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St. John's Presbyterian Church, Devon
Exodus 19:1–9

"All the People Answered Together"

On St. Patrick's Day, 1778, an American prisoner-of-war named Persifor Frazer walked right out of a well-guarded inn that served as a makeshift jail in British-occupied Philadelphia. The inn was called the Golden Swan; for three weeks the British had held American officers there. Frazer was a lieutenant colonel in the Pennsylvania Line; he had been held by the British for the last six months, first in the State House, the building we now call Independence Hall, and then in a jail at Sixth and Walnut. While there, Frazer had counted more than five hundred American prisoners, many of them sick, cold, and with no fire. Somehow, on St. Patrick's Day in 1778, Persifor Frazer slipped past his guards, got out of the city, and made his way across the countryside all the way the winter camp of the Continental Army at Valley Forge, just a few miles up the road from St. John's. When he arrived, Frazer immediately reported to General Washington, told him how he had escaped, and Frazer was returned right back to his post. Three months later, he was commanding his regiment at the Battle of Monmouth, across the river in New Jersey.

Before the war, Frazer had not been a professional soldier: he was a farmer and a ironsmith, born in 1736 in Newtown Township, right next door to Easttown; his father, John, had come over the year before from Glaslough, in County Monaghan, in Ulster, Ireland. So the Frazers were Scots-Irish, or Ulster Presbyterians, part of the great wave of families who crossed the Atlantic in the 1700s and settled in exactly this part of Pennsylvania.

In 1766, Persifor had married a young woman named Mary Worrall Taylor at Middletown Presbyterian Church. Mary had been raised a Quaker, and in those days, if a Quaker married outside the Meeting, the Friends expected you to come back and say you were sorry. Mary was pressed to apologize. She said she was very sorry to have hurt the feelings of Friends, "but," she

later wrote, “nobody should ever hear me say that I was sorry I had married Persifor Frazer.”

In 1774, when the troubles with Britain were coming to a head, the people of Chester County met at the courthouse, and they chose a committee to carry out the resolutions of the Continental Congress. Frazer was selected for the committee, along with his friend and neighbor from Easttown, Anthony Wayne. In January 1776, Frazer became a captain in the battalion commanded by his very same friend, Anthony Wayne, and that summer, Frazer was sent north to Fort Ticonderoga. It was there, on July 15, 1776, that the news of Independence finally reached him. In response, Frazer wrote home to his wife, Mary: “We have heard here this day that Independency has been declared by the Congress. God only knows how these matters will terminate.”

Back home in Chester County, not everyone was happy about independence. Frazer’s sister Ann wrote to him that some of the neighbors, the ones still loyal to King George, had signed a petition *against* independence. And Ann explained, with what I can only imagine was a perfectly straight face, that they really had no choice: the Whigs clearly thought the petition was the only way, she wrote, of “keeping these wicked bloodthirsty Presbyterians from getting the upper hand.”

Looking out at you all, right now, I’m not exactly sure the description still fits. Nevertheless, despite Ann’s joke, in 1776, when people in this county thought about the Revolution, they saw it as a very *Presbyterian* thing.

So here is my question: why would make a man like Persifor Frazer, a farmer with a wife and young children and an ironworks to run, risk everything for independence, and then, after being held as a prisoner of war, and having miraculously escaped, go straight back and risk it all *again*? Where does a Presbyterian farmer from Chester County get the idea that ordinary people should put their lives on the line to reject the king and create a new nation, under God?

Like many other bloodthirsty Presbyterians from the late 18th century, I'm pretty sure he got it from the story we just read in the book of Exodus. So, today, I'll try to help us understand what Frazer and the other Presbyterians *saw* in that text. Now, Exodus 19 is the middle of a story, so I need to set the stage a bit; and you've heard several sermons about the beginning of Exodus this fall, so right now I'll only remind you of three things that led up to the story of Exodus 19.

