

“Stories of Making it Through”

April 11th, 2021

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My grandmother’s name was Ray – Ray Gray once she was married. She was small and feisty and valued precision, which is a good quality in an operating room nurse, which she was. My grandmother taught me to sew and to eat as many different colored foods as possible.

One of my grandmother’s favorite stories to tell was about her honeymoon. This was in 1944 and she and my grandfather had taken a bicycle trip across Canada - they were Canadian – and, as the story goes, they biked a hundred miles a day on their single speed bikes.

But one day they were riding through torrential rain and in the midst of the endless storm the wheel came off my grandfather’s bike. And so they found themselves stranded on the side of the road with no help in sight - needless to say, there were no cell phones in those days.

But then, as grace would have it, there was a wrench lying in the mud on the side of the road just where they had stopped. A wrench that fit the size of the nut on the wheel. My grandparents were able to fix the bike and carry on with their journey and keep telling that story decades later to their granddaughters who would, as grace would have it, keep telling the story.

Last Sunday I talked about how we’re in the midst of major holidays for all three of the world’s Abrahamic traditions. Last Sunday, we reflected on the Easter story, and today we’re reflecting on the Passover story.

Part of celebrating Passover, or Pesach, is the seder, a dinner in which Jews tell the story of Exodus together and eat foods to symbolize the story. Unlike Easter, which is celebrated at church, seder is celebrated at home.

The Haggadah is the book that’s used for the Seder liturgy. The word “Haggadah” means “telling” because the ritual is one of telling the story of Passover from

generation to generation. It's a way of creating and sharing Jewish identity, a feast held at home amongst family and is intentionally intergenerational.

The Haggadah we used in Concord begins this way:

“Passover is meant to be a moment in time when time is collapsed. We tell the Exodus story not simply to learn it, or to ponder the questions it poses, but to remember it—to know it in our bones—as if we too had been slaves on that journey toward freedom. Because we are not slaves, because we are not hungry or thirsty or in exile, we celebrate Passover as a sign that the bounty in our lives feeds our commitment to choose the journey toward freedom and peace for ourselves, for others, and for the future.”

When I think of Passover, I think of the joy and warmth of community, of jubilee and sweetness, story-telling and hope.

Passover is the time when Jews gather together and tell the story of the ancient Israelites leaving Egypt, escaping slavery and finding liberation.

It's a story that says: “we are a people who made it through.” The joy isn't born from a naïve story about how perfect everything is or was, it's born from the struggle of holding hard truths and resilience and possibility all at the same time.

It's a story that we embody in food and ritual. At a Passover Seder, we dip bitter herbs in salt water to remember the bitterness of slavery. We eat matzoh to remember the Israelites fleeing before the bread could rise for their journey.

I know some of you have been to a Seder nearly every year of your life, while others of you might be hearing about it for the first time. So let's get into the story.

The book of Exodus is quite long – I won't relay all of it to you this morning – and it is roughly divided into four parts. The first is the story of the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt and their liberation, the second is their journey through the desert to Sinai, the third is when Moses receives the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, and fourth is the story of the golden calf and instructions for the building of the temple.

During the Passover Seder, the storytelling focuses on the first two parts of Exodus – the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt and the journeying through the desert.

The story begins with the Israelites being enslaved by the Pharaoh in Egypt and Moses's early life. There's the iconic scene with Moses and the burning bush.

Then there is a funny series of events in which Moses tries to convince God that he really probably shouldn't be the prophet and maybe God should choose someone else. Moses tries to come up with a bunch of excuses, to no avail. I appreciate how human he is. But God just gets annoyed with Moses and then gives him a magical staff and says "this is for performing the signs and wonders."

Next come the plagues. God tells Moses that the Israelites will be released from slavery, but that Moses has to go convince Pharaoh to cooperate. Which basically entails trying to convince someone who thinks they are God that they are in fact not God and should liberate the entire people group they're exploiting for financial gain.

So Moses goes to Pharaoh with his brother Aaron and his magical staff and insists that the Israelites be released. They turn the staff into a snake as a sign of their power, but Pharaoh's heart is hardened – he's not impressed – and he refuses to let the Israelites go.

What ensues is a battle between Pharaoh and Moses, who is acting on behalf of God, in the form of ten plagues. Each time Moses goes to Pharaoh and says "Let my people go or else this plague will come upon all the people of Egypt" and Pharaoh keeps saying no.

It begins with Moses turning the Nile into a river of blood, then come frogs, then gnats, then flies, dead livestock, boils, then thunder and hail, locusts, darkness – still Pharaoh refuses. Then comes the warning of the tenth and final plague.

The tenth plague is where we get the name Passover – the tenth plague is the death of every firstborn in the land, human and animal alike. But before this plague happens God hatches an escape plan for the Israelites. They are to mark their doors with the blood of a sacrificed lamb and gather up their belongings by midnight to prepare for

the journey – this is why Jews eat unleavened bread, matzoh, during Passover – to remember that there was no time for the bread to rise before the escape.

At midnight, the angel of death passes over the houses that have been marked by blood, so the Israelites are spared from the final plague. In the morning Pharaoh wakes up and realizes that the firstborn of every family and animal in the entire land is dead like Moses had warned, and so he casts the Israelites out of Egypt, releasing them from slavery.

But the story doesn't end there. Because now all 600 thousand Israelites have to actually leave Egypt. On foot. Through the desert. And the story says that God led them on a roundabout route through the wilderness to avoid the war in the land of the Philistines – God feared the Israelites might return to Egypt if they were faced with war – so the journey is long.

And God leads the Israelites through the wilderness towards the Red Sea, but there's one final scene in this face-off between Pharaoh and Moses. Because Pharaoh regrets freeing the Israelites and gathers up an army of chariots to chase them down. And they meet at the edge of the Red Sea. But Moses still has that staff that God gave him for performing wonders, and as the chariots start to close in on the Israelites, Moses lifts the staff and parts the Red Sea. The Israelites find safe passage and the Pharaoh's army is swallowed by the closing waves.

In the end, the parting of the Red Sea isn't only to convince Pharaoh of the power of God, it's also to convince the Israelites of the power of God. A God who helped them escape slavery, a God who will provide manna in the desert so they can survive the journey.

Like I said last Sunday with the story of Easter, this Exodus story is one with many interpretations, which may or may not work for us as Unitarian Universalists. Maybe it's a story that reminds you of your own resilience and your connection to your ancestors. Or maybe it's not.

Either way, I think it's an important reminder that we need stories that remind us of our resilience and our own capacity to hope.

Because, remember, as Cornell West teaches, our “tragicomic commitment to hope” is one of the three core building blocks of liberal religion.

An absence of hope, this gritty, honest kind of hope, an absence of that hope is death to the moral imagination and agency that is necessary for meaningful change.

And this is why I find the ritual of retelling the story of Exodus during Passover so powerful. Because it is a story of struggle and survival and being aided by forces beyond our imagination. And the retelling is joyful and sweet and hopeful – it’s a story passed down from generation to generation, a gathering of family and friends that creates connection and resilience.

What are the stories you tell of our resilience as a people? People who find tools in the mud and food in the desert, people who find safe passage. Stories of making it through.

Because I think there is power in the retelling.
And not all of us celebrate Passover, but we do all have stories.

Stories of death passing over us, stories of our ancestors’ journeys, stories of resisting the call but finding some unknown strength to keep showing up.

These are stories not of our own grandeur or self-determination, but of our interconnectedness, of the grace that gets us through.

And it’s important to tell them, to remember our human capacity for resilience, to know in our bones that we are creatures knit together.

Keep telling the story.

Amen.