

Message for October 4, 2020

Exodus 20:1-17

They are amongst the greatest stories of the entire Bible and what I am referring to are the stories that make up the Exodus, the journey of God's people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. The story begins with the Hebrews living as slaves in Egypt and despite the brutal oppression, numerically at least they thrived. In an effort to deal with this the Pharaoh decreed that all the male Hebrew children were to be put to death. One woman, desperate to save her newborn son, placed him in a papyrus basket and set it amidst the reeds on the riverbank. As it so happened the Pharaoh's daughter came along and saw the child. She took pity on him and raised him as her own naming him Moses. It seemed that he, born a Hebrew slave and destined to be killed, now had it made being raised in the lap of luxury at the royal court.

Despite his privileged upbringing Moses never lost sight of who and what he really was; how else to explain what happened next? One day when he saw an Egyptian overseer brutally beating a Hebrew slave, he intervened and killed the Egyptian. Moses then had to flee for his life and fled into the desert. While there he had his famed encounter with God himself; he saw a bush that was on fire yet not consumed. Being curious he went closer to have a better look. Much to his shock God then spoke to him telling him to return to Egypt to set the Hebrews free and lead them to the Promised Land. Moses however didn't want to do this and came up with every excuse and reason why he couldn't but in the end? Off he went.

Not surprisingly, the Pharaoh did not respond favourably to Moses' request to let the people go. Moses tried to impress the Pharaoh with his super-natural abilities such as turning his rod into a snake but that didn't get him anywhere. After that God sent a series of plagues leading up to the last and worst one of all, the death of all the first-born Egyptian males throughout the land. Overwhelmed by this disaster, the Pharaoh agreed to set the Hebrews free. The journey to freedom began but of course that isn't the end of the story.

After giving it some thought the Pharaoh changed his mind and sent the army to bring the former slaves back. Moses and the Hebrews were then seemingly trapped with the Reed Sea in front of them and the Egyptians behind them. Then however came one of the most dramatic miracles of the Bible, the parting of the water. God's chosen people crossed over to safety while the pursuing Egyptians perished. The journey to freedom continued.

As time went by their food supplies ran low and quite predictably the people complained. Once again God provided for them; there were quails to eat in the evening and manna in the morning. When the people got thirsty God again looked after them; a spring of water sprang up out of a dry rock. The journey to freedom continued on to Mount Sinai where they were given the Ten Commandments.

Many people find the event described in today's scripture passage a bit jarring. The people had been set free and were on their way to the Promised Land but then they were given this list of do's and don'ts. "Thou shall" do this and "thou shalt not" do that; where is the freedom in this? It seemed as if the people had just traded in one set of harsh taskmasters for another. Indeed this may explain why the Ten Commandments, seemingly curtailing our freedom as they do, are no longer as popular or even accepted as they used to be.

The idea of freedom is one of the most powerful and cherished values in our society today; indeed many people react very strongly and negatively when they feel that their freedom is being curtailed. This partially explains what is happening in the world around us at the present time. With the current pandemic there are all sorts of rules impacting what we can and cannot do. We must wear masks when indoors in a public space, the size of gatherings is restricted and on it goes. These rules are certainly having an impact on churches too, restricting as they do how many can gather for worship and even what can and cannot happen during a worship service. Inevitably there has been push back; we can think of such as the demonstration in Toronto last weekend where hundreds of people marched to protest the restrictions waving signs with slogans such

as “Your fear does not trump my freedom”. For many people today freedom at its most basic means being able to do what we want, when we want and as we want with as few limitations as possible. With this attitude then, it is no wonder that the Ten Commandments are not particularly popular.

Contrary to what many people may think though, the Ten Commandments, far from restricting our freedom are actually meant to set us free; they set us free to have the right relationship with both God and other people. When they are followed for example, we don’t have to worry about such as others lying about us, stealing from us or even trying to kill us! Yes, the Ten Commandments are meant to set us free and yet... Do they?

The truth is that none of us can keep all of the Commandments all of the time, and then when we add Jesus’ command that we are to keep them in both deed and in spirit? Far from setting us free, the Law seems to imprison us and we are, in a manner of speaking, ‘broken’. Our failure to live the lives that God has called us to leaves us with a broken relationship with both God and others. We are even broken within ourselves by the gulf between our ideals of what we should be like and the reality of what we are like. Truly we are broken but the wonderful promise of the gospel is that we are not broken beyond repair. That is the message and promise of this short story.

Once upon a time a man visited a city that he had never been to before and decided to explore it. The main street wasn’t that different from the main street of other cities and so he started to explore the back streets. As he walked along he noticed a sign overhanging a shop that read “Nothing Broken Beyond Repair”. The shop specialized in repairing broken items and there was a steady stream of people going in; children carrying toys, men carrying tools and women carrying various household items. The people were young and old, well and not so well off and of every ethnic group imaginable. As different as they all were though, they shared one thing in common; entering the shop they looked sad because something special to them had been broken. Upon coming out though, they all looked

so happy because whatever had been broken had been made whole again. That sign, "Nothing Broken Beyond Repair" offered them hope and shone like a beacon in the darkness.

Now of course it isn't but that sign could be hung outside the door of every church. The truth is that we, by our failure to keep all of God's Law all of the time in both spirit and deed, are broken. This is our reality. There is however an even greater reality and that is that none of us are broken beyond repair. To put it another way we, by our failure to keep the Ten Commandments in spirit and in deed, are sinners. But we aren't just sinners; if we want to be we can be and in fact are forgiven sinners! This is the good news and promise of the gospel. As St. Peter said, "He himself bore our sins on his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

By his wounds we are healed, restored, forgiven and put back together again. Can we keep all of the Ten Commandments all of the time? If we take them seriously then quite honestly the answer is no. This is one reality but the other and even greater reality is that God's love for us, as made known to us by his son, means that none of us are broken beyond repair. Contrary to what people sometimes like to think, true freedom does not lie in doing whatever we want. Rather true freedom is to be found in at least trying to keep the Ten Commandments, knowing that when we fail as we inevitably do, we are set free from the burden of a guilty conscience. This is true freedom in the deepest fullest sense of the word.