First, about the burning bush in Exodus 3: Moses asks, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?" It's a legitimate question: who is Moses? He's part Egyptian and part Hebrew, rejected by both families, accepted by nobody, living now in the wilderness with a nomadic tribe. Moses named his kid "wanderer." Who *is* he? God answers his question nonsensically: "I will be with you." Who is Moses? God is with him, that's what matters. Moses then asks God; ok, if I'm with you, then who are you? God responds: I will be whoever I will be. Typically we translate that Hebrew phrase as "I am who I am," but the Hebrew is clear: it says "I will be whatever I will be." Again, this is not a great answer to the question. But God said that God will be with Moses, so who is Moses? God is with Moses. Who is God? God is with Moses. That's ultimately all that matters. And to try to prove the point, God gives Moses a strange sign: "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." Typically, we think of signs happening *before* you do the hard thing, to give you confidence. But Moses is told that he has to trust, and do the hard thing first, and the sign comes last. The sign *is* worshipping God.

Second thing about Exodus: on the night the Israelites escaped from Pharaoh's house of slavery, Exodus 12 says that "a mixed multitude" went up out of Egypt. The people who leave Egypt are not one bloodline. Egyptians go, too, and other people as well who had been oppressed by Egypt; Lybians, Sudanese, Syrians, Ethiopians. They leave together as one. From the first night they exist as a people, "the people" is bigger than just one biological family.

Third, in Exodus 14 and 15, we hear the story of the crossing of the sea. Afterwards, Moses and the Israelites sing a song that ends with the line:

“The LORD will reign forever and ever.” The people had just escaped one king, Pharaoh, and they did not want Moses to be king, or someone like David: their first act of freedom was to sing: we only want God alone to be our king.

Then, in Exodus 19, our reading for today, we hear that it has been three months of traveling after the miracle at the sea, and the people come to a mountain and camp at the foot of it. It is the same mountain where Moses stood alone at the burning bush. The sign was about to come true: God had said that the sign was that Moses and the people would celebrate on the holy mountain. And this time, everyone was there.

At this point, Moses goes up on the mountain, and God begins to speak. We might imagine that God begins with laws and commandments, but in contrast the first thing God says on Sinai is a story. In verse 4, God says: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Some Christian communities will say things like, “Jews try to earn their salvation by following the law.” But here in Exodus 19, we see that’s not true – it’s never been true. Here, they’re saved by grace, before there even was a law to follow.

Before God asks anything of Israel, God first reminds them in this text, of what God has already done: namely, God has saved them. The people are not at the mountain because they deserved it, or were good enough to earn it. They are there because God heard them cry out in Egypt, and God came and rescued them. Even when God begins to give the commandments, God starts with the same story of salvation: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” First, God freely saves by grace alone, and only then does God issue a call, and offer a special role in God’s mission to the world.

In Hebrew, every time we see “you” in these verses, it is plural. In Atlanta, where I lived for twenty years, we had a word for that: “Y’all.” I’d translate the verse this way: “Y’all have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore y’all on eagles’ wings and brought y’all to myself.”

In these verses, God speaks to everyone at once. Remarkably, nothing like this survives from anywhere else in the ancient world, as far as we know. Ancient texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia and Canaan and Greece tell us that the gods spoke to kings; the gods spoke to high priests; the gods spoke to powerful heroes. When ancient Egyptians and Babylonians wanted to use a word to describe a group of people, they used words like "the king's subjects." But to speak to a whole people directly, as "y'all," was highly unusual. Kings didn't want to give people the idea that they were *a people,* like "We the people," a political unit, a body that could act as one, deliberate together, negotiate with the kings and priests, relate directly to the high gods without kings and priests mediating.

In order to say a word that meant something like "the people," in the sense that the US Constitution means "the people," as a body politic, Israel had to stretch a word. The Hebrew word for "people," '*am*, actually means something like "grandfather." In Exodus 19, God starts to use that word to means something else entirely: a unit, "the people," who could act together, who could be spoken to, and who could speak. This was a radically new idea in the ancient world. So far as we can tell, God speaks this idea into existence here in Exodus, when God directly addresses a people.

