



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Reading Exodus
Proper 21, Year A
Sunday, September 27, 2020
The Rev. Amber Carswell

The Carswell family doesn't know that we cousins, the 10 children of four brothers, have for years played a secret Bingo game when we're all back together on holidays. Every space on the Bingo card is an event that will happen during the couples days we're all together, because these events have replayed themselves every year of our existence. For example, one space for the joke when an uncle says, after a gut-busting meal, are there any snacks around, Mom sure does starve us! There's one for when my dad applauds when I'm done praying for the meal, along with the mock debate over whether Kyle, the other priest in the family, or me does a better job with said prayer. There's a recently-removed space for when Grandma would make a wistful comment about not having any great-grandchildren, my cousin Keith finally having shown her (and us) the mercy of procreating. The Bingo game makes old jokes funny again, as we look around the room and make sure we have all marked the space for the one about who has never lost at Rook in their entire lifetime, but also because it makes some bad habits bearable. Which one of the four sons will bother helping Grandma clean up? It's always the same one.¹

The game hinges on the predictability of our behavior. And to be fair, the predictability of our secretive, slightly smug cousin ritual. It's how the Carswell system works, the patterns of jokes, games, behaviors, that stay the same from year to year. You've got one at your own home. All happy families are alike. All unhappy families are alike. This is why it can be so hard to return home to whichever one you've got; no one's fault, it's just that everyone keeps playing into patterns they know, the system ticks on even when it becomes untrue for the participants. You could have a Bingo card for every workplace, every meeting you attend — you know, before long, who will argue, who will be conciliatory, who will go off on a tangent, who will sit silently. Bingo.

We just finished reading Exodus in our online Bible study. I chose it a long time ago in a lifetime far, far away, five months ago in April 2020. It seemed ripe for a pandemic study: it's the sacred text that speaks about a community uprooted, their patterns of life destroyed. What do God's people look like when their structures of life are taken from them?

The answer isn't very flattering. It's one of the reasons I love the Bible — these just aren't stories you'd think people would tell about their origins. For contrast, think of the mythos surrounding the founding of America, the cherry trees, the city on the hill, the bombs bursting, the Constitutional convention, everyone striding around like great white demigods with divine purpose, the way I always heard it told. In Exodus? No one comes out spotless. Stutteringly uncertain Moses, Aaron the compromising, shifting coward, Miriam the leprous accomplice, and a whole host of people who let out one loud, unbroken wail from the first moment of their freedom to the end of the book. Sort of like logging onto Facebook at any time now — one collective howl of complaint. Today's example in our lessons is one of a dozen or so just like it.

I find that when I've studied these scriptures with folks that it's so easy to write off the Israelites. There's a frustratingly cyclical nature to their stories — God's chosen people are rescued, they have a brief moment

¹ Don't despair, the cousins/grandkids always lend a hand.

of goodness and gratitude, then they start moaning about something, God gets angry, things go badly for them or they're punished, as the author has it, and then there's reconciliation. We watch them and grow frustrated: "Could they just stop doing that thing?"

This isn't a sermon about the validity of complaint. Needing water while wandering in a wilderness is about as valid as a complaint gets in life. This is a sermon about how difficult it is to create life-giving patterns when you've only known the slavery of predictability.

Because the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh was god, and what Pharaoh wants is for you to maximize your output with ever fewer resources. You are not a voice or a person to Pharaoh. You are a number, with a quantifiable and exchangeable value. The way to get ahead with Pharaoh is by letting your greed outweigh other considerations. You could rise in the ranks, become an overseer, drive profitability from the lazy people who didn't work as hard you had on behalf of Pharaoh. That's how Pharaoh works — the promise of a little power to make you forget that you're still a slave. While there wasn't freedom, there was security and predictability. The pattern was set for generations.

The story of Exodus is a story about how hard it is for anyone to be set free from Pharaoh. How does one stop serving the gods of greed and accumulation and begin to trust the God who feeds everyone only enough for each day? How do you unlearn the habits of domination and subjugation, to learn the sort of independence that entails mutual, community-wide thriving? How can we begin to trust the kindness and mercy of God... and maybe just as importantly, become people of kindness and mercy?

TS Eliot wrote,

"In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
 You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
 You must go through the way in which you are not."

It's from his Four Quartets, which he wrote about returning home, actually. Not after a 40-year journey in the wilderness, nor yearly on holidays with a Bingo card in hand, but the ideas are the same. If we're to live the kind of home, live the kind of being God calls us to, the way of dispossession is the only way there. And maybe that's where you are, noticing yourself a little more speechless, a little less inclined to keep step with the prescribed way, gripping a little less tightly to the structures that give you all the world and nothing of your soul:

If that's you, keep on. It's a long road, but it's the only way home.