

You Go Moses!

So, since our worship theme this month is Exodus: The Practice of Transformation, I thought it was about time we did a reading from Exodus. You know, the book in the Bible?

You know, I love preaching from the Bible. When I started at seminary, I actually considered going UCC (that's the United Church of Christ) because I liked using the Bible so much. There was just this little problem of belief I had...

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the story, the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible as we call it in seminary, or the Torah. It describes a group of oppressed people, the Israelites leaving Egypt. In fact the title "Exodus" is an abbreviation of the Greek title "Exodus Aigyptou," which means "exit from Egypt." Which means that Exodus means "exit." Such as in "mass exodus," or a group of people leaving from somewhere.

So if Exodus is the practice of Transformation, are we transformed every time we "exit," every time we leave something?

It's no surprise to me that a group of Unitarian Universalists came up with this word "exodus" as one of our themes. The vast majority of us, myself included, were not raised in this faith. And that means that we left other faith communities, or perhaps we left the identity of having no faith community, to come here.

Many of us have had our own exodus, for one reason or another. Perhaps from a faith community that harmed us in some way. That was oppressive to us in some way. Perhaps for other, more practical reasons. We are, after all, the church that many interfaith couples come to. Are you a Jew married to a Catholic? We've got a space for you!

And the original Unitarian Universalists, the ones who came to be when the two Protestant Christian faith traditions of Universalism (which was a belief in Universal salvation – that is no one goes to hell) and Unitarians (who came from a belief in the unity of one god – as opposed to the Trinitarian belief in the trinity of the father, son, and holy spirit) – in a sense they left the Protestant faith, the Christian religion as it had been understood to become the faith tradition, the religion that we are today, the one that has similar practices, but different theology, than Christianity.

And then, there are the Protestants, the ones who Unitarianism and Universalism grew out of. They, too, left the Catholic church because Martin Luther tacked his ninety-five theses on the door, stating that he didn't want Priests being paid what were called "indulgences" in order to buy their way into heaven. This Protestant Reformation in the 16th century created many of the Christian traditions we are aware of in the US today. And it was in large part due to the printing

press and the spread of literacy. Getting the bible into the hands of the people meant it was no longer just the priests who had direct access to scripture.

But before them, there were the early church of Christians, the very first ones, who sprung up in the first centuries after Jesus' death. As they accepted Jesus as their Messiah, there was a split between them and the Israelites, the Jewish people, who did not believe that. And, in a sense, began their Exodus from Judaism, the faith of Jesus himself.

And it's in the Jewish faith, the Israelite's descendants, that the holiday of Passover will be celebrated next week – which honors their escape, their Exodus from Egypt, the one that is recounted in the Bible, in the Book of Exodus, from which Maria just read.

How interesting that in our history we come from Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

And how interesting that those are the same religions that many of us came from, many of us left to come here. Sitting in this sanctuary, right now, are people who group up Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish.

And, like I said, some of us have experienced exodus from our faith communities. But some of us still retain ties, still honor those traditions, and still have connections to those communities

So, in more ways than one, this story in the Book of Exodus, is a story of our spiritual ancestors. And important part of our history.

Now, Passover, the Jewish holiday that honors the story in exodus begins on Friday. This is a unique year when Easter and Passover don't happen at the same time.

And I think about how every year, at least at the UU churches I've been at, we tell the stories of Christmas and the stories of Easter.

But I have not often heard the story of Passover. The story of Moses freeing the slaves from Egypt.

How many people are familiar with this story?

Ok.

I have heard many Jewish Unitarian Universalist friends balk at the suggestion that ours is a faith that truly honors the Jewish aspect of our Judeo-Christian roots, and that our way of doing worship, from the word church, to ministers, to Sunday morning itself is decidedly Christian in origin.

Yet, I admit my familiarity with this story has come only from scripture classes in Seminary, and the occasional Passover seder I've attended with friends.

What I'm saying is that while Passover is a holiday that has a basis from the ancestors of our faith, I personally don't have that much familiarity with it.

None-the-less, please come with me on a journey to the 14th century BCE, that's "Before the Common Era," three thousand and four hundred years ago. I'd like to tell you the story of Moses, the story of the ancient Israelites and the story of exodus.

The Israelites were suffering under the oppression of the Egyptians. They had settled a few generations earlier with an ancestor, Joseph and were growing in number, and a new king took power and saw how many Israelites there were, and got a little freaked out. "There are more of them than us!!!" He yelled.

They made them slaves in Egypt.

And under the king, this Pharaoh, the Israelites suffered. They were forced to work and build cities for this Pharaoh. They were constantly working in terrible conditions, without pay, and without justice.

The Pharaoh was feeling overwhelmed with how many Israelites there were and wanted to get rid of them. So he ordered that all boys born to the Hebrews must be killed. One couple had a baby that they tried to save, but after they couldn't hide him any longer they sent him in a basket along the river.

