

I have often told this congregation that I understand salvation as space. God gives each of us the freedom to become whom we are meant to be. I see salvific space, and very clearly, in the Exodus story, where God gives a people group room (both literally and figuratively!) to live into their identity as God's beloved. Trapped by an Egyptian army and a raging sea, God parts the waters, and Israel moves from a broken present toward a hopeful and holistic future. God offers Israel space to figure things out in its adolescence, and I suppose in its early and middle adulthood as well! Forty Years!!! But this wilderness is not without provisions. And eventually, God clears the way for this people group to inhabit a new land, full of promise, where God's people, lands, and other creations will live in accordance and covenant with God's good purposes.

Of course, the Exodus story is not without its issues. It is, after all, retold, over and over, with a nationalistic spin. God ordains, at least in the minds of the ancient writers, the seizing of occupied lands. Canaanites are displaced for no other reason than not being Israelites. Disobedience toward and disbelief in YHWH results in the exclusion of an entire generation of people from entering this new land. It's not too dissimilar from the story about the first earth creatures, and their expulsion from the garden. Though to be fair, in each instance, God's punishment is tempered with provisions: manna in the wilderness, and hand-knitted clothing beyond Eden. And God is, of course, ever-present. Throughout the Pentateuch, we meet a universal, graceful, incomprehensible God, One worth discovering and celebrating.

We must, however, always be intentional in asking of every text we encounter: "Is this descriptive of the God whose Spirit flows through and shapes each one of us, or is this descriptive of a God reshaped, contorted even, in order to align with contemporary needs?"

Our text today is not about the Exodus, but it's certainly connected. Moses has passed away, as has his first generation of followers. Joshua has replaced Moses as the new leader of Israel. He gets his own water-crossing story, too, though not as elaborate as the one for Moses. Joshua leads his people across the Jordan River. He aligns his people into formal covenant. They celebrate the same Passover meal their ancestors hastily made in the midst of fleeing Egypt. This is a turning of the page. The doubters, and the disbelievers, and the idol-worshippers, and the complainers who refused to believe in God's promises and possibilities are gone. A new people, a readied people, a hopeful people have emerged.

The Israelites have also been weaned from manna. In this new space, God's people will use their God-given gifts to sustain land, community, and covenant.

And there's a bit of a reverse-garden effect here, too. When Adam and Eve were inside the garden, they experienced an environment responsive to their every need. When they left Eden, they had to till land that wasn't eager to be tilled. God clothed them, and kept them safe, but abundance was replaced with modesty. In the wilderness, the Israelites experienced an unresponsive land, but God provided manna to see them through. When their descendants enter Canaan, they find a land eager to harvest grain, and fruit, and all sorts of produce. Life has once more given way to abundance.

But, Joshua, I believe, has a hard task, one given to him by Deuteronomistic writers, and not God. Joshua has to sell the idea of an unjust war being just, not just to his contemporaries, but to you and me as well. He's also seen firsthand the generational trauma that occurs

when an enslaved people are abruptly moved into a state of even more intense geo-political uncertainty. Their doubt, their fear, their anger, their vulnerability, all justified and perfectly reasonable, I might add, is unfairly fashioned into a narrative of shame rather than humanity. And it seems to me that headlines of conquest and cleansing and manifest destiny sell a whole lot more newspapers than headlines of grace and togetherness in response to generational trauma.

All these years later, we sing aloud that Joshua fought the battle of Jericho. I suppose that sells more records than Joshua's children meeting new partners in new lands, and eventually migrating organically into the region, a collaborative of God's diverse people enjoying the bounty of the land.

We cannot read the stories of the Exodus or the stories of Joshua in a vacuum. No more so than we can live and process our own lives in a vacuum. Humanity is intricately connected whether we like it or not (and I think we should like it by the way!).

It's evident that the ancient writers, even in the texts we might find too provocative, or too dangerous, or too worrisome, acknowledge the bigness, grace, love, and creativity of God. But they also live in a zero-sum-gain world. So all of God's bigness, grace, love, and creativity must shine on them, or else it's gonna shine on somebody else. But never both.

Joshua's people want what everyone wants: space and grace to achieve their potential. And it's certainly reasonable that all people need sustainable lands and communities to realize such potential.

It's also reasonable to believe that as God's created beings we do have some sense of responsibility and accountability in the seeking of and living out of our callings. But our responsibilities and accountabilities are steeped in God's grace.

Finally, I think the story of Israel, be it in the garden, or in wandering, or in Egypt, or in Exdous, or in wilderness, or in Canaan is the story of all humanity. We have wounded and been wounded. We have rebelled and been rebelled against. We have wandered, and doubted, and complained. We've been recipients of grace, and perhaps offered some, too. We've forgiven and forgotten, been forgiven and forgotten, too. We've been productive and unproductive. We've taken stuff. We've had stuff taken from us. We've been our best selves. Sometimes we haven't. Maybe in just this week alone we've been all these things!

And yet, God has been present. Always bigger than our smallness. Always opening expansive windows of grace and love, even when ancient writers aren't intentionally trying to make such grace and love evident.

It's always imperative that we recognize our current location along the spectrum of wilderness and settledness is NOT a reflection of our faithfulness, or God's response to our faithfulness. God is faithful to the thousandth generation, and beyond.

Joshua claims the shame or disgrace of Egypt has been left behind. That's not how I would phrase it. I believe a people, who were just as perfectly imperfect and perfectly human as you and me, wandered in the wilderness. God made space for that wandering, just as God made space for their children to find rest and settledness in the next generation.

I hope it's not lost on us that a table, the Passover table, marks the occasion of new possibilities. Just as I hope it's not lost on us that we are a table people.

Perhaps the question for us this morning is this: What kinds of spaces can our table bring about?

Can our table reach back to wanderers, and invite them into grace and rest? Can our table be mindful of the boundaries it might disturb in the future? Are we aware of those spaces where we claim to be host, but in reality are guests? Can our table be a space big enough where God is expressed as the God of ALL creation and not simply OUR creation.

As we near the end of our own wilderness, the Lenten season of 2022, may we seek to build spaces big enough for God's grace and love to be present and evident well beyond our own circles.

May it be so. Amen.