And in the first-ever address to a people, God makes an offer. In verses 5 and 6, God says: "Now therefore, *if* you all obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine," God says, "but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

That "if" can make Presbyterians nervous. If you do what God says, then… It sounds like a condition on salvation. But remember: the people have already been saved. The "if" is about what kind of people they'll become now that they've been rescued. Salvation always comes first, by grace. The people are invited to respond only after salvation. And look at the job description they're offered: a priestly kingdom. A priest exists for other people, standing between God and the world so that God's blessing gets through. In Genesis 12, God had said it to Abraham: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Here it's said to a

whole nation. “The whole earth is mine,” God says. Israel is not chosen *instead* of everyone else. Israel is chosen *for* everyone else.

And God calls this arrangement a “covenant.” Today, that word, “covenant,” sounds religious, churchy. But in the ancient world it had nothing to do with religion. A covenant was a contract: you made a covenant to sell grain, to buy a house, to make a business deal. No one, as far as we know, ever claimed what Israel claimed: that their God had signed a contract with them. To the neighbors, that would have sounded pathetic: a contract limits you. It gives the other side a claim on you. What kind of god would sign a contract with a crowd of runaway slaves? It sounded demeaning. But we hear over and over again that making freely agreed-upon agreements, or covenants, is an important part of who YHWH is.

And then Moses comes down the mountain and tells the community what he heard. In verse 8, we hear that: “All the people answered together: ‘Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do.’”

The people spoke as one voice. There was no king to accept the terms on their behalf, and no priest to ratify it. The people who camped as one body signed the contract with one voice; everyone had a choice, and they chose together, as one. You said that sentence this morning, by the way. It was in the last line of our call to worship: Everything the LORD has spoken, we will do.

When the American Revolution began, most of the Presbyterians in this part of Pennsylvania had come, like John Frazer, from Ulster in Northern Ireland, where the Scots had been settled a century before. Harvests had failed, and landlords had raised rents to whatever a desperate tenant would pay. And in 1704 Parliament passed a law that barred Presbyterians from public office unless they would take communion in the king’s church. These were people whose Scottish ancestors had stood against the English king who wanted to tell them how to worship. The Covenanters, they called themselves, after the covenants of the Bible. Their banner read, “For Christ’s Crown and Covenant.” Their resistance came directly from the revolutionary theological message of Exodus in the Bible.

And when the Revolution came, the Scots Presbyterians remembered the stories from Exodus. In August of 1776, while Persifor Frazer was at Fort Ticonderoga, his friend Thomas Cheyney, a farmer and justice of the peace from Thornbury, wrote to him:

"We may look like the poor Israelites who broke loose from Pharaoh's oppression, with nations to conquer and seas of blood to wade through. But if we don't get there ourselves, our children will. They'll arrive at the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey."

Cheyney was summarizing Exodus, in the summer of the Declaration of Independence, but he also sounds a lot like Martin Luther King, Jr. Cheyney learned this interpretation of Exodus in his local congregation. The deepest idea in the Declaration of Independence, namely, that a people can constitute itself by consenting together, and that no earthly power stands between that people and God, had been running through this county's Presbyterian congregations for generations.

Why did Persifor Frazer go right back into Washington's army, right back into mortal danger, when he miraculously escaped his imprisonment in the Golden Swan? Because he was convinced that the God of the Exodus was still active, working in the world, doing the same things in new places.

Of course, not *everyone* was freed from oppression, not *everyone* was considered fully part of "We the people," in the new American experiment with democracy. In 1775, a county committee appointed Persifor Frazer to draft a petition to the Assembly "with regard to the manumission of slaves, especially relating to the freedom of infants hereafter born." *Hereafter born*. Not everyone was freed, at least yet.

In 1780, Pennsylvania passed the first law in the United States to abolish slavery, but it was a gradual law. It required every slaveholder in the state to register, by name and age, every person they held; the register for Chester County survives - and you can read it today, online.

Thomas Cheyney, of Thornbury, the man who wrote about freedom from Pharaoh, is on the list. He registered two people: a girl named Lizey, age nine, and a boy named Isaac, age six.

