

So We Are Free; Now What?

Last Sunday we talked about the plague of frogs and said something about the plagues in general. The ten plagues God brought upon Egypt at the hand of Moses and Aaron were not only to convince Pharaoh to give the Israelites their freedom, but also served to prove the vast superiority and authority of God over all the demon gods of Egypt. This proof was provided for Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but even more so for the Israelites who needed to be reminded that the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph had returned to them and that it was He who would lead them to freedom. In order to be free the children of Israel needed to be set free of any and all allegiances to Egyptian gods, and be restored in their allegiance to the one true God. They needed to learn to walk in faithful obedience to Him in order to know true freedom.

But the thing we need to recognize is that freedom from human slavery did not mean that the Israelites were truly free. There is a parallel here between the experience of Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt and the experience of former slaves in America following their emancipation at the end of the civil war. When you have been a slave for a long time, a war or an act of congress or ten plagues visited upon your captors may secure your physical freedom, but in and of themselves these outside forces cannot deliver you from the damage done to your soul. In other words the fear, loss of self-esteem, the shame you feel for not being able to protect yourself or your loved ones, patterns of deception you have adopted for survival, scars, anger, and hate toward your former oppressors do not evaporate over night. Your education and ability to care for yourself and your family has also been compromised. Living in freedom requires a new mindset and a new set of skills that take time to develop. Trust in God or your ability to thrive in freedom do not come easily, and the longer you have been a slave the more difficult it will be for you to adjust to a new reality.

And, of course, there is also a parallel here between what happens when a person is delivered from slavery to the Devil and becomes a servant of Jesus Christ. Although your sins have been forgiven and in Christ you have been declared righteous and although you are positionally a new creation and are free from all condemnation, your ability to experience all of this may be severely limited by your years of captivity to Satan. So although you are clean, you don't feel clean. Though no one can condemn you, you still feel vulnerable. Though you are safe, you

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don't feel safe. Though you don't need to sin to comfort yourself or to protect yourself, you still find yourself turning back to some of those old habits. You lack the skills to live in your new reality. Although you have asked Christ to come into your heart and have committed yourself to serve Him, you may often find that you lack the faith and strength to obey Him. This is the situation that Paul is describing at the end of Romans 7, where he asks, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

"Who will rescue me?" is an appropriate question but perhaps an even more appropriate question is "How will I be rescued?" How is a former slave to learn to live in freedom? How are former slaves of Satan to learn to live new lives to the praise and honor of God? We know that Christ is the Who but what is the How? How does He transform us from thinking and acting like slaves into daughters and sons of God, who think and act like members of God's royal family?

Let's see if we can learn anything from the experience of the Israelites upon being released from bondage to Pharaoh. Exodus 13:17-18 say, "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.' So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle."

What this tells us from the beginning, as we might expect, is that the Israelites were prone to fear. In Egypt they had been controlled and kept in their place by fear and by the threat of violence against them. Furthermore, they were trained to be slaves not soldiers. And so, even though they were well armed and had a vast army numbering 600,000 men plus women and children, when they left Egypt, they had no experience or confidence in battle. The Israelites had to be freed from their fear if they were ever to inherit the land of promise and the life God wanted them to enjoy.

We might do well to stop here for a moment and search our own hearts in this regard. What would we do for God that we are not doing for God now because we are afraid? What would we let go of? What new responsibilities would we embrace? What broken or strained relationships would we take steps to heal? Imagine how our lives would be different if we had no fear: no fear of poverty, no fear of ridicule or embarrassment, no fear of

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rejection, no fear of being abandoned, no fear of death. What could we do as Christians if Christ should deliver us from all your fears. In Psalm 34:4, David testifies, "I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." What would it be like to be delivered from all our fears? I don't know about you, but I confess I'm not there yet. I'm closer to being there today than I was yesterday, but I'm not there yet. Maybe you're not there yet either?

At the beginning of the Exodus, the people of Israel were extremely skittish and fearful of what it meant for them to live in freedom, but look at what God does to reassure them. Exodus 13:19 says, "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.'"

