

Exodus: Searching for the Promised Land

Rev. Peggy Clarke
New Member Sunday

You are probably familiar with the Exodus story. It's the central story of Hebrew Scripture, the story of how the Jews became a people. It's the lens through which all the previous history and much of the subsequent history was understood. But, I'm not talking about history today. Today is about religious mythology. If you're interested in the facts, I'm happy to preach a sermon unpacking any of the bible stories at another time. But today, is about truth, not about facts.

The Exodus. The descendants from 12 brothers (Jacob's son's, for those who remember Jacob) were enslaved in Egypt. Their contributions to the kingdom had been forgotten and they were all assumed into generational enslavement. The kings were cruel and unreasonable and families worked hard to stay alive. They prayed to their gods seeking freedom from bondage.

Moses was chosen by God and empowered by his people to negotiate on behalf of the enslaved. He had to do quite a lot of convincing, backed by a total of 10 plagues which brought much hardship to the people of Egypt.

Pharaoh had enough of the pain and loss his kingdom was facing, so he told Moses that the slaves could go. Moses recognized that Pharaoh's change of mind may well be temporary, so he told the people to move quickly. They grabbed what they could and raced out the door.

As predicted, Pharaoh did change his mind and sent his soldiers after them. The slaves got away narrowly.

Now they are in the desert. They got what they wanted, right? Desert. The Book of Numbers says there were about 600,000 people. Of course, it also says Adam lived to be 1,000 years old. But, forget facts. The point is- there were a lot of people and none of them knew where they were going. Complaint number one was – where the heck are we going? God decided to lead them by day as a pillar of clouds and by night as a pillar of fire. They followed dutifully. But, ultimately, they wandered around the desert for 40 years.

I had a professor who did this in graduate school. He reported that, in fact, it takes about three weeks to walk from Egypt to Israel through the desert if you're taking your time. It's about 80 miles. So this band of escaped slaves from 12 different tribes, wasn't travelling. They were on a journey. This isn't a story about a trip from one place to the next. This is a story about transition. It's about transformation. You don't go from being a group of Egyptian slaves to being a unified, independent nation in a few weeks. It takes a generation.

Two months after their great escape, the people started to complain. Two months of wandering. They missed home. They missed access to food and water. They wondered if enslavement was really all that bad. It had to be better than the aimless roaming and the not knowing and the potential starvation. They told Moses they'd had enough, that they just couldn't go on without eating more regularly. God heard their cries and gave them manna, a flat bread that they reported tasted like honey. And that's what they ate. Every day. And it came with rules. You could only gather what you needed for your family to eat. God created the manna to get maggots after the first day; no hoarding allowed. Except on Fridays. Friday morning you could get some extra which wouldn't go bad because you need to feed your families on Saturday. Saturday is the Sabbath so there won't be any manna available. Plan ahead. But only on Friday. So, really, how much better than slavery is this? There were a lot of rules and the travelers were tired and hungry and in a general state of discontent.

And that was true for 40 years. For 40 years they walked and starved and suffered and celebrated and hoped and created a new culture and a new self-understanding. They adopted new laws, a new system of government; they even adopted a new God. They became a single nation.

And then they found the Promised Land. The search was over; they had arrived.

I wonder how it was the Israelites knew they had gotten to the Promised Land. Was there a sign out front that said "If you lived here, you'd be home by now"? As a nomadic people, they'd found other land, other people, other cultures. What made them decide this was it?

The Exodus story is one of the richest metaphors we have. Today, I'm using it to talk about the path some Unitarian Universalists take to find their way here from the faith of their upbringing. We start somewhere

our needs aren't being met. Often that's because of theology; we just can't believe the things we've been taught. Something isn't right. The god of our fathers and mothers seems arbitrary. Reason isn't implemented. Facts don't have a place. I heard someone say recently "I had to check my brain at the door". Sometimes it's because of hypocrisy or hierarchy or social teachings. Almost always it's because we can't be who we are, we can't get what we really need. It ultimately gets so bad, we fight our way out.

