

Set Free
Exodus 1:8–2:10
Sunday, August 27, 2023

Let us pray: May your word reveal to us, Lord, who *you* are, and who you are calling *us* to be, in Christ. Amen.

We have spent the past two weeks following the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. Joseph was the favorite son of his father Jacob, and his eleven brothers *hated* him for that. They sold into slavery, and he was taken to Egypt, where he eventually became Pharaoh's most trusted adviser and saved Egypt and the surrounding region from a seven-year famine. We heard last week how he was reunited with his family after more than 20 years, and he ends up moving them all to Egypt, where they live comfortably together for the rest of his life. It says that when they first moved to Egypt, there were 66 people, not counting the wives of Joseph's brothers. Well, as years pass, it says that "the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them."

But then, a new king arose over Egypt who *did not know Joseph*. Didn't know who Joseph was, what he had done to save Egypt, who all these people were that were related to him and why they were there. He didn't know the history. And he begins to be *afraid*. "There's more of *them* than there are of *us*. If a war breaks out, they might join with our enemies and fight *against* us." So, Pharaoh comes up with a solution – he makes them slaves.

It didn't happen all at once. You don't just subjugate an entire people overnight. It says later in Exodus that the Israelites were in Egypt for 430 years. We don't know exactly how long they were slaves; some places say 400 years, some say 215. But it doesn't matter if it was 400 years or four days, would *you* want to be *owned* by another person and *forced* to work?

I have talked with some of you before about how, growing up in public schools in the South, I was in *high school* before I was actively taught that slavery was *bad*. There were history books that had been published by the Daughters of the Confederacy that presented slavery and the Civil War in a very particular way. It was this idea that slavery was *necessary* for the economy, that enslaved people *benefited* from it, and that most slave owners treated their slaves well. It's an ideology referred to as the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy, and it is still prevalent today.

I vividly remember sitting in an 11th grade U.S. History class and seeing a picture of an enslaved man whose entire back was covered with scars from being whipped. It was like this moment of cognitive dissonance for me, where I was like, "Wait a minute...*that* doesn't look *benevolent* or *beneficial*, like he has been treated *well*. Why haven't I seen this before?" I became fascinated with understanding this whole thing – *how* I could have been taught that; *why* I was taught that; and what the *truth* actually was.

So I went to college and majored in Southern Literature (not a major that is in high demand in the job market). I studied the Civil War, took classes on southern history and culture; I really wanted to *understand* this. I took classes on African American religious studies and southern religion. And here's why I'm mentioning this – because I remember the first time I learned how the Bible was used to justify slavery.

Slave owners would force the enslaved people to be Christians and to attend worship services where either the slave owner would preach to them or another enslaved person would preach. But they never preached from the book of Exodus. Maybe the Ten Commandments, but they never preached the story of Israel leaving Egypt. Because that's a story of God *liberating*

enslaved people. Instead, they would preach from Ephesians 6, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women.” Slave owners used that to say, “In your slavery you are serving *Christ*.” They never read the verse right *after* that, “Masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with God there is no partiality.”

They preached a similar verse from Colossians 3, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done.” They used that to justify the punishment of disobedient slaves. But they never read the verse right after that, “Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.”

They preached from Paul’s letter to Titus, chapter 2, “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to steal, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.” They never preached from Paul’s letter to Philemon, where an enslaved person named Onesimus has run away from his owner, Philemon, and Paul is sending him back “no longer as a slave,” he says, “but more than a slave, a beloved brother...welcome him as you would welcome me.”

There are verses where Jesus is referred to as a slave (because the Greek word *doulos* means both slave and servant; you can translate it either way). Verses from Isaiah where the Messiah is depicted as a suffering servant who is beaten but does not cry out. They never preached from Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus...For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.”

When you only hear those *first* verses, it would be easy to come away thinking that the Bible condones slavery. But when it comes to slavery, the Bible is not *prescriptive*, saying that this *should* be done in this way. The Bible is *descriptive*, saying, “This is how our world *is*, and so how should we respond to that?”

For the writers of both the Old and New Testaments, slavery was a part of their world. They could not conceive of their world *without* it. It was just a fact of life. When a nation came in and conquered another nation, as happened frequently, the conquered people would often become the slaves of the conquering people. We do not see in scripture a call to *abolish* slavery; to do away with it altogether. That was just the way the ancient world was ordered.

Even when Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female,” he’s not saying that there is no longer slavery or that there no longer *should* be slavery. Obviously there were still Jewish people and Greek people. There were still men and women. He’s not *getting rid* of those identities. He is saying that, in Christ and in the life of the church, there is no *difference between* those who are Jewish and Gentile, male and female, slaves and free. Those who *are* slaves, he is saying, should not be treated any differently than those who own them. Because what you had in the church was slaves being made to serve everyone else. And Paul is

saying, “That hierarchy may exist in the world around us, but it does not exist here in the church. God does not show partiality.”

