

It's Time!

Exodus 12:1-14

First Presbyterian Church

July 5, 2020

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴If a household is too small for a whole lamb; it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the LORD. ¹²For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Sermon

In response to the latest calls to end to racism and racial inequity in this country, some 60 members of our church have participated in the 21 Day Racial Equity Challenge. The reason for this challenge is perhaps best articulated by writer, David Foster Wallace, who once began a speech by saying: There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming in the other direction. The older fish nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" The two young fish swim on for a bit, but then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the heck is water?" Wallace continues his speech: "If you're worried that I plan to present myself as the wise old fish explaining what water is, please don't be. I am not the wise old fish. But the point of the fish story is that often the most obvious and important realities are the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about. Racism is one of those realities... and as white people... who have lived our lives swimming in waters of privilege (waters that many of us were not even aware of) we committed to a discipline of listening... so that we might hear voices that we would not ordinarily hear.

Taking part in the challenge myself, I've thought about many things... and among them I have thought a lot about slavery. I've learned so much about the history of slavery in our country... I've gained insight into its social and psychological and economic impact. I've heard again all the distorted scientific and religious justifications for slavery... and I've thought about what all this means NOW...for our nation and our churches and each of us NOW.

Perhaps it's just coincidence on the Sunday we complete our 21 Day Challenge... that our sermon series offers us this seminal story of slavery and freedom in the history of our faith. The Hebrews... the descendants of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Joseph... were slaves in Egypt. The great supply cities of Pharaoh – the warehouses of national ambition and stockpiles against fear... these were built with the sweat and blood (the muscle and bone) of Hebrew slaves. They were given quotas for the making of bricks... and then were deprived of the raw materials that were essential to meeting their quotas. And when they cried out to their taskmasters... when they protested the harsh conditions of their life and labor, they were only beaten and treated more harshly.

You see, when the Pharaoh looked at the Hebrew people – they were multiplying and growing against all odds. And Pharaoh feared the Hebrews... he feared that if he set them free, his economy could collapse... he feared they might demand things he wasn't willing to give... he feared that if he went to war, they might join his enemy. So, he held on tight. Yet, as we now know... from reading the book of Exodus... the economy of slavery was an offense to the economy of God. And Moses went to the Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go."¹

"But that was then," we say, "Surely, we are not like Egypt, Lord. Surely, we left slavery behind long ago. Surely, we are not the ones who are still holding your people captive." And yet, the most recent estimates report that more than 40 million women, children, and men are enslaved around the world today.² Their enslavement takes many forms. For millions of women and girls, it is prostitution, forced marriage, or some other sexual and reproductive exploitation. Others are forced into domestic work and agriculture, construction and manufacturing. Some are tricked or kidnapped or sold for illegal adoption. Still others are forced into begging or military service... crime or organ harvesting. And lest we think this only happens in some far-off place – best estimates are that 15 to 17 thousand people are trafficked INTO the United States each year... and that 60,000 men, women and children are enslaved in the United States right now. And Moses said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go"

One of the insights I've heard most often from those of you who did the 21 Day Challenge is that there is so much about the history of Africans in America that we just never heard... were never told... were never taught. This is true for me as well.

Bryan Stevenson... Director of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of the best-selling book *Just Mercy*, (which is also now a movie) explains much of what I didn't know: Millions of African people were brought to America in chains, enslaved by a narrative of racial difference that was crafted to justify their captivity and domination. Though involuntary servitude was banned by the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, nothing was done to confront the ideology of white supremacy. Slavery didn't end in 1865; it just evolved. And until the 1950s, thousands of black people were routinely lynched in acts of racial terror, often while many in the white community stood by and cheered.

¹ This opening is quoted from "Leaving Slavery Behind," a sermon by Dr. Alathea Portier-Young, preached un Duke University Chapel on September 7, 2014. This is an excerpt from Alathea Portier-Young, "Slavery, Surrogacy, and Society: Making a Future in the Wilderness," *Huffington Post*, June 16, 2014.

