

THIS IS OUR STORY

2) “Once Upon a Time”

Pastor Ron Dunn

September 17, 2017

In our current sermon series, we are thinking about our story—that is the story that has given shape and substance to us and our identity as a people of faith. Last week, you may recall, we celebrated the first sixty years of our unfolding story and then, anticipated the next sixty years and the chapter that we will write with the witness of our lives.

Yet, this story of ours is, of course, not just about our own journey as a congregation, as important as that is. It is actually, much larger than that. Our story is ultimately about our journey as human beings as we seek to discover the meaning, purpose and possibility of life with God.

Now, there are, of course, many different stories in many different faith traditions that have been written to give voice to that experience—each of them valuable for the insight that they share. Yet, for us who happen to share the Judeo-Christian faith story, there is one story that looms rather large in our thinking and our living. It is the story of the Exodus—Israel’s epic journey out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

This story of liberation is what Marcus Borg referred to as one of the “Macro Stories” of scripture. It is a story, of course, that can be read and understood literally about Israel’s journey even though scholars are hard pressed to identify any historical evidence that would suggest an accurate date for this event.

What is, I believe, of even greater value than the historical reality of this epic event, is spiritual reality that it addresses. Whether understood literally or metaphorically, the message of the Exodus story is one provides us with a template for understanding the struggle of the human condition and the ways in which God is at work to liberate us from that struggle.

While it simply would not be possible to share this story in any detail in the time we have this morning, I would like to provide a brief overview—a thumbnail sketch, if you will, of this epic story of love and liberation. After doing so, I will then lift up what this story tells us.

Once upon a time, a baby was born in—a Hebrew baby by the name of Moses. But there was a ruler who was determined to kill all of the Hebrew babies. So it was that Moses’ mother placed him in a basket and hid him in the reeds along the Nile. It was there that Moses was discovered by none other than the Pharaoh’s own daughter who took the baby home and raised him in the royal court.

Even though Moses enjoyed the benefits of this fortuitous discovery, he could not overlook his identity as a Hebrew. It was this sense of identity that led him, as a grown man, to confront and kill an Egyptian guard who was mistreating one of his own people. You will remember that the Hebrew people had been subjected to slavery by the Pharaoh. Well, this act of violence against an Egyptian caused Moses to flee in fear of his life. He ended up in the remote region of Midian where he married and became a shepherd tending his father-in-law's sheep.

But while Moses was busy tending sheep, God was busy listening to the cries of the oppressed people of Israel. Those cries became so loud and so persistent, the story goes, that God decided to do something about it. He appeared to Moses in the wilderness, speaking to him out of bush that was burning, but not being consumed. The message was clear and direct. "I have heard the cry of my people," God told Moses, "and I want you to do something about it. I will send you to the Pharaoh and you will tell the Pharaoh to let your people go. I will then lead you to a new land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

Moses, however, wasn't buying it. "I can't do it," he said, "I don't know how to speak. I have had any leadership training courses. Find somebody else. You've got the wrong man."

But God thought otherwise and finally convinced Moses to try out the role of leader and liberator. It was a role that he would eventually grow into, but not without fits and starts. After several fruitless conversations with the Pharaoh and the experience of several rather nasty plagues, Pharaoh finally relented. As soon as he received permission to leave, Moses and his people left in great haste—a fact that is remembered and celebrated in the Feast of the Passover.

No sooner were they on their way out of Egypt, however, than the Pharaoh had a change of heart and ordered his army to chase the Israelites down and bring them back. With the Egyptian army closing in from behind, Moses and the Israelites were confronted with the obstacle of the Red Sea that was blocking their escape route. In one of the most dramatic moments, Moses' trust in God is put to the test. Rather than give up and allow his people to be taken back into slavery, he lifts his staff, at God's instruction, and the water parts, allowing the people of Israel to escape from Egypt.

They had taken their first important step towards the Promised Land and the new life that awaited there. But there were, to be sure, other steps to be taken—steps that would sometimes lead them to stumble and fall. For while they were no longer oppressed by their Egyptian rulers, they now faced the daunting challenge of learning how to live together on their journey. Indeed, there were times along the way when the people became so hungry, thirsty and weary that they actually would fantasize about returning to the relative comfort of Egypt where, at least they had food enough to eat.

Their lowest moment came when, in the absence of Moses who was communing with God on Mt. Sinai, they decided to melt down gold and forge a golden calf to worship. Clearly, the

God of Moses wasn't getting the job done—so they thought—and they would try another god—one that was of their own choosing.

As you may remember, that didn't go especially well with Moses. When he returned with the newly minted commandments to guide his people, he was so angry that he shattered them and imposed a time of mourning and repentance.

