

PREPARING FOR PASSOVER

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, March 25, 2007
John A. Buehrens, Minister

Unison Chalice Lighting

Passover Haggadah

May the light we now kindle
inspire us to use our powers
to heal and not to harm,
to help and not to hinder,
to bless and not to curse,
to serve you, O Spirit of freedom.

*Hymn 104

When Israel Was in Egypt's Land African American Spiritual

Reading

The Choice to Bless the World

Rebecca Ann Parker

Your gifts/ whatever you discover them to be/ can be used to bless or curse the world.
The mind's power,/ the strength of the hands,/ the reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting.
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,/bind up wounds,/ welcome the stranger,
praise what is sacred,/ do the work of justice,/ or offer love.
Any of these can draw down the prison door,/ hoard bread,/ abandon the poor,
obscure what is holy,/ comply with injustice,/or withhold love.
You must answer this question: What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.
The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
a moving forward into the world/ with the intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition,/ a confession of surprise,/ a grateful acknowledgment
that in the midst of a broken world/ unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.
There is an embrace of kindness/ that encompasses all life,/ even yours.
And while there is injustice,/ anesthetization, or evil/ there moves a holy disturbance,
a benevolent rage,/ a revolutionary love --
protesting, urging, insisting that/ that which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their lives/ as a gesture of thanks
for this beauty/ and this rage.

The choice to bless the world/ can take you into solitude/ to search for the sources
of power and grace; /native wisdom, healing, and liberation.
More, the choice will draw you into community,/ the endeavor shared,
the heritage passed on,/ the companionship of struggle,
the importance of keeping faith, /the life of ritual and praise,
the comfort of human friendship,/ the company of earth,/ the chorus of life,
welcoming you. / None of us alone can save the world.
Together – that is another possibility,/ waiting.

Anthem *Eli, Eli* H. Senesh, D. Zehavi

Responsive Reading 631 Congregation Beth El, Sudbury, MA

What sacrifices would we make for freedom today?
What would we leave?
How far would we go? How deeply would we look within ourselves?
Our ancestors had no time await the rising of the bread.
Yet we, who have that time, what do we do to be worthy of our inheritance?
We were slaves in Egypt . . . but now we are free.
How easy it is for us to relive the days of our bondage/
as we sit in the warmth and comfort of our seder.
*How much harder to relieve the pain of those
who live in the bitterness of slavery today.*

Offertory Anthem *Hush, Somebody's Callin' My Name* Spiritual, arr. J. Sheldon

Reading *Liberation is Costly* Desmond Tutu

Liberation is costly. Even after [God] had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they had to travel through the desert. They had to bear the responsibilities and difficulties of freedom. There was starvation and thirst and they kept complaining. They complained that their diet was monotonous. Many of them preferred the days of bondage and fleshpots of Egypt.

We must remember that liberation is costly. It needs unity. We must hold hands and refuse to be divided. We must be ready. Some of us will not see the day of our liberation physically. But those people will have contributed to the struggle. Let us be united, filled with hope. Let us be those who respect one another.

*Hymn 156 *Oh, Freedom!* Spiritual, arr. Boyer

Sermon PREPARING FOR PASSOVER John Buehrens

*Hymn 210 *Wade in the Water* Spiritual

Benediction

Postlude *Village Dance* J. Chajes

PREPARING FOR PASSOVER

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, March 25, 2007

John A. Buehrens, Minister

It is written in the Torah:

*“I call heaven and earth to witness
that I have set before you this day
life and death, blessings and curses.*

Choose life, so that you and your descendents may live.”

Deuteronomy 30:19

Earlier this week I was at a ministers’ retreat on Cape Cod, contemplating the coming season of springtime, of redemption and resurrection. Our retreat leader was my dear friend and colleague, Barbara Merritt, who has spoken from this pulpit several times. She started with what she said was a favorite joke:

A grandmother and her grandson are walking along an ocean beach in March. The child is dressed warmly, with a scarf and mittens and hat that Grandma hand-knitted for him. Suddenly a tsunami-like wave comes crashing onto the beach. Grandma tries to hold on, but the child is torn away from her and washed out to sea. Choked with sea-water, she finds herself lying on the beach, with only one mitten clutched in her hand. Standing, she raises that hand to the sky and yells up at God, “This is . . . *unacceptable!*”