For some, the fight is almost as dramatic as it was for the Israelites. Did you have to threaten anyone with plagues? Did you have to escape in the night? Did you leave someone behind? Did anyone send soldiers out after you?

Then there's the time of wandering. Maybe we go church or synagogue hopping or take up yoga or get more involved in a 12 step program or stay home on Sundays and read the Times. It's not unusual to feel like you're drifting. Plenty of people feel lost or alone and go back to wherever was home, only to discover that whatever drove them out still exists there.

People are often driven to new houses of worship for one of two reasons. Because they want to raise their kids in a religious tradition or because they are in crisis. Sometimes it's both. Sometimes the wandering itself has created the crisis, the feeling of being homeless or faithless. Needing a community but living with a feeling of being disconnected, maybe different, maybe like a foreigner.

And after weeks or months or years or decades, we find ourselves in a chair in a UU sanctuary and realize we are home. I heard a new member recently tell some visitors that she came to last year's Easter service and kept listening for things she'd find offensive and never heard any. There's a lot of that. I lot of discernment, waiting to see if this could really be home.

And some of us know instantly. I knew within 10 minutes of my first UU service. I'd left a job and home and community and church all in one sweep and found myself on a Sunday morning a little groundless. I knew I was seeking ordination, but I didn't know where. The UUA website had a flashing banner that said "We support gay marriage", so a UU church seemed like a good place to start. I woke my husband and said "Will you go to church with me this morning?" He said "No", so I told him "They support marriage equality", and he said "OK". He was a Catholic refugee who thought a place he didn't have to apologize for his beliefs would be OK if only for one Sunday morning.

We went to the Mt. Kisco Fellowship and right at the beginning of the service they read together what they call their Unison Affirmation. It's a slightly altered version of something you can find in the hymnal and which is ready in many congregations. It reads: Love is the doctrine of this Fellowship, The quest for truth is its sacrament, And service is its prayer. To dwell together in peace, To seek truth in love, To serve humanity in fellowship, To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony, Thus do we covenant with one other.

By the time they were done, tears were streaming down my face. I'd been teaching undergraduate theology for a decade and never had I found something that declared my faith system so clearly and beautifully. I read it Wednesday evening to the Board and remembered what a powerful moment that had been for me. It was the moment I saw the Promised Land. The moment I knew I had arrived. What had been unarticulated, what had been, in some way, a secret belief system was being spoken by 60 people in unison, being embraced by an entire congregation, being taught to the next generation.

But the Promised Land isn't exactly flowing with milk and honey. Like Israel, we are not yet. We are becoming. We are each becoming more Unitarian Universalist. We are each becoming ourselves.

You might remember that Moses was called by God to lead the people out of slavery. The original message came to him from a burning bush. When he asked with whom he was speaking, the response was I AM. Some translations extend this to I AM WHO IS. Some translations extend it to I AM WHO IS BECOMING.

God is becoming. God is not yet. If we follow the story of God in Scripture, that fact is clear. This is a God in process. And this is another sermon. But it's good to know we're in good company.

We are each not yet, each of us becoming. We are becoming in our faith and in our religious life and in our membership here and in our membership in the Unitarian Universalist world.

What if the Exodus story is internal and the search for the Promised Land is our own spiritual growth? What if the story is pointing us toward an interior liberation?

I am who is becoming. I am who is becoming who I am. I am becoming the love that is my doctrine. I am becoming the soul growing into harmony. I am becoming our Seven Principles, growing in my acceptance

for the worth and dignity of every person, growing in my ability to be responsible in my search for truth and meaning, growing in my trust of the democratic process, growing in my connection to the interdependent web.

Being alive is a process of coming to the Promised Land. We are always coming into ourselves, always searching for our better selves.

Moses was on this path his entire life. The story of his birth and upbringing were all in preparation for the journey. He then spent his adult life wandering through the desert, struggling with his faith and his people. And when he arrived, he died. The story isn't about attaining, it's about the expedition. Moses became the leader he needed to be, he learned the laws, he embraced the Sabbath, he entrusted his God, he lead his people and then he was done. That was the promise, that was the process. I am who is becoming.