In time, however, Moses would pick up the pieces, metaphorically speaking, and the journey toward the freedom of the Promised Land would continue. It was, as the story would remind us, a very long journey, one that would span approximately forty years. It was enough time for these former slaves to learn how to live and worship together as a community of people. They also would learn how they could place their trust in their leader Moses and the God that led him.

Sadly, however, Moses would not live to see the day when his people would cross over the Jordan and set foot in the long awaited Promised Land. Instead, it would be Joshua, an understudy of Moses, that would take the baton and lead the people forward into their new and liberated life.

There it is—the story of a forty year journey condensed down into four minutes! A Reader's Digest version, if you will. Yet, even in this very broad and general sketch, it is possible to discern a message and a meaning that is timeless in its relevance and its ability to describe both the nature of God and the reality of the human condition.

Let's briefly consider what this story of ours has to tell us about the nature of God. I am going to resort to a little alliteration to try to make my points as clearly as I can.

First of all, this story of the Exodus tells us that our God is a God who LISTENS.

God listened to the groans of his people. God heard their cries and God took those cries to heart. God, you see, not only heard those cries, God felt those cries and resolved to do something about them.

Our God, then, is a God who listens to the cries of people who struggle, people who are in bondage, people who live under the thumb of oppression, people who are not afforded their basic rights and dignity as human beings.

2) Secondly, our God is a God who LEADS. But rather than intervene directly, God leads by leading individual people to do the work of God. Rather than waving a magic wand or putting on a fireworks display, our God is One who God calls people like Moses, people like you and me to respond to the hurt, the hunger and the injustice of our world.

3) Thirdly, our God who LIBERATES THROUGH LOVE. Underlying the narrative of the Exodus Story is the fundamental understanding that the love of God liberates people from their places of bondage and slavery. This is to suggest that the love of God motivates the response of God's people to stand up and speak out against those forces that would deny the dignity of others and justice for all.

The Exodus Story then, gives us a glimpse of who God is and how God works in our world. Ours is a God who listens, who leads and who liberates through the most powerful force at work in the world—the power of LOVE.

Yet, this story also provides us with a glimpse of ourselves. It tells us about the reality of being human as we make our own journey through this life. Indeed, it is the metaphor of the journey that so appropriately describes our experience of living. Think, for a moment, about the ways in which the Exodus story speaks to the reality of our own story.

It is a story, first of all, that suggests that there are times in which we find ourselves living in captivity to forces that enslave and oppress us. Like the Israelites who lived under the thumb of Pharaoh's oppression, we sometimes find ourselves held captive by our fears, our addictions, our legalism and our self-centeredness—to name but a few of the habits or attitudes that hold us in bondage. The great irony in all of this, of course, is that in spite of the freedom in which we live, there are many who can never truly enjoy that freedom because they are enslaved to a way of thinking that limits, inhibits and restricts them from the life that God intends. There are many people living today in captivity.

Secondly, Israel's story and its description of the great drama of the crossing of the Red Sea suggests that there are, likewise, times in our own lives in which we arrive at the moment of great decision. These are the moments in which we must decide whether or not to step out in faith and get our feet wet or shrink back in fear and return to that which has enslaved us. Perhaps you can think of a time in which you were confronted with such a choice. We have all experienced those moments in our past it is quite likely that we will experience them yet again in our future. The route of our journey of faith is dotted with moments such as these in which we must decide to either trust God and move forward or give into our fear and step backward.

Thirdly, Israel's wayward journey through the wilderness is, of course, a metaphor for our own journey through the wilderness that we often experience in the living of our lives. I imagine that most all of us can think of those times in our lives in which we lost our bearings and found ourselves wandering in circles, looking for the path that would lead us out of our confusion and uncertainty. Times of "wilderness wandering," it seems to me, are part and parcel of our story as human beings. And that is not a bad thing. As Israel would discover, it is often through the wilderness experience that we discover who we are and who we are in relationship to God. It's all a part of the journey.

The ancient story of the Exodus and Israel's journey from slavery to freedom is, of course, a story that is not just their story. It's our story as well. It is a story that has much to tell about who God is and what God does. God listens...God leads...and God liberates with love.

It's also a story that has much to tell us about ourselves and the experience of slavery and captivity, the experience of learning to step out in faith, and the experience of growing through the confusion and uncertainty of our wilderness wandering.

There is, of course, much more to this story than I can possibly illustrate this morning. But even this brief overview suggests that there is a richness, a wisdom and a depth to this story that gives shape and substance to our own story. It is in reading and reflecting upon Israel's story of the Exodus that we gain insight about ourselves and our identity as a contemporary people of faith.

I invite you, this week, to pick up your Bibles and read this story once more. And, as you read, you may want to reflect upon its message for you at this particular time of your life and for us, as a congregation, as we continue on the journey that we share together. It is, after all, not just Israel's story. It is our story as well.

Amen.