

Easter as Exodus

Spirit of the living God

Come and grow our faith

Deepen our hope

Strengthen our love

And water within us the desire to be your faithful family forever. Amen.

Readings for today:

- Exodus 7-15 and Matthew 28:1-10
- Joanna Macy: World as Lover – World as Self

“Life on our planet is in trouble. It is hard to go anywhere without being confronted by the wounding of our world, the tearing of the very fabric of life. We are assaulted by news of tornadoes and hurricanes, fleeing refugees, and entire village buried in mudslides, thousands of bodies under the rubble, another species lost, another city bombed.

Our planet is sending us signals of distress that are so continual now they seem almost normal. Reports proliferate about the loss of cropland and the spreading of hunger, toxins in the air we breathe and the water we drink, the die-off of plant and animal species. These are warning signals that we live in a world that can end, at least as a home for conscious life. This is not to say that it *will* end, but it *can* end. That very possibility changes everything for us.” ~ Joanna Macy

Our Plagued Present

In these days of Covid-19, our plagued present reminds me of the plagues that preceded and finally precipitated the Exodus of old. I would therefore like to invite us to see this Easter Season through the lens of the Exodus. In fact, I want to invite us to see Easter as Exodus.

Today a plague is sweeping the world. It is steeling our breath – reminding us of the futility of our boarders and boots we use to patrol them and the bombs we use to punish those who transgress them. A plague that makes a mockery of our selfish individualism by writing our illusion of independence into law: “You will not socialise”. A plague that has forced human retreat. In response all creation rejoices. The dolphins dance and the birds sing in blue sky. This is the great humbling of humanity. *We* are the problem.

Easter as Exodus

In these Covid-19 days of lockdown we re-look at the Exodus story with the hope that we can learn something that may enable our own Exodus. Exodus is a journey from slavery to freedom. Literally a journey from death to life. In other words, Exodus is an Easter story. A story of resurrection. In this story of resurrection, the ocean opened as surprisingly as a guarded tomb, with water rolled up into a heap as unexplainably as a gigantic stone rolling away.

First a brief word about Easter and then we will return to the Exodus and finally see how them come together as one.

Resurrection as Journey

To see Easter as Exodus is to be saved from the false belief that resurrection happens in an instant. It does not. Resurrection is not a quick fix to all our crucifying problems. Like the Exodus, Easter is a journey. A courageously daring journey risking everything for the delight of freedom.

Resurrection as an invitation to journey is how the locked down disciples first came to hear of the resurrection. Listen again to the words in Matthew's gospel: The angel (messenger) said: "Go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed Jesus is *going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him*'and Jesus said to them: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to *go to Galilee; there they will see me*".

As Wolfram Kistner used to remind us, "Galilee is where it all began for the disciples. To return to Galilee is to return to the beginning". Jesus is effectively saying to his disciples and to us: "I will meet you at the beginning again where we can start over". In this, Galilee is more symbol than place. A symbol of grace. Jesus invites his denying, despairing and defeated disciples to start over, yet this time to follow in his footsteps illuminated by a new light. Resurrection light. In resurrection light the hope is that we will be less afraid to follow Jesus into the suffering shadows of the world.

Resurrection therefore does not help us to get over the cross. Just the opposite. Resurrection gives us courage to face the cross. This means that by resurrection light we are given courage to face our cruel world without turning our back in numbed indifference and to acknowledge without denial our own capacity to crucify. Resurrection light empowers us to choose life when the choice of life and death are before us. To choose life is to choose the way of Jesus – of justice, mercy and humility. To choose the way of Jesus is to decide with Jesus to give up our life rather than to take life – to choose to be crucified rather than crucifying. To choose the way of Jesus is ultimately to choose the way of the cross. The disciples resisted the way of the cross each time Jesus hinted at it. In the end they deserted and denied Jesus when the cross was raised.

But now, illuminated with resurrection light, the hope is that they, and us, may be brave to walk more faithfully and love more fully. A bravery rooted in the trust that resurrection is actually conceived on the cross. Resurrection is conceived from the intercourse of mercy (forgiving love) and oppressive suffering. Mercy's victory lies in its refusal to save itself by refusing to be anything other than forgiving love in that moment of meeting. Mercy dies rather than change to be saved. For in changing, Mercy ceases to be Mercy, yet in dying Mercy becomes more fully what it is.

