

Message for Third Wednesday in Lent (February 27, 2008)

Primary Readings: Exodus 12:40-42, Galatians 5:1, Luke 4:18-19

The religious life and Christian discipleship has *often* been described in terms of slavery and freedom! And the story of Moses, the Pharaoh, and God's people being delivered from slavery to freedom is a *classic* story and a *classic* example of God's work to let the oppressed go free.

As the actors of our drama reminded us, it's a *classic story* that almost *begs* to be told by a Hollywood studio-type production. A great tug of war between two charismatic leaders: Moses & Pharaoh. The lives of thousands of people and hundreds of years of history hanging in the balance. Plagues of frogs, flies, disease, boils, whole rivers turning to blood, staffs turning to snakes...

I can almost hear the story told by grandparents over a campfire, "The Living Lord our God," the wise, old grandparent says, "always works to bring freedom where there's oppression and deliverance where once there was slavery. In fact, this God despises oppression and slavery *so much*, that a long time ago there once was a people – God's people – who were oppressed in slavery long, long ago. And God brought plague after plague – frogs, flies, disease... *even the death of all the firstborn children* until finally the oppressors had no *choice* but to give up and *let God's people go...*"

It's a great story. It seems fit for a television screen. But it doesn't happen in real-life, does it? I wonder if it's similar to the way we often feel about the story of Jesus. It's a great story. It seems fit for Sunday morning from the pulpit. But it doesn't have much to do with my life, does it?

This evening as we remember this great story, we do well to remember that God's deliverance isn't just a fairy-tale of human history. There's other, more recent tales of deliverance you're probably familiar with. The non-violent struggle of Ghandi and an "army" of eventually 50,000 Muslim Pathans in northwestern India who delivered the people out of British control.

Or in this country, we remember the struggles of African-Americans and their allies to end the practice of slavery. We also remember the modern day Moses, Martin Luther King, Jr. who struggled for years to make certain that this country practiced what it preached when it came to a message of freedom for all.

But there are other stories we might be less familiar with. In Poland, a nonviolent campaign affiliated with the Catholic Church called “Solidarity” which defied the Soviet empire and helped liberate the people of Poland from communist oppression. Or in the Philippines, a million demonstrators who stood up to the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Or in South Africa, people rallied around this song we sang earlier, “We Are Marching in the Light of God” to end an oppressive structure called apartheid.

Unfortunately, systems of oppression and slavery usually are built-up like a giant brick foundation over generations and so they hardly crumble overnight. But God is persistent, removing brick after brick of oppression. And God calls you to this kind of persistence as well.

And our story as Christians is built upon this great story of deliverance from slavery into freedom. From the story which our producer and director so eloquently showed, we fast-forward a few hundred years. To a humble Jew named Jesus. He stands up in his synagogue at home (as the Gospel of Luke tells us) and begins his ministry with the words, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free!”

And then, Jesus closes his ministry, like two bookends, on the evening when his people were celebrating the ritual of “Passover” – where they remembered, re-lived God’s deliverance of God’s people (a fairy tale of a story) from slavery to freedom. And Jesus took the Passover cup and the Passover bread and said, “Whenever you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you are remembering this story, you are remembering me, and you are remembering a God who frees anyone who’s enslaved.”

Jesus’ message of freedom was one in the same with God’s deliverance of God’s people and this is why we dare to call Jesus, the “Son of God.” “For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul says in Galatians. Freedom from sin, freedom from broken systems where some are oppressed and some are enslaved.

It’s good news that God in Christ Jesus frees us from all sin and oppression – even before we dare to ask for forgiveness. So let us rejoice and celebrate and re-commit ourselves to dismantling any system of oppression or slavery we find being built up in our world. It takes discernment. It takes the grace of God. But deliverance from slavery into freedom isn’t just a fairy tale. It’s the story of God from the beginning of history to the very last word.