

*"We Used to Be Slaves"*

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The Holy Gospel according to St. John, the third chapter. [Glory to you, O Lord.]

[Jesus said:] "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

The Gospel of the Lord. [Praise to you, O Christ.]

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Have you heard of Seder? Have you heard that word before, Seder? Seder is a Hebrew word that describes, it means order, like an order of worship. And it's the order of worship that our Jewish friends follow in celebrating Passover. So we used to do this before we lost our chef, because it's very involved, there's a ritual and meaning to all the foods that are shared. And in this Seder, the way that it begins is with children toward the beginning of the service who ask a question: "Why is this night different than all other nights? Every other night we eat all kinds of things, but on this night we eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs." Then, others at the table, as they do every year, respond with a story: "Because we were slaves in Egypt, but the Holy One brought us out with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand. If not for that, we would still be slaves."

So as we remember coming to the table a bit later in our worship, gathered around this table, in the night when Jesus was betrayed, we remember that on that night, he was also celebrating Seder, he was celebrating the Passover. And someone, probably a disciple, began with the question, "So, why is this night different?" and then they would begin with what's called the Haggadah, the story of deliverance, and somebody would have said at the table, we used to be slaves but we aren't anymore, the Holy One stepped in and here we are, we're eating and drinking in freedom, but never forgetting either, the hard flat bread and the bitter herbs of slavery.

And then, people would break out into song. Maybe you know it, but I'm not going to teach you, but here's the words, are you ready? It begins, "Dayenu." Dayenu means "it would have been enough." So there's kind of a litany. So here's how it went, "Had the Lord divided the sea and not permitted us to cross the sea on dry land?" [Dayenu!] Had the Lord permitted us to cross the sea on dry land and not sustained us for 40 years in the desert, [Dayenu!] Had the Lord sustained us for 40 years in the desert and not fed us with manna, [Dayenu!] And later on, had the Lord sent us prophets of truth and not made us a holy people, [Dayenu!] And later on the rabbi would say, and what does this Dayenu mean, it means it would have been enough. Dayenu means to celebrate each step toward freedom as if it were enough. Then to start on with the next step.

So it would be one thing for us as baptized that we could sing Dayenu in this way, we could say, for God so loved us that he sent his only son, [Dayenu!] Then later here in first John, see what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are, [Dayenu!] And it would have been enough, that God sent his son to be immersed in our humanity, to know what it feels like to be human [Dayenu!] But, so intimately is he immersed in baptism waters that he bestows on us the title beloved children of god, a royal priesthood, holy people [Dayenu!] It would have been enough, it would have been enough for some of us to be cured [Dayenu!] Oh, but then, there's a difference between being cured and how God heals [Dayenu!] It would have been enough to be comforted in our grief [Dayenu!] But that God would come not only in that comfort but would show us how good the Good News of that gospel really is [Dayenu!].

But can anything really be enough? Can people, can we ever be truly satisfied? When we go from the ancient story about the human heart and our relationship with God there is a Dayenu. Here is creation, here is the garden, and it's for you. But it wasn't enough. Man and woman see the tree in the middle, they see the apple, the fruit of the tree, and it was delightful. And rather than receiving and living in Dayenu, they took and they grabbed, and forevermore this is our condition, that we live in this tension between Dayenu and becoming slaves and to always wanting to take and to have more.

I mean listen to ourselves sometimes, do we ever really have enough? How do we talk about time? How do we talk as a family personally how do we talk as a nation about security? Isn't there always something more that you seem to need or seem to want? And it's so odd because we know about bondage; our story is also connected with the book of Numbers, where we find our ancestors decades into their desert wandering and their escape from Egypt, and what are they running from? They're running from the endless toil of Pharaoh, the relentless striving of making more bricks even when there isn't straw to make the bricks, in Pharaoh's economy there is never enough. They were slaves to Pharaoh, never enough, and he always wants more, more pyramids for grain and more pyramids for security. So in the book of Numbers we hear the people forgot about singing Dayenu. "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, for there is no food and no water, we detest the miserable food?" Huh, wait a

minute, you say there is no food but now you detest the miserable food? I mean, minded, I came upon a quote from Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where Huck tries to speak well of a preacher by proclaiming, "He never charged nothin' for his preaching, and it was worth it too."

You don't get food, and it's terrible. So what do you do? Go back to Egypt, go back to bondage. Even our slavery to Pharaoh was better than what we've got now. At least then we knew what each day would bring, and now we don't know where our next meal is coming from. Unless we trust God, He said that it would come.

