

Sermon (9/10/17, Exodus 12: 1-14):

Earlier this year, a movie entitled ‘The Zookeeper’s wife’ was released. It tells the true story of Jan and Antonio Zabinski who owned and operated a large and prolific zoo in Warsaw, Poland. The film’s story begins in 1939, just prior to the Nazi occupation of Poland. As the story progresses, it details the events of the Nazi invasion of Warsaw and life under Nazi rule including the infamous creation of the Warsaw ghetto where rounded up Jews were sent to live in horrific conditions.

Seeing the horrors of what was happening in the ghetto, Jan and Antonio decide to save as many Jews as possible. To accomplish this, they turned their zoo into a pig farm after gaining the approval of the Nazi authorities. As they transported food scraps from the Warsaw ghetto for the pigs, they also smuggled out Jews, bringing them to the zoo where they were hidden in animal cages, tunnels, and in their own home. From there, efforts were made to smuggle them out of the country and out of danger.

In 1943, following a failed uprising, Nazi authorities decided to decimate the Warsaw ghetto. In a powerful moment in the movie, scenes bounce back and forth between the brutal destruction of the Warsaw ghetto and the Jewish house guests of the Zabinski family, gathered around a table celebrating a Passover Seder. The dichotomy between the suffering of those in the ghetto and the people in the Zabinski household, desperately clinging to the hope the story of Passover tells, is incredibly powerful.

At great personal cost and sacrifice, the Zabinskis ended up saving 300 hundred Jews during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw.

Over the years, we have celebrated a version of the Passover Seder at our church a few times as part of our Holy Week observances. For those of you who are familiar with it, you know that it tells the story which is highlighted in today’s reading from Exodus - the liberation of the Hebrew people from the grip of the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Some have said this is the Easter story of the Old Testament and, to be sure, it is a pivotal event that stands out as a defining moment for the Jewish people. It’s the story that has sustained them through holocaust,

death camps, and numerous exiles. It has reminded them, again and again, that no matter how undefeatable the destructive forces of this world might seem, God's covenantal demand for divine justice will ultimately prevail. The ritual of the Seder, the retelling of God's rescue of the Hebrew people from slavery, provides a safe harbor, reminding those who tell the story that no matter how rough the seas might get, there is one who will somehow guide the ship to safety.

As Christians, the Exodus story is equally significant as we find important parallels between the Hebrew peoples' journey from slavery to freedom and the liberation God accomplished on our behalf by way of the cross of Christ.

While a story like this, celebrating the liberation of the enslaved, might be expected to include much joy, it is interesting to note that joy is not the exclusive emotion. Much like our Holy Week leading up to the celebration of Easter, the Seder not only recognizes the freedom attained by God for his people but also the sobering reality of the cost this freedom required. In this case, the profound loss suffered by the Egyptians because of the death of their firstborns.

It is a mysterious and difficult reality of our faith. Our faith stories often take us to places where laughter is mingled with tears, happiness is mingled with sadness, freedom is repeatedly gained but not without painful loss.

At one point in the celebration of the Seder, a drop of wine is poured off for each of the plagues that God inflicts on the Egyptians because of the Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to let the Hebrew people go. As this is done, those who remember and relive this story say with remorse, 'We are sorry for the suffering the Egyptians endured...'

Why did the Egyptians have to suffer? Did God not love the Egyptians too? These are tough questions and not so far distant from the ones we associate with Easter. Why did Jesus, the One without sin, need to die? Why did Jesus, perfect love, need to suffer such a horrific end? Is God so blood-thirsty that God requires such a sacrifice on behalf of our mortal failings?

None of these questions are easy to answer. Indeed, they are

impossible to satisfactorily answer. Since the earliest days of the church, the theology of the cross has been repeatedly debated with each theological explanation tending to leave us wanting.

One thing we need to remember is that there are plenty of other stories in the Bible which starkly remind us of God's love for those whom we have often defined as the irredeemable enemy.

The prophet Jonah, for one, who ended up being upset with God because God chose to forgive the Ninevites – the sorely despised enemy of the Hebrew people.

In so many cases, the divine shines a light on the enemy we despise, challenging us to see and understand them in a new way.

We must also consider the fact that Pharaohs thought of themselves as not just royalty but gods and they demanded the same belief from those whom they ruled over. As such, Egyptians were expected to worship and offer sacrifices to the Pharaoh.

So, in many ways, this battle of the plagues was a battle between gods – the god of mortal empires, nations, despots, and failure prone, power hungry leaders verses the God of the Hebrew people who was determined to infiltrate the world's corruption with divine justice.

