

*Let us pray,
May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts,
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer.*

Flight

The final scene of The Sound of Music makes me a little teary.
It is of the family walking over the mountain with nothing but the clothes that they are wearing,
the older ones piggy backing the little ones.

But without the beautiful soundtrack behind them trudge many refugees,
ill clad, trudging through snow covered mountains,
hauling young children and elderly along rocky paths;
or those who put themselves on a flimsy boat to cross a treacherous sea,
ready to risk anything to escape.

Those who are afraid to face the mountains, enter the desert, or cross the seas
will remain in captivity: at best, nothing will change for them, at worst ...
The deserts, the mountains and the seas are not places to settle in,
but to pass through in order to come to greater freedom and awareness.
I have just described a spiritual journey, but authentic spiritual journeys happen in reality,
not in the imagination.

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he finds himself alone in the desert to face what lies ahead.
It was the very Spirit of God that drove him out into the wilderness.
We talk about 'movements of the Spirit', and we should take note
when we suddenly see something breaking into our world
be it the coming down of the Berlin Wall, a civil revolution,
the moving of a whole race of people.
In these cases people have decided to move and have acted upon it.

Pharaoh's hold cracks

Before the plagues started, the Israelites were crushed in Spirit and would have remained so
if Moses had not been there to stand in the breach.
As nine plagues hit Egypt, one after the other,
the Egyptians themselves began to lose faith in their Pharaoh
and instead started paying more attention to Moses.

The Israelites who were at first angry with Moses for making their servitude harder and more bitter
because of his confrontation with Pharaoh,
now too paid more attention to Moses,
so when he came and told them to prepare what would become the Passover meal,
they obeyed Moses.

The situation had completely changed.
Pharaoh's hold had cracked, and he was no longer in control.
His country was lying in ruins.

It is D-Day for Pharaoh.
God told Moses to warn him of a final plague.
Every first born in the land of Egypt would die,
from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the female slave
to the first born of all livestock.

As part of the preparation of the Passover meal,
the Israelites had to paint the lintels of their doorways with the blood of the sacrificed lamb,
an act that differentiated them from the Egyptians,
an act that preserved them from the angel of death.

It was a dramatic night, the Passover meal was made ready,
a meal that was to be consumed in readiness for departure,
the people ate with sandals on their feet and staffs in their hands.
The lintels were daubed with blood.
As they ate, the angel of death passed over, the 10th plague,
and wails could be heard in all the houses of Egypt.

Pharaoh summoned the man he had never wanted to see again and told him and all his people to go.
The Egyptians also urged them to go and gave up their silver and gold and gifts of clothing.

Roles reversed?

Eleventh hour treaties.
At the end of all this, it was the weak and the oppressed who were seen as strong.
They had something that the wealthy and privileged Egyptians looked for in vain.
Along with the great company of Israelites who set out, a mixed crowd went with them,
perhaps other ethnic slaves, perhaps some Egyptians
all desperate to get out of this cursed country.

The shoe is on the other foot.
This could have been a story of how the slave became the master – those are very popular stories.

But this story, while having the pleasing result of escaping from slavery,
will continue into a people forging a new identity,
a new community with lessons learned from their bitter experience.

Their experience for instance will be expressed in the commandment about keeping the Sabbath,
where not only the Israelites should rest, but also

the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. Deut 5:14-15

It is not going to be a bed of roses from here on end.
The wilderness will hold many more lessons and be a place of refining fire.
It really is a remarkable story of redemption, not only from the Egyptians,
but ultimately themselves.

Crucial remembrance

Passover to Judaism is what Easter, the whole passion of Jesus, is to Christians.
But our celebration comes out of the Passover and its meaning.

The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, tell us the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples
was a Passover meal.

In it, Jesus gives the bread and wine a new meaning:
this is my body, this is my blood, do this in remembrance of me.

John's gospel omits the Last Supper itself, but has Jesus being killed
at the *very same time* the lambs for the Passover were being slaughtered,
hence in this gospel Jesus is called the Lamb of God.

Jesus leads us in an exodus from human sin,
that of injustice; of lack of compassion and love towards others,
particularly the poor and weak;
of greed for power and possessions; of violence and abuse; of pride and arrogance.

Jesus overcomes the problem of sin, not by taking over as a new authority,
but by taking it into the desert, disempowering its hold, and dismantling its pretensions.

Jesus draws together and creates a new community, not of worldly power,
but a community of justice and peace to bear witness that there is a better way,
a different way from that of grasping and competing.

There repeated rituals of the Passover and the Holy Communion are ones of drama,
as in bringing something to life in a way that we experience that moment.

Symbols and rituals need either to be self-explanatory, or provoke the question,
What does this mean?

Our religious celebrations are educative, not only reminding us of certain events,
but continuing to explore their meaning,
and recognize the parallels in our life experience today.

Lent for instance is that time to risk the desert in our own lives and to go forward in faith.

The Bible makes clear that telling the story and reenacting the action
is just as important as walking into freedom in the first place,
perhaps even more important.

*(Those have fought for freedoms are often grieved at the way
the next generations take those freedoms for granted.)*

Freedom happens not just once but again and again and again.

For in every generation, there is one who rises up to press us down,
and in every generation there comes the moments for those pressed down to rise,
not to reenact the slavery upon others,
but to follow the Divine liberator into community and freedom.

Acts of remembrance celebrate the survival of the darkness and deprivation
and the coming into a fuller and richer life.

Continuing the journey of freedom

The Biblical stories are not just events that lay back in history,
but are stories of humankind, of today, of our search for meaning and understanding,
of seeking God and redemption.

These stories tell us freedom lays in human hands and legs.

In 1965 Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched alongside Dr Martin Luther King Jr
in Selma Alabama, to demand that the grandchildren of slaves be accorded the right to vote.
Abraham came back home from that march to say, "I felt as if my legs were praying."

Faith is not just anywhere or nowhere.

God is not just anywhere or nowhere.

God is found, and faith will exist in the midst of reality, of the community, and of the journey.

Our present situation calls us to relearn and rethink
the story of Pharaoh, the Exodus and the Wilderness.

To learn from it in ways that our forbears did not,
to hear some aspects of the story that were always there
but did not rise up into our consciousness
until our own crises taught us to notice and draw upon them.

We learn in order to act.

*Let us pray,
Almighty God,
We thank you for this most wonderful story of your deliverance in Exodus.
You have delivered us all through Jesus,
through whom you have left us a wonderful memorial of your passion, death and glorious resurrection, a memorial of
your presence, your power and your love.
Help us to be ever aware of these sacred mysteries and know in our lives the fruit of your redemption, rejoicing in
your triumph over all evil and death.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.ⁱ*

ⁱ Prayer based on David Adam. *Forward to Freedom*. 65.