

I Will Be Your God 2020
Exodus 6:1-9 1 Peter 2:2-10

Exodus 6:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land." God also spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The Lord' I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.'" Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

1 Peter 2:2-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

As I began working on the worship service and sermon for today,
I realized how frustrated and weary I am
with needing to plan and arrange these videos
rather than being able to gather for worship together.

Honestly, I am amazed and grateful beyond words
for the gifts & commitment of the team that puts them together,
and for how much we've managed to learn along the way so far.
But I am tired of social-distancing, enhanced hand-washing,
and wondering if someone or something is going to infect me.
I truly miss the physical presence of our congregation together.

The amount of confusion, disruption and isolation
caused by the threat of the Corona-virus is distressing,
for clearly it's not within the plans we'd made.
But yet without any doubt,
and though it may not look like it or feel like it today,

our God is up to something marvelous and incredible,
and our God will somehow transform all of this **into blessing**
and benefit beyond anything we could ask for or imagine ---

-- just as the Apostle Paul wrote (Phil. 2:13 & Eph. 3:20)

"God is at work within you, enabling you ... at work within us able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."

That is the nature of our God who loves us, heals and cares for us
as it's revealed all through the witness of Scripture.

And what better example of that than the story of the Exodus.

The Exodus was about God bringing relief, hope and liberation
into a seemingly hopelessly lost and impossible situation,
as the Lord heard and responded to desperate cries
of the people suffering under Egyptian slavery.

From the burning bush at Midian God spoke to Moses, and called him
to proclaim a message of liberation and justice to Pharaoh.

But in his arrogance,

Pharaoh rejected that message and questioned with disdain,
who is this God of Israel that I should be concerned?

And in fact even the Hebrew slaves were skeptical.

The Exodus passage we read is God's response. vs. 1, 6-7

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; ... Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.

I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.

Notice the wonderful cascade of "I will" promises,
then the phrase, "You shall know that I am the Lord your God".

The text is saying, just watch what the Lord your God does next,

for then, you shall know that I am the Lord your God,

I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.

That is a wonderful truth & promise that flows all through the Bible.

Yet even with a promise to liberate the Israelites from slavery,
they couldn't imagine or believe that could really be true.

They were so broken with disappointment piled on disappointment,
that they were afraid even to hope that liberation could happen.

Now that was not a rebellious rejection or refusal to respond,
but having been so totally beaten down & discouraged by bondage,
they were incapable of hearing, or even hoping for such good news...

... yet God's overwhelming love, power, grace, mercy and promise
meant that God would still liberate and free them,
and nurture them all the way into the Promised land.

Even though they didn't believe or really accept and trust it,
yet liberation did indeed happen, just as God promised them...
... indeed, almost without their cooperation, as they
gripped and complained almost every step of the way.

That's what it means for God to promise, that even with our flaws,

"I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.

Or as Jesus promised in Matthew 11:28,

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Notice that the deciding factor of the Exodus liberation, was not
the mighty strength and cruelty of Pharaoh and his army,
or even the reluctance and doubt of the Hebrew slaves.

As it turned out, what ultimately mattered was that the Lord
is infinitely more powerful than whoever or whatever enslaves...
**... and so too the struggles, burdens, losses and failure of our lives
do not have the last word, for the Lord sets us free to be
his own chosen, precious, beloved and blessed children.**

Since God did accomplish all that was promised in the Exodus,
and that same God fulfills promises all through Scripture,
**isn't it reasonable to trust that God's grace,
is working to heal and bless us, as promised?**

It's this same liberating truth & promise of God's gracious love,
that we read about in the letter of First Peter.

Like the Exodus passage, 1st Peter is addressed to a people
feeling overwhelmed, defeated and in fearful distress.

In 70AD, responding with harsh violence to a Jewish rebellion,
the Roman general Titus demolished the Temple and the city,
and the Jewish people were expelled from their homeland.

For all the people of Israel, including the early Christians,
this was an unimaginable disaster and theological crisis.

First Peter was written to a discouraged people still reeling
from the destruction of the Temple and their city of Jerusalem,
and feeling crushed, lost, bewildered and discouraged.

Using familiar images and metaphors drawn from the Old Testament,
1st Peter is urging those discouraged & struggling Christians
to trust and cling to their faith – to seek the Lord, vs. 2-3

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow - ... if
indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

In your Bible reading and study, your prayer and meditation,
are you seeking the Lord and trying to deepen your walk with Jesus
with the same urgency and single-mindedness of a hungry baby?

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk.

As God's own beloved, who have tasted God's goodness & blessings,
 let us seek after that which nourishes our spiritual life,
 fervently and constantly hungering for more and more,
 just as a newborn wants and requires frequent feedings.

In addition, consider the sacred moments of grace in your own life,
 those amazing times when God has felt so close and so real,
 when you have personally tasted that our God is so good.

The idea is that we crave and long for the pure, spiritual milk,
 and desire above all a growing and deeper relationship with God,
 one that's not been diluted by compromises with culture,
 or a life less than the full blessings God intends for us...
 ... which is accomplished when the Holy Spirit active within us,
 and by noticing the work of God in our lives and in the world,
 to which we are called to faithful and active participation.

