

Over the next few years, I'll be using Sundays in Ordinary time to help our congregation engage the 66 canonical books of scripture. On applicable Sundays, I'll include a brief history of the selected book (A Word About Today's Word) as well as a homily featuring a text from that book. Both intro and homily are not intended to offer a deep dive, but rather an invitation to explore each book of scripture. Midweek emails will include a playful summary of tidbits and personal anecdotes about each week's selection. I hope you'll join us on the journey to engaging our scriptures, and carving out meaning for God's presence in our present.

A Word About Today's Word: *Exodus*

The commentary of the Oxford Jewish Study Bible notes that *Exodus* is inattentive to historical details. In an age where we want to know with certainty the details of time, place, and recorded thought, the lack of such details can be maddening. But the lack of details can also be freeing.

God created us. God is vested in us. God, through the events of *Exodus*, has and continues to liberate us from forms of oppression. The *Exodus* is portrayed as space-making that happened both historically and continues to happen in every age. Let me see if I can demonstrate this phenomenon.

A tyrannical, egocentric, unjust leader emerges, intent on withholding the most basic human rights from the women of his or her realm: her reproductive rights – that is her own, God-given autonomy to make choices for the health, wellbeing, safety, and ultimately, future possibilities of herself and her family members.

In defiance of this injustice, midwives hold firm to their duty of stewardship – they protect the women they serve, offering the care that is needed. Loving mothers and big sisters find creative ways to protect their sons and brothers. And decisive, quick-thinking wives, do

what is necessary to protect their husbands. Even the tyrant's own daughter chooses compassion over loyalty.

The indignant tyrant quakes with frustration. Here they are, the most powerful instrument of earthly authority, and yet their cruel actions are fleeting and feeble when countered with the determination, compassion, and zeal of faithful women undergirded in and elevated by God's love, creativity, and justice.

You tell me, is this the story of a people oppressed by a Pharaoh thirteen centuries before the Common Era, or by the King of Babylon, or the by the Emperor of Rome, or by plantation owners in the Antebellum South, or by Supreme Court justices and governors in 2022? I think it's all of them, and more. *Exodus* is historical and contemporary at the same time.

I see the Exodus story in the life of Harriet Tubman, not to mention the hundreds of millions of women who will one day soon, reclaim and codify their God-given autonomy once and for all. I believe that *Exodus* invites everyone into the story of God's liberating work in their lives and communities.

A few other things to note. *Exodus* is broken into two main parts: 1) the narrative of God's intervention in freeing the Israelites and 2) the giving of the law. The order of these events is profoundly important. God's solidarity, love, and investment in humanity is not, is NOT contingent on the law. God does not desire to punish, refine, or reform Israel into something worthy of salvation before offering redemption, because, Israel, just like you and me, is already worthy of God's love. Nothing can ever change that. God attends to Israel's suffering because God attends to human need. The law is given, after divine intervention, with the

intent of freeing Israel to live in the confounds of God's love – that is creating communities where care, concern, and empathy for neighbor prevent the festering wounds that lead to inequitable and unhealthy relationships.

Too often, Christianity has made the cross the singular and most demonstrative act of God's redemption. And too often, the cross has been illustrated as an act of substitutionary atonement – Jesus needed to be sacrificed for God to save humanity. In my opinion, such an interpretation is a perversion, not only of God, but of the Exodus story. *Exodus* tells us that God has always been and always will be in solidarity with us. And the scriptures recount this truth over and over. The cross is not the payment for sin, but is rather the consequence of feeble and stubborn pharaohs who rely on violence to maintain power. The empty cross, the empty tomb, the resurrected Jesus, and the Acts Church are echoes of Puah and Shiphrah, Pharaoh's daughter, Jochebed and Miriam, and Zipporah; God's everlasting yea over and above Pharaoh's nay. I'll say a lot more about this in the coming weeks, and I will invite each of you to do the same.

There is also unspeakable violence in these pages. Liberation, it seems, comes with tremendous costs: plagues on children, drowning an entire Egyptian army, and the genocide of the Amalekites come to mind. I struggle mightily to reconcile such violence. If, as most scholars believe, the final form of these accounts were completed in exile, or shortly thereafter, one can infer that there were many raw feelings by the writers, and maybe the inclusion of violence was more imaginative and therapeutic rather than historic. But that doesn't make me feel better. Perhaps the violence is there to provoke us and make us feel the discomfort? What does it say about the stubbornness of humanity that nearly every conflict for achieving liberation – the space to breathe and

be as one is created – has needed violent force to become reality? What does it say about us, who believe in a God of limitless possibilities, that God’s interventions and solutions always need to be rooted in destruction? When I read these pages, I am working hard to root myself in a stance of peace, to believe that our God, and our world, are big enough for everyone to have enough and be enough, and to achieve all of that without bloodshed, let alone, divinely endorsed bloodshed.

Finally, this is a story full of oppressors and oppressed. This is a really, really, big ask because it’s neither fun nor comfortable. It’s quite painful. When you read *Exodus*, don’t always see yourself in the story as just the liberated Hebrew, but as Pharaoh, Canaanite, and Amalekite, too.

What might it feel like to see this story as one who is preventing space for others? Have we benefited from the oppression of others? Have we gone shopping for an open lot in Canaan? Have we used systems, or laws, or traditions that benefit us, but do so at the expense of God’s beloved? How might these stories help us to wield what powers and privileges we do have as a platform for advancing welcome, hospitality, and empathy?

