

When do God's people become truly free? The Exodus story, of which we have just a tiny slice today, will wind throughout the Hebrew scriptures as the iconic story of what it is to be delivered by God. It will be especially remembered in the texts that are written when the people are captive in Babylon. It will be essential to developing an ethic of welcoming the stranger that is essential to serving God: You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. ([Exodus 23:9](#)).

The story of the Exodus – which includes emancipation of the Hebrew People – is a huge story: the call of Moses, the confrontations with Pharaoh, the plagues, the Passover, the escape, the Red Sea parting, the providing of the Law -- and then 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness. And that got me wondering: When did Israel consider itself free?

Our little taste of the Exodus today happens one month into the sojourn into the Wilderness. Pharaoh's army has been drowned in the sea in the previous chapter and there was great rejoicing. But now the food has run out. And there is great complaining.

"If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Exodus 16:4)

The people of God look back across the Wilderness and they long for their slavery – because it had fed them. And they forget their oppression – which had starved them of their identity and their relationship with God. And now they wonder what they have gotten themselves into.

They spend the next 40 years learning what they have gotten themselves into. They've gotten themselves into the wilderness – that place where God will teach them essential lessons about Freedom in order to be able to receive God's promise. And it starts with God filling their bellies with quail by night and manna by day.

[The Commentary on Exodus in the Jewish Study Bible](#) points out that flocks of quail falling from the sky and an edible scale that covers the ground like dew is not uncommon in this region. What is miraculous is that it happens right when the Israelites need it – these are not typical occurrences nor are they particularly abundant. But at this moment in the story, God provides. And here is the first lesson they learn about their Freedom – it is not simply emancipation from Egypt. It is freedom to depend entirely upon God for their very life and identity. That is their first test: can Israel allow God to determine its daily portion, so that all have enough, though there won't be left-overs?

This story of God's relationship with God's people is written over and over again throughout our Hebrew Scriptures, through our Christian stories and right into our hungry lives today. Can we rely on God for our daily bread? And by that I don't mean our groceries. Rather can we live in a relationship with God in which God is the source of what we need to love one another, to create community and ground civil society, to share resources, to welcome the stranger? I think this is what it means to be a people that is redeemed by God.

The alternative is to do it ourselves, perhaps with a nod to a God that sits by and silently approves. And that can be very tempting for Americans, especially as we gather around the Olympics and see the fruits of intense personal training and individual achievement.

But there is a shadow side to our individualism, our independence. It can lead to a grossly imbalanced distribution of resources, of power, of dignity and worth among people and creation. And it can lead to a wildly distorted view of where our abilities and resources come from – we get the feeling that it's something that we can train for, and control and subdue. I don't think I need to repaint the picture of what that looks like at the present political moment.

Perhaps our greatest mistake is to confuse freedom with independence. Because God's first lesson out of Egypt is that freedom is about dependence -- upon God. That's the covenant that Israel makes with God over and over again. It's not simply the agreement of an individual with God, but it's the agreement of a people with God, and that means that they will rely upon one another to keep it.

God's Freedom is not independence from one another, but a freedom to live in community that is fueled by the love and intention of God. And that love is

ultimately best sustained by interdependence and mutuality. The whole thing tends to fall apart when God's people forget their dependence upon God and instead rely upon their own power – and ultimately harm and oppress one another to secure their chunk of the daily bread.

Jesus offers the same terms when the people come looking for more of what he was handing out when he fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fishes.

"Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world," Jesus says in John's Gospel today.

This is what Jesus offers when he calls himself the Bread of Life.

To eat that bread is to claim a different source for your sustenance than the world provides. To eat that bread is to give up your independence and embrace freedom. To eat that bread is not only to be emancipated from powers that oppress, but to be emancipated from the desire to be a power that oppresses.

That's why the Kingdom of God looks so different than our political structures, and our religious structures.

The author of Ephesians gives us a good example of what this means for us as church, for he is exhorting his community to a oneness and chosen-ness that now includes both gentiles and Jews. He is evoking a covenant that has been expanded beyond Israel alone, but is still a covenant with the one God.

A communal life worthy of that covenant is lived: with all humility and gentleness, with patience, by bearing with one another in love, by making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

A life like that asks: Whom do you depend on for your freedom?

And so, the author of Ephesians says,

"We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every

ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.”

And so we are free – to be inextricably dependent on one another.

The emancipating love that we are called to by the God of our foremothers and forefathers and ultimately by Jesus—binds us together. And that messes with the ways of our world – it upsets the structures that keep some wealthy and others poor; it makes us uncomfortable with taking more than we really need for the day; it activates us to speak the truth in love.

Learning to do this as a community can feel like a long walk in the wilderness sometimes. It can feel like the promise of something *that* beloved is generations away. But that ultimately reminds us that freedom is a **way** and not simply a destination.

And along that way the Will of God makes itself known, it does its work as it goes, it heals and transforms the creation, and it also nourishes us to participate in that healing and transformation as we go – strengthened and fed with just enough for each day.

Amen.