Peter then draws on another Old Testament image, 'a living stone',
 that originally referred to the nation or people of Israel,
 which Peter recasts that image as an interpretation
 of the life and ministry, mission and meaning of Jesus,
**i.e. the living stone rejected by the religious authorities,
 the stone over which they stumbled,
 and yet the cornerstone used by God.**

Then, this image of 'a living stone', is shifts again a little bit
 from the person of Jesus to those who follow Jesus,
 and who are called, chosen and precious in the sight of God.

So then, we are living stones, being built into a spiritual house,
 as we become the temple of God, the dwelling place of God,
 as in 1 Corinthians 3:16,

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in the midst of you?

**That means, as individual believers and together as Church,
 we are becoming a temple into which God has chosen to dwell.**

So to those grieving over the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem,
 this is a clear message of hope, assurance and empowerment.
 The Temple in Jerusalem ?, you don't need it anymore,
 for together, you are being built into a temple,
 a spiritual dwelling where God is present among you. vs. 5
 like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy
 priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

So we are not just a random pile of individual living stones,
 but a structure **being built by the architect of the universe,**
 so let us present our lives as chosen building materials...

... each one of us uniquely and irreplaceably special,
 each one according to the will and purpose of God,
... all called to serve and fit together snugly to be the Church.

**So clearly our task as a congregation, the Church of Jesus Christ
is to notice, encourage and bring out the best in others
as we work together on our mission for the glory of God.**

In contrast to when the world says that
we are just insignificant nobodies who don't really matter,

God disagrees – for God calls us each one his own, vs. 9-10

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order
that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received
mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are a royal priesthood, as in the OT, an inherited privilege
that give us direct access to God through Jesus Christ,
called to serve as mediators of God's presence & blessings,
to be and to live as his chosen children and holy priests.

A pastor friend from Kansas wrote me an email about an experience,
that really helps put some flesh on what Peter is teaching.
It's a bit long, but I want to read the whole thing to you.

"Last week I spent some time in the waiting room of a social service agency. Except for the woman with bright red hair who sat behind the desk, there was only one other person there, a thin woman who looked to be in her early forties. In blue jeans worn white at the knees and a sleeveless blouse, she looked tired, her eyes sunken deep into the sockets.

I was waiting to talk to the staff about a project I am trying to organize ... Glancing over, I saw that the woman was looking out the window at the street, her eyes sad.

To be honest, at that moment, I didn't have the energy to take on anyone else's problems and she looked like problems came in the door with her. Early that morning I'd had some bad news about someone in my family. Pretending to read, all I could think of was how little I could do for the woman sitting across from me, much less my family, so many miles away.

Just then a rough, whispery voice said, "Are you in trouble?"

I looked up, and then behind me, thinking the slender woman was talking to someone else, someone who'd come in when I wasn't looking. But then I turned back, she was still waiting for an answer. "Me?" I asked. "In trouble?"

She ducked her head then, like she was embarrassed, but answered. "your face ... you look like something bad has happened ... like you feel really lost."

I couldn't speak for a minute and could feel myself flush with shame, me thinking all the time she had wanted something from me. Then to my surprise, I told her what had happened, told her how hopeless I felt, told her how more than anything I kept hoping for a miracle.

She moved closer and sat in the next chair. She told me not to give up hope, that miracles do happen. "About five or six years ago I got into smokin' dope; then it was cocaine and meth ... my husband left me ... then he went to court and took my kids away," she said.

"I thought my world had come to an end ... I didn't believe in anything ... not my family or friends ... not even God," she said, and smiled a funny smile.

"But you know, just when I'd almost given up, I met some folks who gave me another chance," she said. "They gave me a place to live; helped me get a job. Pretty soon, I'm gonna get my own place ... try to get my kids back, least part of the time. Don't you worry ... things work out."

"But you don't understand," I said. "I'm a pastor ... I'm supposed to have answers ... I'm supposed to be the one who knows how to help everyone, how to fix things."

"The way I look at it," the woman said, smiling an incredible smile that seemed to light up the room, "that's the work of all of us ... we all got to help each other ... who else is gonna do it?" Then she winked and said, "This is a hard, old world. We got to be there for each other. Don't you think that's the good Lord's plan for things?"

She walked away and I sat thinking how easy it is to look at someone and not even see who they are ... not even see that they are unique and amazing children of God, a person who has come into our lives to give us a blessing.

None of us has a lock on God's grace; not any of us – pastor, president or homeless person – no one is more special than any other.

I think she's right, and I think Peter agrees,
you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people

It doesn't say some of you ... it says you, as in all of you.

The woman in the waiting room was right ... each of us are called
 to care for each other --- it's the work of all of us,

Don't you think that's the good Lord's plan for things?

**God's call is not for us to be perfect or get it all right every time,
 but it is for us to be authentic and focused out in the world,
 reflecting the grace & blessings we ourselves have received,**

**and for our lives, for our words, deeds and attitudes to declare,
 the promise of God's grace and hope that liberates human lives.**

Yes, sometimes our journey seems long, arduous and disappointing
 but we don't travel aimlessly, or alone or without support.

As Paul wrote, (1 Corinthians 16:13-14, Phil. 2:3 & Eph. 3:20)

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.
 God is at work within you, enabling you ... at work within us able to accomplish abundantly far more
 than all we can ask or imagine.