A pastor friend of mine said that each congregation has a "back to Egypt" committee. You want to try something new and it's, "Ahh, I think we want to go back to where it's safe and comfortable. We don't really want to embrace that kind of freedom."

And it doesn't happen even in a back to Egypt committee as a congregation, but certainly even within our own heart of hearts. It's like living in these days with the self-deception that comes with bondage and freedom. I thought my laptop was to make me free; I'm forever tethered to it. And it reminds me of one time being an activist in St. Paul, this time with anti-apartheid efforts. Apartheid, where there was segregation in South Africa between the races, and it wasn't even just segregation, it was life-giving or it was death-dealing. And we had occasion to bring some students over from South Africa to talk to congregations like ours, and one student, she said, "You know what we face is paying attention to the shackles, to which we're shackled, the chains." And she said, "There's two ways we can do that: we can either polish the chains, polish the shackles, or we can yearn for the freedom that would break them open."

I think of that when I face what it means with my own bondage which has everything to do with fear and feeling powerless. And what I'm doing when I get empty, there's little comfort, believe me, though it seems right at hand, to go ahead and take that peanut butter and jelly sandwich and try to fill up that emptiness. So that I'm just kind of, I'm not dealing with the deep fears.

And so, whatever it is, as we hear the people and their complaining, the people and their living, it wasn't enough, God sends serpents. Reminder of the serpent like that in the garden. The snakes have plagued the Hebrews in the desert with their own betrayal that would come back to bite them. And so, what needed to happen? The people needed to look at the very thing for healing that was also biting them, that was troubling them. Isn't that the picture of Lent? Repentance, to look squarely and to gaze at all that is evil lifted up, that separates us from love of God, love of neighbor, and love of creation.

The book of Deuteronomy says that the difference between a slave and a free person is that slaves don't get a Sabbath, a day of rest. Do you? I mean, do you ever get a day? Do you ever stop work? And I'm not just talking about the, oh, having a day to hit the slopes or, you know, having a day to lose yourself in your favorite hobbies. My wife asked me, she's from Mexico, she doesn't know what March Madness is, "What do you mean, 'March Madness?'" And coming from Indiana, I explained to her about basketball. Which meant that my bondage includes rising

very early in the morning to see the recording of the previous night's game. And she greeted me by singing, "It's the most beautiful time of the year."

It's not that kind of Sabbath. It's the kind of Sabbath that digs deep down into what separates us from living Dayenu, that it is enough. And what does that freedom look like? It's kind of a joke among those of us of the faithful that our freedom kind of looks like slavery. But it's a transformed kind of slavery, that our service is of the humblest kind, to our neighbor, to our spouse, to our child, our colleague, and even to the enemy and the one who betrays us. And there's another thing about this freedom, that God so loved the world that he gave that freedom; we used to be slaves but no more. We are no longer slaves to lines and walls and fences that lie between us. The ancient ones between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. But also our own peculiar kind of fault lines, those arguments about whether we are living being right or wrong and what is has to do with our fears.

Jesus says, that I, when I am lifted up, will draw all to me, for God so loved the world. So it's not only looking at those snakes, its looking at the crucified One, looking at Him on the cross, upon which is lifted all of the brokenness, all that separates us with the races and the violence and the materialism and deep-seated kind of need-first attitude, our judging of ourselves and of others, of everything that holds us in bondage. And so I invite you to look at the cross, and this time listen when you see the cross. When you see the cross. For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Contemplate that. God so loved the world that: God looks out at us and weeps at the mess we've made? God so loves the world that God sent us good thoughts and encouragement on our way? God so loved the world that He sends angels to hep us find a way out? No, God sent his only Son with the gift of life, real life, abundant life, eternal life. And Jesus, as he was handed over to be lifted up, as we will celebrate our Sabbath, just these moment, just this time, when we come to this table, and when Jesus offered the bread and, people, we take and we eat, and Jesus says, "This is my body, given for you," that Jesus' words were true not only of the bread but of His disciples then and for us. We are now His body, the body for which he would hand himself over to countless others beginning with those first disciples around Jerusalem, then in Galilee, and later Rome, and to every place, including this place and this place now gathered in Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church. And in this moment, this Sabbath, this Dayenu, at this table, Jesus takes our lives and He gives back His life. And so today one more time Jesus will do that for us. We used to be slaves, but no longer. The Holy One with his hands forever ruined on that cross, with his outstretched arms on that cross has intervened, and now we are free. Dayenu!