Another wave crashes onto the beach. The grandchild, spluttering but alive, is deposited at her feet, still draped with a sodden, woolen scarf and with another mitten. Grandma, enormously relieved, first lifts the child gratefully in her arms, and then yells up at God, “This child. . . *had a hat!*”

Most of us, said Barbara, are rather like that. Give us any cause for gratitude, or for joy, and we’ll likely want to tell the Universe what’s missing for us. Let’s remember that. During our congregational meeting today, for example, when we’ll hear about all that we’re going to get in renovating our building next year; and about the few things that we may be missing, at least for the present. About the arrangements for worship at Temple Beth Shalom, and for Sunday School at Carter United Methodist Church; and about the fact that we still don’t know where our offices will be, or some of our meetings.

Leaving anywhere, even for the best of reasons, is always filled with a mix of emotions: excitement and anxiety, hope and doubt, gratitude and regret. It was every thus, I think. Certainly it was for the children of Israel, in the Sacred Story that surrounds Passover.

That story has inspired me every since I first really took it in at the age of 13, when my best friend was bar mitzvahed at this season, and I joined his family at their Seder. Perhaps it resonated with me because my own family had endured many leave-takings. We had lived in ten different houses before I turned sixteen, as my father sought new work and our family had move. But over the years, I've only grown in my conviction that we have *all* been sojourners in the land of Egypt, and perhaps still are, both spiritually and politically; and that few stories have as much to teach us about both dimensions of human freedom. The story of the Exodus inspired the first founders of this congregation, and of New England, who came here seeking religious freedom. And as political theorist Michael Walzer points out, it influenced every liberation movement from Marxism to feminism and gay liberation, from the freedom struggle of African Americans to those against apartheid and colonialism overseas. As our hymns and readings today testify.

So central is the story of the Exodus to our whole cultural heritage that it has been subject to endless interpretations – *midrashim*, as the rabbis would call them. As I point out in my little book, *Understanding the Bible*, even the Easter story, which we'll celebrate and interpret two weeks from now, can't be understood apart from the Passover story around which it was formed. Or without setting aside some of the bubbling mix of interpretation that has been baked into doctrine through the ages.

I'm reminded that in Jewish tradition, an important step in preparing for Passover involves going through the house and removing all the *chametz*, all the leaven and baked goods. On Shabbat Ha-Gadol, the Sabbath before Passover, it was long customary for rabbis to preach a longer sermon than usual, not only on how to do this properly, but on the necessity of preparing spiritually for Passover by setting aside all the leaven of pride and ego, in order to re-assume a humble stance of gratitude for the heritage of redemption, for the rebirth of spring, for the renewal of shared hope for the future.

Temple Beth Shalom began its life over 50 years ago here in this very meetinghouse. When they left, they gave First Parish a thank offering, in the form of this Seder plate. It's inscribed, "Behold how good and pleasant it is when brethren can dwell together in unity," from Psalm 133. A week from this Tuesday, on the second night of Passover, twenty leaders from First Parish will bring that plate back to the Temple, as we celebrate the Seder together with them, and thank them for "opening their tent" to us, in the spirit of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, giving us a place to worship while this building is renovated. We'll also affirm a covenant between our two congregations, expressing the spiritual hopes we share: for mutual respect and learning from one another; for spiritual maturation for all involved, young and old; for collaboration in good works, *mitzvahs*, that can contribute to *tikkun ha olam*, the restoration of right relations in the world – a broken world that today surely needs more signs of covenanted collaboration in hope.

Michael Walzer points out that what makes the Exodus story so powerful and enduring is that has three central lessons:

- 1) First, we *have* all been in bondage in Egypt. Look around you, or within you. If there is oppression there, then, wherever, whenever you live -- it's still Egypt.
- 2) Second, there exists a better place, a world more fair, full of promise and hope. All God's children are meant to live there, using their freedom in covenanted cooperation.
- 3) Third, and this is the part that we don't want to hear: the only way to get there is through wilderness. There's no other way, either spiritually or practically, except the way of relinquishment, being tested as we go.

I don't know about you, but I often feel today that I live in a land where Pharaoh rules. Where immigrants are treated harshly. Where Pharaoh's army is bogged down in the mud of a misbegotten and unnecessary war. Where there's piety but no repentance, haughtiness and hardness of heart instead of honesty, and where the rich prosper while the poor go neglected. But please . . . don't get me going!

