

**First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County**

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**The Way Out**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**



Many of us have a vivid image of the Exodus story that comes straight from the movie the Ten Commandments. Who can forget Charlton Heston as Moses demanding of the Pharaoh: “Let my people go!” Or the arrogant Pharaoh who is not at all convinced to set the Israelites free.

So God sends a few plagues. The plagues are equally memorable, if not more so. It’s hard to forget the locusts, rivers turning to blood, hail, fire, and boils. The last plague brings the death of the eldest child of every Egyptian family. Israelites have been warned to mark their homes and death passes over their children.

This last plague persuades the Pharaoh, and he agrees to let the Israelites go. But soon after their departure, he changes his mind and sets off in their hot pursuit. The Pharaoh’s army catches up at the Sea of Reeds.

We can hardly forget this part of the story in which God parts the waters allowing the Jews to cross. After they are safely on the other side, the waters close in over the Egyptians, including the Pharaoh, drowning them all. Moses then leads the people through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. The journey to the Promised Land took them 40 years.

All this really is the stuff of Hollywood – and the Bible – and life. The narrative is told in the Book of Exodus, and it is recounted by Jewish people on Passover as part of the Passover Seder.

It is not only a story for or about Jewish people. It is about the very process of Liberation. It has relevance to oppressed people and others living in bondage in places all over the world.

The Exodus has become a broad-ranging and powerful metaphor for the deliverance of people in all times and all places from conditions of bondage. Learning to be free has as much to do with our lives today as it does with the group of Jewish people thousands and thousands of years ago seeking their freedom. The Exodus is an outer experience of liberation, of leaving a situation of exploitation and physical enslavement.

The Jews were seeking freedom from being forced laborers. They were actually not slaves in the conventional sense we think of it as being the property of wealthy landowners. But they were obligated to work for the state on demand. And the state owned all the land and charged them rent in the form of the produce they grew. It may not have exactly been slavery, but the effect was enslavement.

People the world over have resonated with the story’s meaning. We in this country have a deplorable and shameful history of slavery in the not too distant past. We are still coming to terms with the reality of just how long and how many generations it has taken and may take to right the sins of the past.

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It is no accident that African-American slaves were inspired, uplifted, and given hope through the story of the Jews coming out of bondage in Egypt. African American spirituals like the one we sang as we opened our service illustrate this.

It seems shocking that with all our advancements and modernization slavery continues to this day. We Unitarian Universalists strive to purchase fair-trade products for the church as one small way to respond to the kind of slavery that continues to oppress people in third-world countries. But we know much more needs to be done.

As important as achieving physical freedom is, there is another kind of freedom the exodus narrative reveals. It is a kind of Liberation all people can relate to. It is inner spiritual freedom.

The truth is that those of us here today live in relative physical freedom. We live in a democracy. We may sometimes question the process and how well our democratic ideals are enacted, but we nevertheless live in a country of many freedoms. We can travel around the country and around the world. We vote for our leadership in elections. Physical freedom from enslavement may not be a primary concern for all of us on a day to day basis.

That doesn't mean we have achieved inner freedom. Think of the Jewish people. Just because they were physically liberated did not automatically bring them spiritual freedom. They had grown accustomed to their life of bondage. To be free, they also needed to break through the spiritual bonds that kept them stuck in a way of thinking.

Their physical escape from Egypt enabled them to make it out of slavery and to cross the Sea of Reeds. But when things got tough, they rebelled. Some of them even wanted to return to their old life. The urge to return to their old state of things was strong. Aren't we like that sometimes?

Their search for a new home, a new way of life, their search for an encounter with God, was a challenging path with no clear direction carved out for them. Outer freedom did not ensure them inner freedom.

And so they had to struggle to break the bonds of their old habits. They had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years to do so.

Each of us is likely to have some habits or desires that we are wandering around in the wilderness trying to shake off. There may be something that seems to be in control of our lives that we want to and desperately need to change. We may be trapped or frustrated in patterns of living our lives that not only fail to bring us joy and fulfillment but harm us and those we care about.