Exodus has generated lots of questions for me this time around, and a few hundred more words of introduction than I intended. But I think *Exodus* stirs up the kind of questions we need to ask both individually and collectively, in order that we, too, might finally know God’s liberation. I hope you’ll join me in a such a quest, Sardis.

Homily: Stranger Things

Moses has been a stranger nearly all his life. Born of Hebrews, raised by Egyptians, now a fugitive (remember he murdered a taskmaster for the mistreatment of a slave), Moses finds himself in Midian, an outlaw in his Father-in-Law's clan. He's a shepherd, before the days we people of faith thought so highly of shepherds.

One day, the stranger notices a strange thing: a mysterious brush fire occurs in the fields he's attending. A bush burns, but it's not consumed. The stranger investigates, and the stranger is rewarded, or challenged, depending on how you want to look at it. Somehow, someway, Moses finds himself in the presence of God. And although this stranger has been in many strange places, this is perhaps the strangest encounter this stranger has ever encountered.

But there is SO much power and beauty in this strangeness. A refrain throughout the First Testament is to remember that you were once strangers in a strange land. The emerging community will be a place where strangers who have known alienation, marginalization, and oppression are now equipped to offer the strangers in their midst community, and inclusion, and a lighter burden. The Hebrews will exchange a land of strangeness for a land of neighborliness.

It's fitting then, that the very first encounter with God by the Israelites centers around an outsider. Moses grew up in an Egyptian palace, and now he's living with a Kenite priest named Jethro. He's hardly credentialed to be the prophetic voice of this new liberation movement. Then again, the stories of the Pentateuch, not to mention the Gospels of the Second Testament, tend to defy expectations.

God determines that a stranger will lead this large collection of strangers. God tells Moses what is to occur, and like everyone of us would do, Moses says, “Sorry, I think you’ve got the wrong person. I didn’t ask for this, and I’m certainly not qualified for this. Can we start over? Who are you again? And what exactly is it you want me to say to these people? Oh yeah, and do you have a name? And tell me one more time, how is it that you believe I can do this?”

I want to be honest with you. For years, I found God’s response lacking. It always seemed incomplete and distant. Not so!

God’s response is perfect for the stranger who must lead strangers. God is the God of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs. That God. And you better believe the Israelites know the character of that God. God is sending Moses at this particular point, because God lives in solidarity with God’s people, feels their pain and hurts their hurt. God has chosen this moment in history to give humanity agency for liberation. Moses will be the face of that agency. God’s name is *I am*. God’s gonna be who God’s gonna be. And that is One who is present, and compassionate, and active, and creative. And Moses, you can do this, because *I am* is with you. *I am* created you. And God created creation to be free – to live into its possibilities.

In this interaction with Moses, God eliminates the idea of stranger. Moses needn’t feel unknown, unheard, unused, undervalued. Moses is a known quantity. And with God’s help, Moses will make Israel, a band of strangers, a known quantity, too.

In this harried and chaotic world, I think it’s pretty easy for everyone of us to doubt our ability to make a difference, to help liberate our communities from the heavy pressures and burdens of all those isms.

The calling is strange and overwhelming at times. As we struggle with the strangeness of calling, may we always hear the name of a neighboring God, *I am*. May we also remember that we are part of the history of the ever-present God. May we know that we have been created by a God who loves and empowers us. And may we know that God is with us to face the challenge of our callings. Sardis, we needn't be strangers in a strange land anymore. Thanks be to God!

Bob's Word of the Week: *Exodus* (See weekly email for version with graphics).

4 Sittings: Try reading *Exodus* in 4 sittings. Sitting One: Chapters 1-6, Setting the Stage; Sitting Two: Chapters 7-15, The Conflict with Pharaoh; Sitting Three: Chapters 15-24, Wilderness and Law; Sitting Four: Chapters 25-40, Tabernacle and Worship.

Best Names: Puah and Shiphrah: midwives, activists, advocates. They humbled the most powerful man in the world. Their courage ensured a movement of liberation.

Best Plague: The scholars will ding me, it's actually a sign or wonder, and plagues are never positive, so maybe *intense* is a better adjective? Regardless, I'll go with frogs. I love frogs. But frogs, frogs, frogs everywhere, even in your bed chamber, or kneading bowl, or "coming up on you," is a bit much.

Worst Plague: Don't forget there are ten plagues, the last of which is the plague upon first-born sons of Egypt. Clearly that's the worst. It's in a category of trauma all on its own. Locusts are insufferable, too. They

not only swarm every imaginable space, but they devour the remnants of anything the previous plagues destroyed.

Coollest Character: Miriam: sister of Moses. She's a prophetess, a protector, and a proclaimer. Everyone should get to know her.

Favorite Story: I love manna in the wilderness. It's very helpful in understanding the difference between having enough and having excess. On a side note, I always wonder if manna looked like the flaky remains of glazed Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

Troublesome Stories: All that violence. Egyptians tossed in the sea; Amalekites exterminated; plagues that harden Pharaoh's heart (feels like God could soften as easily as harden); double standards; the treatment of Miriam by both God and community in comparison to Aaron and Moses.

Themes (Some not all!): God is vested in Israel; God stands in solidarity with the oppressed; God's investiture in human agency is an historical and ongoing redemptive act in creation; God's communities are rooted in hospitality and welcome.

If I were to cast the lead for the movie version of *Exodus*... Oh, I'm offering a revised screenplay, too. Miriam is the heroine, played by Viola Davis, and Moses is the supporting role, played by Denzel Washington. Wandering in the wilderness is reduced to 20 years, and just try to tell me you wouldn't pay good money to see that movie!