It was that same Pharaoh's daughter who eventually found the child in the basket. She took pity on him and eventually adopted him.

And guess what she named him? Moses.

You've heard of this Moses, I assume. I heard he's a pretty popular figure in the Bible.

Eventually Moses saw the ways in which his people, the Hebrews, were being treated by many Egyptians. And, not only that, but God noticed this in Moses and God sent down an angel to speak with him in the form of a burning bush.

And God said to Moses that God had heard of the injustice, and God commanded that Moses helped bring his people out of slavery.

So, up until this point we have a child, born of the oppressed group, raised by the oppressors, and being told by a burning bush to be sent to Pharaoh to help bring the Israelites out of Egypt.

The thing is, Moses does not jump at this chance. Because what God is asking Moses to do is hard. Even though Moses sees how the Hebrews are being treated. Even though he see how HE is being treated, he doesn't want to do it. He asks God to send someone else. He claims that he's not a good speaker.

Now, I'm not part of an oppressed class the way that the Hebrews, our ancestors, were in the story. But I do know how hard it can be to work for liberation.

I wonder how it feels to ask for liberation here, in this day and age.

We have our own set of immigrants here in the US, and some claim that they are taking over. And while they are not slaves in the same way the Hebrews are, they are subject to How might it feel to ask for liberation for them?

So what does Moses do? After he tells God that he doesn't think that Pharaoh will believe him that it was God who sent him, God shows him how he will turn a staff into a snake upon being thrown to the ground. Surely *that* should be proof that Moses was sent by God.

But Moses is still skeptical. "But I'm not a good speaker! I'm not eloquent! I don't know how to talk to Pharaoh."

Honestly, it seems like Moses is trying to get out of this any way that he can. And can you blame him? How many times has there been something you knew you needed to do but that you hoped someone else would do for you? Or would do instead?

This happens to me all the time. There are meetings I'm in where I could speak up, but I stay silent. There are comments that are made that I don't agree with, but I stay silent.

God didn't give Moses that choice. In a clever move, God just says to Moses "Dude, chill out, you're brother, Aaron, he's a much better speaker than you *he'll* be the mouth piece when you go to speak with Pharaoh."

This is about the time that Moses realizes that there isn't a way out of this mess. He is going to talk to Pharaoh whether he likes it or not. No matter what excuse he comes up with, God seems to have an answer for him.

And I have to tell you that I keep thinking about how much this must scare Moses. That feeling like he's got to do this has to be sitting there in him. This dread.

And sure, Moses knows that what he's doing is right, he believes in it, but man, is it scary.

It is, right?

To make matters worse, at this point *Moses had already escaped Egypt himself*. So this guy had to go back into Egypt, with his brother, to talk to Pharaoh about letting the Israelites go and be free.

And then God does something that I really don't understand.

God tells Moses that he will harden Pharaoh's heart even after Moses shows him what should convince him that he should let them go. So it seems God actually makes the story more difficult for Moses.

To make a long story short, there are ten different things that God sends to Pharaoh, after the staff, God turns the Nile into blood, and Pharaoh still doesn't let the people go. God makes frogs swarm Egypt, and Pharaoh still doesn't let them go. God makes the dust in Egypt turn into gnats and he still doesn't let the people go. God releases a swarm of flies over everyone and Pharaoh still doesn't let the people go. On and on until there have been ten plagues on Egypt.

What's interesting is that each time, Pharaoh says he will let people go, and but then God hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he does not let them go. Each time, it is God who is actually making it harder.

The final plague was the plague of darkness that would cause all the first born children in Egypt to be killed. This is what finally convinced the Pharaoh to let them go.

And as Moses and the Hebrews left, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his men after him. And then of course, there was the famous parting of the red sea.

Just as all the Israelites got through, the water closed again and trapped Pharaoh's army on the other side. Moses had lead his people to freedom!

This exodus was difficult. They were living in the desert and had to start anew. But their freedom was worth what they had to go through. It was worth escaping their slavery.

Now this exodus of these people is a part of our heritage as Unitarian Universalists.

And it can be easy for us UUs to dismiss stories from the bible because we don't believe that they happened. Or we don't believe in their historical accuracy.

Yet the story of a group of people rising, with a leader, and escaping slavery, or leaving an oppressive system, that is a story that dwells in each of our pasts. In some cases we have been the Israelites, the slave in Egypt. And in some we have been the Egyptians.

But stories of escape and exodus are not limited to this story of Moses.

There is truth in this story.

Let us use it as a reminder of the pain that many live under slavery in our world today, and the ways in which we might be siding more with the Pharaoh than with Moses.

Let us use this story as a reminder of the challenges of our own exodus experiences, of leave harmful situations, or religious communities, or anything else, that what difficult and cause us to transform.

Let us honor all of our exits, all of our transformations, that have brought us to this moment. The personal exodus and the religious exodus of our ancestors in Egypt.

Let us say together, Amen. Amen.

May it be so.