people. Because their God had never left them, had never forgotten them, even when they were weak and oppressed.

Jesus looks around the Temple and sees all this business going on and no one seeming to remember the story. Why were all the animals there? To be sacrificed. OK, fine, but why not bring your own dove from home? Because if you come any distance at all, the dove or cattle or sheep or whatever would no longer be unblemished. But why does it matter that the sheep has a bit of mud in its fleece or the dove is a bit ruffled? Because we offer our best to God, and even our best can't offset the tiniest portion of the smallest fraction of what God has given us. But no one is thinking about bringing their best. They're changing Roman coins into ones from Tyre and then buying the animals in the forecourt.

The Temple that could be raised up in three days was not the stone and timbered affair that the animals ran out of and in whose courts the money changers scabbled to collect up their spilled coins. The Temple that Jesus built with his body in the Resurrection was the reminder to connect with the holy, connect with the stories that had been told to make God's people their own people.

In worship in January when we picked the topics that the kids would study, I mentioned that as a community, what we chose to teach our children is often something we need to learn ourselves. So spend a portion of this Lent, even if it is just for the length of the drive home today, thinking about the stories that make you, you. Some of them may be Bible stories, but many will not. Gather those stories, of how your wife answered the phone in that way that you knew she was going to say yes, of the baby you lost at six weeks and you've never forgotten. Some of them

will be devastating, hard stories, like being a slave in Egypt, with no choice and no voice and no hope for the future. At the Passover Seder, the story our children are studying begins “when we were slaves in Egypt” and ends “next year, in Jerusalem”. See if you experience your own stories differently when they begin with the reminder that God has always been and will always be with you. See if their connections change somehow when they end with the reminder that God will bring you home.

Leave the Temple behind, with all the rituals might once have reminded you of your own story but now just deaden the memory. Instead, come out of Egypt, ready to return to the land of milk and honey, living into the stories that make you the person God is calling you to be.