At the Lyceum this morning, I spoke about how I worry that even the best efforts to end the war in Iraq are now also bogged down in political posturing, self-righteousness, and a failure to take responsibility for the damage we have done in that country and beyond. Joining my voice with that of hundreds of other religious leaders, led by rabbis like Stephen Jacobs and Michael Lerner; Catholics like Sister Joan Chittister and Donald Gelpi, Protestants like Tony Campolo and Cornel West; and many of my fellow Unitarian Universalists, I said that the only spiritually and ethically sound way to end the war in Iraq involves three steps:

First, repentance. We proud Americans don't do this well. But we have been mistaken in thinking that safety and security can ever be won through preventive war. Instead, we have become bogged down in someone else's civil war. A strategy of domination needs to be replaced with one of collaboration. And Second, we must admit that we now need help -- in stabilizing and setting right what we have broken and cannot now effectively repair. US and British troops can't be peacekeepers, but UN and Arab League forces perhaps can. Third, we need to pay, both to rebuild Iraq and to launch a global Marshall Plan, replacing a desire for domination with generosity, if we are ever to rebuild right relations with the poorer people of this planet.

Out in the midst of the wilderness, at Mount Sinai, Moses is portrayed as being the one leader among the people who can both hear and see the Eternal, the Spirit of Freedom. Who instead of wanting to return to the safety and security of the Pharaoh's fleshpots, hears the Eternal calling to him and to everyone else, saying, in effect, "Forget the hat!" Just be grateful you and yours are still alive! Now, a few suggestions: about ten, in fact. First, I who speak to you can't be given an image from any part of my Creation. I'm not the god of the Sun, or the Nile, or the Mountain, but the One who brings it all into being, who redeemed you from bondage. So don't worship idols, and don't curse in my name. Choose to bless. Stop to rest in gratitude and awe before this Creation at least one day every seven. Honor those who gave you life, that your lives may be long upon the earth. Don't murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness against another, or covet your neighbor's possessions. (Including, I would say, their oil reserves.) In short, don't ever treat anyone the way you were treated back there.

This is a call to covenant, not creed. When I counsel with couples planning to be married, one of the things I consistently tell them is the difference between a covenant and a contract. The first is spiritual; the second, legal. A covenant begins in gratitude and trust. It says, “I am grateful for this loving relationship that has come to me as a gift. I promise to try to keep it *as* a sacred trust, a shared pilgrimage of the spirit. Contracts may have their place, for partnerships in worldly goods, but they begin in distrust, in what-ifs and penalty clauses. Similarly, when Jay first heard me express our need for hospitality, he said that he and his people wouldn’t think of starting with any consideration of remuneration; only with a covenant of sharing, of mutual respect and of shared hopes.

Surely this is the way forward – using our freedom, in humility and gratitude, to rebuild right relations: thru covenants that allow each of us to retain our identity and integrity. Not only here among neighbors, but all around this troubled world.

There’s a *midrash* on the Passover story that says that when the children of Israel reached the shore of the sea, Moses lifted his staff to part the waters, as God had told him to do. But at first, nothing happened. Only when the first of the Israelites actually stepped into the dangerous waters did they divide. Still another says it was only when others followed, swimming as far as they could, that God intervened, and solid ground was finally felt under their feet. A feminist *midrash* says that the first to enter the waters was not Moses, nor Aaron, nor any other male, but rather their sister, Miriam, whose hymn of exaltation on reaching the other side, in Exodus 15, is perhaps the most ancient of the poems around which the whole tradition develops. But when I told all this to my wife the other night, Gwen added yet another *midrash*: The grandmothers, in following Miriam, turned to the children and say, “Come on children! But don’t forget your galoshes!”

Come on, children, let’s get ready and get out of here! Let’s go forward, in faith, in hope, in covenanted solidarity, in good humor and even love. So may it be. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 210

Wade in the Water

African American spiritual

Benediction

May God trouble and divide the waters, but not your soul.
May it remain firm in trust and in faith,
Determined to bless and not to curse,
To maintain such covenants that use freedom wisely,
Leading us all from a world of oppression and war
To one of increasing generosity and peace,
First within, and then among --
among all God's children, the whole world around.
Shalom, and amen.