

Date: March 24, 2019

Occasion: 10:00am Service (St. Andrews Episcopal Church)

Text: Exodus 15:1-21

Title: "Freedom from Oppression + Freedom for Worship"

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### **Introduction: The Exodus Story**

The Exodus story is about more than the Exodus.

Yes, the Exodus story is about the oppressive rule of Pharaoh, God's covenant commitment to his people, Israel's passage through the Red Sea, and the defeat of Egypt's armies.

But the Exodus story is about more than the Exodus.

It must be understood *"in terms of the worldwide purposes of a Creator God who is about the business of setting a chaotic, oppressive world straight."* (Terence Fretheim)

The Exodus is about God – his victory, his people, his world, his eternal reign.

That is why the Exodus story provides the paradigmatic pattern of redemption in the Bible.

When the prophet Isaiah is grasping for words of hope for dejected exiles, he speaks of a day when there will be a New Exodus, when God will come again to do what only he can do.

When the Gospel writers want to describe the significance of Christ's baptism and ministry, they do so in language reminiscent of the Exodus – passing through the waters, forty days in the desert, victory over the enemies of sin, death, and the devil.

When Paul tries to explain to new converts the radical transformation they have undergone in Christ, he often reverts to the narrative arch of the Exodus – you were slaves but now you are free.

When John is describing his vision of heaven, he speaks of peoples from every nation singing the song of Moses.

The Exodus story is about more than the Exodus.

It is the story of Israel, the story of Jesus, the story of our lives.

Ultimately, it is about God – his victory, his people, his world, his eternal reign.

With this in mind, we turn now to consider the Exodus story from two angles:

- (1) It is a story of 'Freedom from Oppression'
- (2) It is a story of 'Freedom for Worship'

### **(1) Freedom from Oppression**

Exodus 15 is a song of celebration, a song of joy over a victory that has been won.

And yet, if we want to capture a sense of the joy that pulsates through every line of this song, of the victory and hope that mark its cadence, then we need to know something of the pain and oppression which was its predecessor. We must not overlook the fact, especially during Lent, that Israel was not singing in Egypt, but groaning.

**Exodus 2:23-25: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them."**

The Israelites groan under the heavy hand of Pharaoh. And yet, the experience is not Israel's alone.

Brothers and sisters around the world groan under tyrannical regimes and oppressive socio-economic systems.

Friends and families around the world groan under the burdens of broken relationships and unfulfilled dreams.

The whole creation groans, longing to be set free from bondage to death and decay.

And we, too, groan, longing to be set free from the weight of sin and its oppressive influence in our lives.

Consider, for example, the ways you have been burdened and oppressed by the words and actions of another person (maybe you still bear the weight of another's sin – you have been scarred for life; maybe there are areas of your heart that remain clamed up, closed off, in a mode of self-preservation lest you be wounded again; and maybe there are areas of your life where deep-seated anger, cynicism, and resentment has taken root and born its ugly fruit).

Consider also the ways your own words and actions have been a cause of burden and oppression for others (maybe you still bear the guilt of sinning against another, the remorse of causing another much pain, the regret of having spoken too brashly or acted so thoughtlessly).

We groan, both for ourselves and for those whom we have hurt.

The book of Exodus encourages us to inhabit Lent as a season of groaning and crying out to the Lord. It is not a season where we turn inward to analyse, assess, and manage our own sins and vices. It is not about cultivating a self-help, self-diet, self-control, self-management programme. No!

Lent is a season where we turn to the Lord, recognising that we are enslaved, both by external forces and by internal desires. Lent is a season to cry out to the Lord for deliverance, and to be reassured that, just like with the Israelites, God hears our groaning, God remembers his covenant, God looks upon us, and God takes notice of us.

Lent is a season to anticipate future grace.

To inhabit the Exodus story from its beginning (ch.2) is to join Israel in its cry for freedom from oppression. To inhabit the Exodus story from its ending (ch.15) is to join Israel its song of celebration.

Freedom from Oppression leads to Freedom for Worship.