This can be a chemical dependency, suffering from depression or an eating disorder. Or we may live in fear or anger. Our egos may crave power or we may overwork. Maybe some of us over-emphasize our possessions – our houses, our cars, our stuff. We may find that we have become captive to disappointment or loss. There are both large and small ways we may be stuck.

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The decision to make a change may come to us slowly over time or as so often happens an event or crisis awakens us. So we decide we're going to change. We make a resolution to get help and alter our behavior or attitude. We begin to make some different choices about how we will be in the world. These are choices that can free us to a new life.

So we make the commitment to living our lives in pursuit of a deeper spirituality, a greater state of enlightenment, with a stronger sense of who we are and what is possible.

One of the goals of religion is help people do this. Religion seeks to help people achieve this kind of freedom. Now, I know that some of you have had experiences with religions that actually tried to control you or made you feel trapped. This does indeed happen in certain extreme forms of religion. These, too, are attitudes and situations we need to be freed from.

The ultimate goal of the world's great religions is wisdom, enlightenment, and freedom – not bondage. In Buddhism, for example, there is a way out of suffering, out of our bondage. The way out is to end craving and attachment. This is a process of changing the way we live in the world. Mystical traditions seek inner freedom through an encounter with God. Christianity seeks it through love of neighbor.

Some of us, and I am including myself, came to this religion because we were religiously stuck. We wanted a religion that could encourage us in our spiritual lives and allow us to search freely for our faith. Unitarian Universalism is indeed a free faith. Among our core values is the democratic process used in our decision-making.

In this religion freedom means not only being able to build our own theology, but being encouraged to do so. You could go so far as to say it is one of the requirements of our faith. It is essential that we wrestle with old religious patterns and ideas that no longer nurture the spirit or create love and compassion in the world. In the absence of a strong spiritual life, we need to learn to shape one.

As we evolve or create our ideas – about God or salvation, for example - we often find we need to discover new ones. This can mean coming to terms with our actual beliefs about why we are here on this earth, what God is or isn't, and what the core ethics of a life of faith entail.

No one is going to hand a Unitarian Universalist a creed or ready-made belief system. So freedom means having to figure out our own beliefs – to seek our own understanding with the encouragement and inspiration of a religious community.

This is what it seems to me the Jewish people were doing out there in the wilderness. They were seeking their God and their faith. Freedom resides in that struggle and searching, and also in the awakening that happens in the process. Achieving inner freedom comes from seeking something more than a life of obligation and routine that does not reflect our own gifts and capabilities. And that does not express compassion and justice.

Learning to be free means coming to terms with the cost of our freedom. When the Jews left Egypt and times got tough and food was scarce, they were ready to turn back to the security they

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had once known. They complained bitterly. They just wanted to return to a life that, while flawed, was at least predictable and felt safe to them.

I would have complained too, I imagine. Most of us are going to want to turn back at times. Sometimes it seems too difficult to build a theology, to overcome an addiction, or to create a new life for ourselves. Most of us will have setbacks as we strive to move through whatever is keeping us stuck in our lives. As much as we want to be free, freedom can be a longer and more circuitous journey than we thought.

The way out of slavery, metaphorically speaking, is through the desert. It is through the wilderness. That has become a powerful metaphor for people seeking a deeper spiritual experience. Most of us have discovered that the way out is not to go around or under or over. It is to go through whatever is blocking our way. We're going to need to part the sea, or at least it's going to feel as though we have done something of this caliber.

The Exodus story makes it all too clear that the passage can be long and difficult. But it is also worthwhile. Our bondage can be broken. It is possible. We can find the way out. We can achieve liberation – the Promised Land we seek.

Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez explains that “The promised land is not simply a new country; it is also the gift of a radically different situation.”

As with the Israelites, that quest for a radically different situation is aided by a community of kindred spirits. It helps to have spiritual friends who will tell us it's okay when we stumble. It helps to have brothers and sisters of faith who will help us get back up and encourage us to carry on toward the Promised Land. May we be those spiritual friends for one another.

Shalom.