Then, in September of 1777, two days after the battle of Brandywine, a British raiding party pillaged the Frazer farm. Someone in that household later wrote up the losses, and at the bottom of the list, under the heading of property, is this: "Two enslaved women ran away afterwards. One of them went to the British in Philadelphia." They were valued at two hundred pounds. But nobody wrote down their names. They ran to the British because the British would have, at that point in time, set them free from enslavement. The point that, in September of 1777, in Chester County, if an enslaved person wanted freedom, they had to run to the British. Who was Pharaoh in this version of the story?

When God said "y'all," God meant everyone who came out of Egypt. But "We the people," in 1776, did not *yet* mean everyone. It is still, two hundred and fifty years later, a work in progress. And the question Sinai keeps asking, generation after generation, is: who are we leaving out?

The good news is that the Bible asks us to keep asking that question. The Torah, the five books of Moses, asks this question, over and over. God makes a covenant with the people at Sinai, and then, for the next few hundred pages of the Bible, the people keep discovering that somebody got left out, and because they remember that the covenant was supposed to be for everyone, they make more room to include everyone.

In the book of Deuteronomy, set forty years after the people first got to Sinai, with a new generation that has been born and raised in the wilderness, the people are perched on the far bank of the Jordan, about to cross into the promised land, and Moses, who is about to die, gathers them one last time before he dies, and he oes back over the whole law. Everyone who stood at the mountain of God and had died in the wilderness, except Moses and two other men. The crowd in front of him is the children and grandchildren of the people who were there.

In Deuteronomy 5:2, Moses says to them: “The LORD our God made a covenant with us at [Sinai].” Then Moses says: “Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.”

That is not *literally* true. Their ancestors were exactly the ones at the mountain. Most of these people weren’t born yet. But Moses isn’t confused. He’s making a point. The covenant is not something you inherit, already finished, from the people who signed it two generations back. God makes it with “all of us here alive today.” And “today” means whatever day those words are read. It meant that day across the Jordan. It meant Chester County in 1776. It means this place, St. John’s, this morning. The covenant is ours. And so is the question of who’s been left out of it.

So let me return to Persifor Frazer. A year and a half before he broke out of his makeshift jail in the Golden Swan, he was at Fort Ticonderoga; it was October 1776. The American fleet on the lake had just been destroyed, and the British army was expected to assault the Fort within a day. Things looked grim. Frazer wrote to his wife, and he told her that he couldn’t say how it would go with him. Frazer wrote this:

“Hope for the best, my dear Polly. Providence may have many happy days in store for us. Let us endeavor, however, to deserve its blessings.”

A good Presbyterian will want to correct one word of Frazer’s: we can’t ever *deserve* blessings. Nobody at the foot of Sinai deserved to be there; that’s the whole point of God saying, “I bore you on eagles’ wings.” But Frazer’s larger point was nevertheless true; in the letter to the Ephesians we hear it put another way: “Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” We don’t ever have to earn any blessings, but we have been entrusted with God’s blessings to share with others; let us walk worthy of this task, and carry God’s blessings and give the blessing to the people who haven’t yet received it, just as it was once given to us.

Here’s an example of that blessing from the Frazer family’s own life: in July of 1777, with her husband, Persifor, away with the army, Mary Frazer had a

wheat harvest to bring in and no one to bring it. So the neighbors came to help: twenty-six men showed up, she wrote, every one trying to outdo the next. And then she added this: “There were both Whig and Tory in the field, and not the least dispute among them.” Whigs were for the Revolution; Tories were for the king. So the people who disagreed about the most important political question of their lives worked side by side in the same field on the same July morning and reaped a soldier’s wheat to care for his wife and children. That is what a priestly people looks like: a people who serve those who are in all kinds of need.

Two hundred and fifty years ago the people of this county heard the story of Sinai and believed it. They got part of it right and part of it wrong; but they have passed down that covenant, and the task of discerning how we respond to it most faithfully, and now, it is ours. The only question is whether we will answer the way they answered at the mountain.

Amen.