What Paul *is* doing, and what God does in the Old Testament, is to set up protections for enslaved people. They are saying, “Slavery is a reality among us, and if this has to exist, you have to treat them well.” Even after the people of Israel are ultimately set free from slavery in Egypt, when God gives Moses and the people of Israel the law, there are places where God says over and over again, “Remember that *you* were slaves in the land of Egypt, and so treat *your* slaves fairly and well.”

Now, that’s also kind of problematic, because scripture is *not* saying, “You shouldn’t have slaves because you know how awful it was. You lived with that for 400 years, so *don’t do it.*” Scripture is saying, “You know how awful it was, so when *you* enslave *other people*, treat them well.” Again, this just goes back to that was how the ancient world was structured. Life could not be imagined without it. So if it’s going to be this way, we’re going to make sure there are protections in place. While this might sound *crazy* to us, it was actually very progressive in that time and culture.

Obviously, our world is different. Or we *want it* to be different. There are still an estimated *50 million people* living in some form of slavery today. And I dare say that not a single one of us would say, “Yeah, just make sure you’re nice to them.” We, as Christians, should actively be working to dismantle those systems in our world today. *No one* should be *owned* by another person or be forced to do work that they do not *choose* to do and are not *fairly compensated* for. We live in a different world than Paul and the ancient Israelites, so how do these texts and this story of the Exodus speak to us today?

Well, I think we start with this statement that “a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” Because when we do not *know* each other, when we do not *understand* each other, when we do not know each other’s *stories*, it becomes easier to *fear* each other and *objectify* each other. To view each other not as people who have hopes and dreams, people who love and laugh and hurt and cry, and certainly not as brothers and sisters created in the image of God. We end up viewing each other in this depersonalized way, where what happens to *them* doesn’t really affect *me*. Or even worse, we end up viewing each other as *things*. We saw that happen in Nazi Germany, how the Jewish people were dehumanized, so it became much easier to *hate* them and *kill* them. We saw the same thing happen in Rwanda during the genocide of the Tutsi people in 1994. We see it over and over again, all throughout history. And when we don’t *remember* that history, it becomes easier to repeat the same mistakes.

We see it happening *now*, in *our* country, where there are people who are once again trying to teach that slavery was not that bad, that there were *good* things about it. And all we have to do to find the truth there is to ask, “Would *you* want to be in that situation? Even if you were treated ‘well,’ would you want to be *owned* by another person?” There was *nothing* good about slavery. But when we forget that history, when we do not know Joseph, it can allow us to do some very bad things to each other.

But we also see it in the fact that we are so fiercely divided along partisan lines that we do not *see* each other or *understand* each other or *know* each other as unique individuals anymore. It’s just “them,” and “they” are all alike. Conservatives, liberals, whoever that person is on the other side, they are *evil* and want to destroy our country and our way of life. Enough people start talking and thinking like that, and it becomes very easy to justify violence against the other.

But there is a way *out* of that. We have to be intentional about *knowing* people who are *different* than me. *Listening* to them. Hearing their stories. Understanding them. Knowing what they *want* and *why* they want it. Knowing what they *love* and what they *hope for*. If we can *do* that, we will find that we have a lot more in common than we think. And even if we never *agree* with them, we can at least say, “I understand why you think this way.”

What lies at the foundation of all of this – of the Exodus story and of *our* stories – is that God is a God of *liberation*. God set the people of Israel free from slavery in Egypt, and God wants to set *us* free from all that which holds *us* captive. Whether that is actual slavery in the world today, or whether it is fear, addiction, sickness, oppression, injustice, mental illness, anger. Some people are held captive by prejudice, hatred, grief, abuse, anxiety. Whatever it is that is keeping us from being free and living the fullness of life, God wants to set us free from that.

Our reading from Exodus ends today with God providing a savior for the people of Israel in Moses. *Our story begins* with God providing a savior in Jesus Christ. God says to Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry...Indeed, I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them and bring them to a good place.” And God says to *us*, in Jesus, “I have seen your misery. I have heard your cries. I know your suffering, and I have come down to deliver you and bring you to a good place.”

Whatever it is that holds us captive – whether it is physical, mental, emotional – God *wants* to set us free from it. God wants to *liberate* us. But also, God wants us to liberate one another. To set each other free. God says to Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people. I have heard their cry and know their suffering. And I will send *you* to set them free.” And Jesus does the

same thing with us. “I have forgiven *you*, now forgive *each other*. I have loved *you*, now love *each other*. I have liberated *you*, now liberate *each other*.” The promise that God gave to Moses and that Jesus gives to *us* is, “I will be *with you*, every step of the way. I will give you everything you need to do this. Do not be afraid.”

God is a God of liberation. So may we live as those who have been set free from sin and fear and death, so that we can set *each other* free, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.