

THE VOCABULARY OF FAITH

3) Freedom

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Some of you are David McCullough fans. McCullough, of course, has written a number of books that creatively capture a realistic picture of some of our nation's greatest leaders and their greatest challenges. McCullough has written biographies on John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and, of course, George Washington. McCullough's book, "1776" does an especially good job of depicting the true drama and tension that took place in that pivotal year as the revolution against the British hold on the American colonies gained momentum. I found it fascinating to consider how tenuous and fragile that early aspiration of freedom really was. Were it not for certain fortuitous events, just as a heavy and unexpected fog that protected Washington's army from certain capture as they retreated from New York, the war likely would have ended very differently.

So it is that books, such as "1776," serve to remind us of the important people and the important moments that inspired the story of our freedom. Sharing these stories of how our freedom came to be serves to remind us, especially at this time of year, of the courage and sacrifice that served to pave the way for a new nation to be born.

This is a tradition, of course, that every nation, every people are inclined to observe. Certainly, it was a tradition that the people of Israel faithfully observed over the centuries and still observe today. The story of their journey to freedom as a people is, of course, captured in the ritual of the "Passover Meal." Once a year, Jewish people gather together at table to remember the pivotal event in their unique history as a people—their liberation from slavery in Egypt and the oppressive rule of the Pharaoh.

Each of the elements of the meal itself carries a symbolic meaning, reminding the participants of the events of that led to their hurried departure from Egypt and the drama that ensued. If you have ever participated in a Seder or Passover Meal, you likely realize what a powerful thing it is to share in this ritual celebration of freedom that continues to give the Jewish people a clear sense of who they are as a people.

But what is especially significant, I believe, is the understanding that while this meal offers a commemorates an ancient event in this history of this people, it is important for each participating generation to understand that this is a story not only about their ancestors, but it is also a story that continues to unfold in the context of their contemporary lives as well. Part of the Passover liturgy states:

"For ever after, in every generation, all of us must think of ourselves as having gone forth from Egypt. For we read in the Torah: In that day, thou shalt teach the child, saying: "All this is because of what God did for me when I went forth from Egypt." It was not only our ancestors that the Holy One, blessed be God, redeemed; us, too, the living, God redeemed together with them..."

The Passover observance then, is not just about the freedom that God gave to an ancient people, but also about the freedom God now provides to those who live in this present moment of time. It is a story about “then” whose real meaning is discovered in the “now.”

A couple of weeks ago, in my opening message in this series, I suggested that Marcus Borg finds, in the Passover story and the exodus from Egypt, one of the “Macro” themes of scripture...that is, one of the themes that serves as a metaphor for the human condition in all of its hurt and all of its hope. As Borg points out, “It is a story of bondage and liberation—a story about a journey and a destination.” (“Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time” p. 121-123)

In this understanding then, it is possible to envision our own lives unfolding in a similar fashion. Metaphorically speaking, it is possible to suggest that we too may discover that the course of our own journey of life and faith is one that leads us from slavery to freedom, from bondage to liberation.

In our lesson from Exodus this morning, we read of the call that God places before a reluctant and fearful Moses. After Moses turns aside to see the flaming bush that was not consumed, God says to Moses: **“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings and have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them out that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”**
(Exodus 3: 7-8)

This is, I believe, one of the truly pivotal moments—not only in the story of Israel—but in our story as human beings as well. For as this calling makes clear, God is the God of liberation—the God who has heard the cry of a people living in the misery of slavery...a God who then acts to lead them to the joy of freedom. In this sense, then, freedom is another name for salvation—the wholeness and fulfillment that God intends for every human being.

Our God, then, is a God who calls us to break the chains that bind us, to loosen the yoke that limits us so that we might truly experience the joy, the meaning, the hope and the promise of a life that is truly free.

It doesn’t take much of a stretch for us to name the ways in which we find ourselves living in bondage today to the demands and dictates of a Pharaoh that would, somehow, keep us from the life that God is calling upon us to live.

I don’t think that it would be especially surprising to learn that there are some people here, this morning, who are living in bondage to the values that our culture has tried to instill within us all—the values that emphasize the importance of being number one, of being the best, of being excellent in everything that we do and, thereby, earning the admiration or envy of all. Indeed, these values are often rooted in the importance of perception—of being perceived as having it all together.

Still others may know the bondage of being possessed by one's possessions, of being so wrapped up in the acquiring of things and the consumption of goods that they are unable to let go of their need to have more and more. And yet, the great irony of it is that, the more they acquire, the more they accumulate, the less meaning and significance life seems to hold for them. While on the outside, they may appear as if they are living the good life, on the inside, they will tell you that they are empty and hungry and looking for something more...something that will offer the life that they long for.

Others, of course, find themselves enslaved in other ways. In this community, it is no secret that alcohol and prescription drug abuse is a growing and menacing problem—especially among our young. To say that it has reached epidemic or crisis proportions is understating the problem. It has been estimated that each day in the United States, 2,500 youth (age 12-17) abuse a pain reliever for the first time. It is, likewise, estimated that in the United States, approximately 15 million people abuse prescription drugs. (Foundation for a Drug Free World website).

Suffice it to say that Pharaoh is alive and well in our own time and place and that many, many people find themselves living according to his dictates and demands...many, many people find themselves enslaved to ways of thinking and living that prevent them from tasting the true freedom that they long for.

The story of the Exodus, of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt is not, you see, merely some old story that has lost its meaning or relevance. It could not be, I believe, more contemporary or hold a more important message for our lives in this present moment of time. For the God who called the people of Israel out of their slavery into freedom, is the same God who calls us out of our own slavery as we experience the liberating power of God's love.

As the Apostle Paul states it so memorably in our lesson from 2 Corinthians, **“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”**

It is in relationship with the God whose love for us is never diminished and never restrained, that we find the strength, the encouragement, the hope and yes, the resolve to break the chains that bind us, the shackles that hold us back, as we move into the promised land of the life that God has set before us.

Yet, it would, of course, be a mistake to interpret this gift of freedom merely in personal or privatized terms. The freedom that God intends is not just for you and not just for me, but for all who share the bond of humanity. It is, therefore, not enough merely to concern ourselves with our own freedom. Like Moses, we are called to work to the work that God has set before us—the work of breaking the chains of those who are not free. Emma Lazarus, the American Jewish poet who lived in the 19th century put it so memorably when she wrote, **“Until we are all free, we are, none of us free.”**

Last week's Supreme Court ruling reminds us that we have work to do. Freedom, for some, is slow in coming. But, by the grace of God and the investment of people like you and me, it

is coming. Step by step, moment by moment, God's Spirit is at work—inviting, enabling and empowering us to free ourselves, but others as well, from the chains that bind and the shackles that restrict.

While freedom is a word that has, sometimes, been used so often that it has lost much of its meaning, we have the opportunity to reclaim this word as one of the fundamental words of our faith tradition...a word that lives at the heart of God's intention, not only for Israel, but for you and me and the world of which we are a part. For we too, know what it means to be enslaved and we too, hunger for the freedom that God's liberating love provides. Amen.