## **(2) Freedom for Worship**

Worship is the purpose for which Israel has been redeemed.

Worship is the purpose for which you and I have been redeemed.

**Exodus 15:13: “In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.”**

**Exodus 15:17: “You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.”**

The Song of Moses makes it very clear that Israel has been redeemed for a very specific purpose – to meet God at the mountain, the place where God will dwell and Israel will worship.

It is worth pausing to consider this point for a moment.

Because *“we are schooled by cultural convention to believe that freedom is self-determination.”* (John Webster) The ability to do what one wants, when one wants, and how one wants. To be the master of one’s own time and the arbiter of one’s own destiny.

But the Book of Exodus offers a very different picture of what it means to be free. Freedom from Pharaoh means freedom for God. Freedom from power means freedom for participation. Freedom from the past means freedom for the future. Freedom from oppression means freedom for worship.

True freedom means becoming a people who, on behalf of all humanity, offer God the praise that is his due as our Maker and Redeemer. In this sense, the Westminster Catechism got it right: *“The chief end of men and women is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”*

**Exodus 15:1-3: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior; The Lord is his name.”**

Notice the transition from v.2 to v.3. There is a shift in focus from the one giving praise to the object of praise. The song is designed to guide us from the personal experience of our salvation to the supremacy and glory of the one who enacted our salvation. Worship leads us from the victory to the Victor, from the gifts to the Giver.

(Notice how any mention of Moses is completely absent from the song. This is somewhat surprising, given the crucial role that Moses played in the Exodus story. And yet, Moses himself knows that no one but Yahweh could have done a thing like this. He, and he alone, is the sole agent of salvation.)

And so, the song gives voice to the Lord’s incomparable supremacy.

**Exodus 15:6: “Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power – your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.”**

**Exodus 15:11: “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders?”**

Freedom from oppression leads to freedom for worship.

## Conclusion: Observing A 'Holy Lent'

But, we may well ask, what exactly does the celebratory song of Moses have to do with observing a holy Lent? (two brief reflections)

*(1) We observe Lent in anticipation of future grace.*

Lent gives us an opportunity to humble ourselves before the Lord – to reflect, confess, and repent. It gives us an opportunity to ask God to shine his light on us – to convict us of pride, vanity, sloth, hypocrisy, idolatry, vainglory, ungodliness, and much more.

But we do all this in light of what is to come – Good Friday and Eastern Sunday.

Don't misunderstand me! We are not to be glib or trite about sin. We are not to overlook the very real darkness, pain, unknown, and fear in our lives and the lives of others.

Any yet, we do all this as Christians – as those who do not deal with sin, death, and darkness on its own terms, but on Christ's terms. They are his subjects. He is their conqueror. He is our Lord.

In other words, we observe Lent trusting that victory is the destiny of Lent, celebration is its culmination, Christ's word its final and last word.

We observe Lent in anticipation of future grace.

*(2) The purpose or goal of Lent is not self-determination or self-mastery, but worship.*

If victory is the ultimate outcome of Lent, then worship is its ultimate purpose.

To participate in Lent is to join a long tradition of worship.

It is to join David, saying, **"I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable."** (Psalm 145:1-3)

It is to join Paul, saying, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."** (Ephesians 1:3)

It is to join all the saints of heaven, saying, **"Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."** (Revelation 15:3-4)

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

- The sermon described the Exodus story as “the paradigmatic pattern of redemption in the Bible.” What are the main features of salvation according to Exodus 3-14, and how does this provide a pattern for God’s redemptive action in subsequent parts of the biblical narrative?
- Take a look at Matthew 2:13-4:11. In what ways does Jesus’ story mirror the Exodus story? What is the significance of these parallels for our understanding of Jesus’ identity and mission?
- The Exodus story is, in part, about God acting to free his people from oppression. Take time to discuss what particular forms of oppression still afflict your life, your church, your work, your country. Pray that God would bring freedom in these areas.
- According to the Exodus story, God’s people are freed from oppression in order that they may worship him and serve his purposes in the world. What is worship? In what ways is God inviting you and our church to worship him this Lenten season?