While none of this fully satisfies the understandable questions we ask about the suffering inflicted on the Egyptians and upon Jesus himself, I think it does remind us of the necessity to resist simplistic answers and solutions. Life is complicated and so is the story of God's redeeming work. As much as we tend to be drawn to simplistic notions of good and evil, enemies and friends, Prince Charmings and evil witches, foes and heroes we cannot and must not allow that to control our thinking and understanding. It is not the way the world works nor is it the way that God redeems.

When I was in Chemistry class in High School, our teacher would sometimes demonstrate the violent reaction one element has when exposed to another. I remember one particular time when he gingerly placed a transparent glass bottle on the table. In it was a piece of metal immersed in water. I can't remember what the element was but I do remember him telling us that when it's exposed to the air it explodes. In

fact, he explained, if the entire piece of metal in that jar was taken out of the water, it could do quite a bit of damage to the school.

How cool is that! I thought. Let's do it! Chemistry class suddenly became quite interesting.

To show us what he meant, he then proceeded to clip a tiny piece of the metal off in the water and laid it on the table. In a matter of seconds, it ignited like a sparkler on the fourth of July. He then told us that this is the reason they keep this jar locked up in a safe!

It is, I think, a good reminder of what happens when God's demand for justice meets the clay gods we mortals tend to create, worship, and are often victimized by. Eventually, explosions occur. Eventually God hears the cries of his people and sets out to set things right. And when that occurs, when the Kingdom of God confronts the flawed ways of this failure fraught world, there is an inevitable explosion. An explosion such as the one played out in that movie where we see the Warsaw ghetto being decimated while a small group of Jewish survivors defiantly declare God's victory at the Seder they were celebrating in the Zabinski's house. Or an explosion such as the cries from Egyptian families while the Hebrew people readied themselves for a quick departure. Or an explosion such as the earthquake that shook creation and tore the curtain in the Temple when Jesus drew his final breath on the cross. Or an explosion such as the sudden and totally unanticipated demise of the Berlin wall in Germany in 1989. In High School and College, I had studied the story of that wall and I never imagined it would come down in my lifetime, yet that's what happens when God hears the cries of his people. Or an explosion such as the election of Nelson Mandela to be President of a nation once controlled by the ugly segregation of Apartheid. No one thought that would ever happen either. Or the explosion that took place when the civil rights movement challenged our own nation's sins of segregation based on the color of a person's skin. Again and again, something explosive, something unanticipated, something volatile, something wildly mysterious and complicated takes place when earthly matter encounters divine demands for heavenly justice.

Life is hard. There are no easy answers to the destruction and

tragedy that seems to overtake our daily news cycles. There is no shortage of times when we find ourselves feeling overwhelmed, defeated, and no match for the forces that seem determined to do us in. There is no scarcity of fear that tests our faith and clamors for control of our every thought, deed, and motivation. Yet, century after century, God's people have gathered in small sanctuaries to retell their stories of faith. Stories of Pharaohs who were forced to relent their stubborn grip on God's precious ones. Stories of crosses knocking down walls believed to permanently separate us from the love of God. Stories that reveal the true fragile nature of the earthly gods we all too easily hand way too much power over to.

In whispers, we tell the stories even as the muffled sounds of worldly clashes ring just beyond our windows. We relive the stories. We cling to the stories. We shape our lives around the stories. We share them while wearing our jackets, our shoes, and with our packed bags at our side ready to go because we know that it's just a matter of time before God will again demand, 'Let my people go!'

To God alone be all the glory!

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

*People: And also with you.*

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, we give you thanks for this day as you have again gathered us in this place to regain our footing. It is here where we tell the stories of our faith. It is here where we are reminded of who you are and who we are. It is here where our lives are again shaped by your trustworthy covenantal promises. It is here where our hope is rekindled and our sights are again set on the greater things of your handiwork among us. It is here where we are reminded of your determination to set us free even when it is hard for us to understand the whens, wheres, and hows.

We ask for your mercy, O Lord, for the many ways we go astray, placing our trust in idols with clay feet and forces that promise more than they are able to deliver. Make us wise to their limits and make us keen to sense that in you our trust is well placed.

As the Hebrew people cried out to you, O God, we too cry out holding before you the stresses, strains, and hardships that daily confront us. Hear the cries, we pray, of those who are tearfully picking up the pieces in the aftermath of hurricanes Harvey and Irma. Hear the cries, we pray, of those entrapped in prisons of addiction, illness, emotional distress, and enslaving forces. Hear the cries coming from the streets of nations ruled by leaders more concerned about their own power and wealth than the welfare of the people they have been called to serve. Hear the cries of the poor, the disenfranchised, the frightened, the lost, the desperate, and the struggling. This day, O God, we also pray that you might hear these cries which we now boldly name in our silence or aloud...

Loving God, we know you do listen and so we also ask that, as you called Moses to respond, you would also call and equip us

to do the same. We pray this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

**All: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.***

***Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.***