² Kevin Hyland, *Modern Slavery: A Global Phenomenon*, Global Slavery Index 2018

Throughout much of the twentieth century, African Americans were segregated and silenced by Jim Crow laws that denied basic economic, social, and political rights. In the 1960s, the country made progress dismantling the most obvious forms of racial bigotry, but we refused to commit ourselves to a process of truth and reconciliation. Consequently, new forms of racial subordination have emerged. We are currently in an era of mass incarceration and excessive punishment. We imprison people of color at record levels by making up new crimes, which are disproportionately enforced against those who are black or brown. The Justice Department projects that one in three black males born in the twenty-first century is expected to go to jail or prison at some point during his lifetime. And the Bryan Stevenson writes: Only in a country where we have learned to tolerate racial injustice would this be seen as something other than a national crisis.³

Which brings us, I think, to this current moment in our national life. This is a moment when (not all) but many Americans see more clearly than ever before that we are in a national crisis. It's time, many say, to dismantle these modern expressions of slavery. It's time to address head-on the systemic racism and structural injustice we are hearing so much about. It's time – to use one of John and Jesus' most powerful words – to repent of the sin of white supremacy and privilege. It's time! Of course, this is precisely what God had been saying to the Pharaoh through those nine devastating plagues. It's time! These are my people, not yours. They belong to me, not you. They will serve me, not your gods. And if you will not free them, I will. It will not be easy... and it will not be pretty... but it's time.

In our Bible reading this morning we heard the Passover story which for our Jewish sisters and brothers represents THE MODEL STORY of faith and freedom. Freedom that came at a great cost. Those of you who are Harry Potter fans will recall that some of the books in the library are enchanted... such that the pages themselves morph into the shape of a face whose mouth is wide open filling the air with a piercing scream. Well, if the pages of the Bible were to be so enchanted, then opening to Exodus 12, the pages themselves would be dripping with blood even as the mournful cries of Egyptian mothers and fathers would fill the air. This was an epic battle between Yahweh and Pharaoh... a battle which reveals what we know that those who are on top don't typically vacate their position voluntarily... that those whose lifestyles benefit from the work of enslaved minds and bodies aren't likely to release them willingly. This is why the "exodus" of God's people from Egypt was such a struggle... and cost so much. And even for them... even for the Israelites the way to ward off this tenth plague would only come by the shedding of an innocent lamb's blood. There was no free and easy pass. If you were one of those, who after 400 years of slavery, was finally able to walk away... it was because a lamb died that you are now free. The blood of the lamb means life for you... and that's why it was so important for you at Passover to tell your children and your children's children that your freedom came at a price.

It was during one of these Passover celebrations that Jesus served his disciples what we have come to know as the Lord's Supper. Because just like it is for our Jewish ancestors, this meal is about freedom... a freedom that came at a price. Each time we eat this bread and drink from this cup we remember him: the one who announced, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free..."

³ Bryan Stevenson in the Forward to Wallis, Jim. *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, Baker Publishing Group, Kindle Edition.

Each time we eat this bread and drink from this cup we remember him – and how out of love for each of us, HE himself became the sacrificial lamb – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world... liberating us to from sin and guilt... freeing us from all fear in life and in death. And each time we eat this bread and drink from this cup, we remember once again how God took this tragic and horrible death and once again, brought forth life... freedom out of bondage... life out of death... so that we might truly know that nothing can separate us from God... absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love is Christ Jesus. When we eat this bread and drink from this cup we take OUR place in God's freedom story... a story of a God who heard from Egypt (and even now continues to hear from all over our world) the groanings of those who are enslaved crying out for freedom. In this story our God chooses sides... and fights a mighty battle for those who are oppressed... so that they might truly be free. And in this story our God (who wants more than anything for us be free to love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength... who wants more than anything for us to be free to love our neighbor as ourselves) This God emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... so that no one... absolutely no one... would have to be a slave again.