The first thing the Israelites needed to know, and the first thing we need to know, in order for us to live in freedom, is that our God is the God who keeps His promises. We may wonder about the significance of Joseph's bones. Why would a bunch of former slaves, being led forth to form a new nation, bother with a 400-year-old skeleton? Why should they take such a burden with them into the wilderness? What use is a pile of bones when you are trying to survive in the desert?

If you want to know the significance of Joseph's bones it would be good to think about this: Why do soldiers carry their nation's flag with them into battle? Why do we build memorials to our heroes? Why do married couples wear wedding rings? Why is there a cross on the front wall of our sanctuary? The obvious answer is that these things are powerful symbols of promises--the promise of a nation, the promise of our human potential, the promises made on a wedding day, and the promise God made to us at Calvary. The promise about Joseph's bones was a promise that had kept dignity and hope alive among the Israelite slaves for several hundred years. In remembering to take up Joseph's bones, the Israelites were reminded that no matter how long it might take, God will fulfill His promises in the future. God will do what He says; no matter how unlikely or impossible it might seem, God will keep His every promise. **Whenever we are afraid we need to remember that God will keep His promises.**

A second thing that was given to the Israelites to combat their fear was the assurance of God's presence. Exodus 13:20-22 say, "After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people."

These visible manifestations of God's presence served to remind the Israelites that they were not alone on their journey. The cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night had other practical benefits as well. Not only did they serve as guides and, as in the case of the pillar of fire, a lamp to light the way; but, the cloud provided a moist covering that protected the people from the damaging effects of the desert sun in the day time, and the pillar of fire provided warmth against the cold of the desert at night. For those who had eyes to see and hearts to understand, this promise-keeping God who was with them was kind, compassionate, and nurturing. Further evidences of His care would be the provision of water from a rock, manna and meat from heaven, and clothes and shoes that did not wear out, even after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

When I read about the cloud and the pillar of fire that accompanied the Israelites, the images that come to my mind are of Jesus being taken up into heaven in a cloud, with the promise to His disciples that He would return in the same way. And, also the image of the tongues of fire that rested on the disciples' heads on the Day of Pentecost. Although we may not now be able to see the cloud or the fire with our physical eyes, we have been given Jesus and the Holy Spirit to abide with us and to guide us from the inside out. If we will take the time to be still, to meditate on God's promises, and to pray accordingly, we will also know that we are not alone on this journey. We will also be led and nurtured by God. We need to remember that **God is with us and God is willing and able to meet our needs.**

The third thing that we are pointed to in our Scripture this morning is the miracle of Israel's escape through the sea. Exodus 14:1-2 say, "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.'" Although we cannot know the exact place where the Israelites crossed the sea or how much of a sea

they had to cross, what we do know is that God led them to a spot between the Egyptians, who had decided to chase after them, and a body of water large enough to be called a sea. We also know that on the other side of that sea was a town called Baal Zephon, which means "God of the North."

The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron, the God who led the Israelites as a cloud by day and as a pillar of fire by night, had shown His authority over all the gods of Egypt in the South. Now this same God would lead His people against Baal Zephon, the Canaanite god of the North. God would lead His people and teach them to trust Him by taking them through the sea.

Have you ever found yourself between that proverbial "rock and a hard place," trapped with no apparent way out? It's a bad feeling isn't it? It's the epitome of fear. Even after the 10 plagues, the Israelites still feared the Egyptians. They feared the sea. And, they feared the unknown gods in the North. And God led them right into the mouth of their fears. God didn't do that to scare them but to show them that He was greater--greater than the Egyptians, greater than the sea, and greater than Baal Zaphon. **To name and face our fears is a necessary part of gaining courage.**

Do you know that God is working in all of the circumstances of our lives for our good and to prove to us that He is greater than all our fears? If we are afraid of something coming back to haunt us from our past or afraid of something in the future, or if we are between a rock and a hard place just now, we can know that God is willing and that God is able to set us free from all our fears. Our God will keep His every promise. Our God will never leave us or forsake us. Our God will help us name and face our fears. A first step toward claiming the freedom we have as followers of Jesus Christ is to find in Him the freedom from our fears.

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

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Exodus 13:17-4:2

Jon R. Neely, Pastor