

Passover 2017
14th Sunday After Pentecost
9/10/17
Pastor Gordon Wiersma
Exodus 12:1-14

This sermon began about 6 months ago during the season of Lent. I was part of a discussion group of people from several sister churches, reading the book *Prophetic Lament* by Soong-Chan Rah. A significant theme of the book is recognizing the judgment of God that is brought to bear in history – judgment against unrighteousness and injustice. Judgment – anger – wrath – destruction... all words that you can use, and Soong-Chan Rah does, reflecting the prophetic book of Lamentations which is used as the framework for *Prophetic Lament*. Now, I'm not going to do a recapitulation of the content of the book – except to tell you I recommend it if you haven't read it – instead I want to tell you about part of the discussion of the book – discussion as we talked about the judgment of God. My impulse when I read about God's judgment is to have a difficult time with it – to see a focus on God's judgment as something that religion, Christianity, has used to threaten and control people in the name of God. And when I expressed that, several folks agreed with my insight, so I was pretty pleased with that. And then, someone said: "Well, I think God's judgment is good news – when you're oppressed, when you're powerless, when you see evil, you see the need for judgment - God's judgment sounds like hope to me." I was no longer so pleased with myself – I was grateful for THAT insight shared – and it's been percolating in me ever since.

And so that's what I'm asking of you today, is to let that percolate in you too, to try on for ourselves what it means to look at God's judgment through the eyes of the oppressed – see what that reveals to us, where it takes us, how it calls us. And I

want to do that through the lens of the Passover story that we heard from Exodus. And what a story - this is not just “A” story in scripture, you can make the case that this is THE story: the Exodus from Egypt as the defining moment that creates Israel as a people; the story of liberation from slavery, of freedom towards a promised land, as the center of identity and faith for God’s people. The way the story itself is told in scripture is as an event to be remembered, ritualized, retold through the generations. And that has carried forward beyond the Hebrew generations into the Christian story, with the Passover meal of Jesus with his disciples as the setting for the communion sacrament, a story of salvation we celebrate through our generations. What a story – THE story – the Passover – in it we hear of individuals and of nations, of drama and of ritual, of freedom and of judgment, of death and of life – and I wish I could make a systematic theology out of this story – that’s what my brain wants to do; but as I percolated on the interplay of oppression and God’s judgment, what my heart drew me to do instead was to turn to art and poetry, to prayer and ritual, and let those speak. Here’s what I mean:

- I came across a powerful photo of a man that I would call a modern day slave. It was of a black African man, forced to work in brutal conditions without fair pay and with no way out. A photo that looked to me much of what a black African enslaved in America would have looked like centuries ago – and it was in such conditions that slaves then sang: “When Israel was in Egypt’s land, let my people go! Oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go!” People then and now, lives diminished and taken in oppression by the powers of this world. Is it not good news that the Spirit of God stands then and now with the oppressed providing a power of hope that cannot be broken? - AND can we see the truth of judgment, that whenever there is the rule of oppression and violence that such deadly power turns back on those who perpetuate it?

- I turned to the prayers of our Jewish sisters and brothers, who have tended this Passover story so beautifully and powerfully through thousands of years. I found in the Passover prayers a sense that this story only takes on its full meaning when it is not about one people being given liberty at the expense of another, but about standing in solidarity with all who are oppressed, about God revealing the vision of freedom for all people. In the words of this Passover prayer, it means that freedom is never complete for any when there are others still in slavery:

*We are still slaves because freedom means more than just our broken chains.
Where there is poverty, and hunger, and homelessness, there is no freedom;
Where there is prejudice, and bigotry, and discrimination, there is no freedom;
Where there is violence, and torture, and war, there is no freedom.
And where each of us is less than he or she might be, we are not free, not yet.
Let us continue to work for the day when the nations will be one and at peace.
Then we shall rejoice as Israel did, singing on the shores of the Sea.*

And then in that Jewish Passover prayer book, to my most grateful surprise, it included that American slavery spiritual: “Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said, let my people go! No more shall they in bondage toil, let my people go!” – connections resonating across time of oppression and judgment and freedom in this Passover story.

I guess that comment in the discussion group – “I think God’s judgment is good news – when you’re oppressed, when you don’t have power, when you see evil, you see the need for judgment - God’s judgment sounds like hope to me.” – what that comment sparked in me was the need to come at this story, to hear this story, from a different location.

I could make of this story a metaphor of personal salvation even as I wrestle theologically with God’s judgment...but I am drawn to hear the voices that tell of the violence of injustice, the toll that takes. I am drawn to hear the violence of inaction, which continues the suffering of those in oppression. I am drawn to hear the need to challenge and bring down powers of injustice and oppression – and to see that there are consequences for those who build their well-being on the diminishment of others. I am drawn to see that the Spirit of God is at work in history for the implosion of injustice – not to be replaced with a new structure of oppression, but with the creative power of freedom for all, the freedom to live in life-giving faith and community.

And I'm brought to the ritual of communion – to hear and see Jesus embodying an ongoing Passover story of God's presence in solidarity with those without power or voice – to know Jesus as the presence of life which the world cannot take away, giving hope to those who are oppressed. Which means too that this ritual of communion, birthed from and still caught up in the Passover story, opens up the question in me: 'where am I in this story?' – and draws me not only to see the salvation and freedom present in the story, but to see God's judgment too of what must be overturned in me – for me to confess what oppression I am active and complicit in; for me to face the costs of giving up power over, and for me to use my power to speak to the deadly consequences of injustice at the expense of others. We are nourished in judgment and hope to hear the voices of the oppressed that direct us to where God's Spirit is at work for freedom – in the words of this Passover prayer:

You alone are our God and Savior, who delivers from the oppressors' hands and saves us from tyrants' fists. You give us life and steady our footsteps. In a world torn by violence and pain, give us courage to bear witness to our God of justice and love, keeping alive a vision of a world redeemed for freedom.

This is the Passover we observe still today. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

- *Photo referenced is "Nigerian Railsplitter" by Ken Heyman, p.27 in "Imaging the Word", United Church Press*
- *Passover prayers are from "Mishkun T'filah ~ A Reform Siddur", CCAR Press*