To summarise: Jesus' resurrection sets us free to enter and embrace the crucifying suffering of the world with cross-shaped-mercy. These acts of cross-shaped-mercy give birth to repeated resurrections in the world that slowly heal the world and return the world to its right mind [Luke 8:35].

Now we go to the Exodus story [Exodus 1-15].

Economy as Exploitation

You know the story. Pharaoh, who symbolises the powers, is cruel and stubborn. He is addicted to power which is fed by his paranoid fear of losing it. He believes in a strict hierarchy of human worth and employs all manner of means to enforce it. He co-opts religion to persuade all that his high estate is set by divine decree and that everyone else should know their place. Those not persuaded face the sword of his tax-sustained-military.

Pharaoh believes in growth. Endless growth. Growth without limit. Limits are a sign of weakness and must be overcome at all costs for the sake of profit. Profit alone is Pharaoh's measure of progress. As a result, Pharaoh's economy extracts more and more *from* less and less and his captains of industry demand more and more *for* less and less. Whenever there is exploitation of people there is exploitation of creation and visa versa. The disregard for the one (either one) goes hand in hand with the disregard for the other. Exploitation (living without limits) leads to self-destruction as we were warned: "You shall not eat from the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die" [Genesis 3:3].

From an economy of exploitation arises a tiny elite with more than they could ever need, use or spend in 100 lifetimes, while the majority struggle more and more just to survive. Making the time ripe for a revolution. The exploited poor cry freedom while the depleted soil, polluted waters and toxic air begin their rebellion.

Plagues as Earth's Rebellion

Plagues are the earth's response to being abused. Each plague a deadly consequence of our sin of refusing to live within limits that preserve and honour the world wide web of life that we share. Plagues are not sent by God. We bring them on ourselves. We are not punished for our sin but by our sin. Exploitation is suicide by another name.

Plagues warn us to stop the exploitation. Plagues call us to change. Plagues invite us to start over with a reverence for the interconnected oneness of Life. If we do not heed the warning, then the next plague will arrive with accumulative interest. This is how it was with the 10 plagues of old. Each offering a choice: Change and live, or do not change and face further death.

Plagues and Power

One would think it is an obvious choice to make but it is not when we are addicted to the status quo. In other words, to be dependent on a way of life for our survival that is at the same time killing us. This leaves us with no easy choices, because to change feels like we are dying.

Like Pharaoh we too often decide to circumvent the consequences rather than address the causes. For example, when the water turns to blood (1st plague) Pharaoh orders in bottled water (still and sparkling) and carries on as if nothing has happened. Pharaoh does not care. Death is not at his door. We do the same in various ways yet the problem with circumventing the consequences without ever addressing the causes is that it becomes more and more difficult to do and finally it becomes impossible to circumvent the consequences of consequences of consequences. Eventually death is knocking at *our* door.

The Nature of Change

It is only then that Pharaoh agrees to stop his exploitation and “let people go”. Hard-hearted-Pharaoh only changes when the pain of not changing is greater than the pain of changing. We know that power is seldom relinquished voluntarily. When it is, we call it a Damascus conversion because it is only explained by the mysteries of grace. Sadly, the powers by and large only let go of power when the pressure to hold onto it becomes so great that they have no time to enjoy it any longer. We all know this to be true because this is the truth of our own lives.

It is also the truth of our history as a nation. Legislative Apartheid only ended when those who ruled realised that the cost of not changing would be greater than the cost of changing. They reached the tipping point of vulnerability which is when we realise that if we don't give up something, we may lose everything. In other words, change happens when Pharaoh is suitably affected. Covid-19 has shown this to be true. Speedy and gigantic change is possible precisely if everyone is either directly or indirectly affected, including Pharaoh's household.

Real Reality Revealed

That is not to say that everyone will be affected equally. We will not be because we are not all in the same boat as some have claimed. We are all on the same ocean, but our boats differ. Some of us are in spacious boats, stocked with food. We have a bathroom or two on board plus an entertainment area. An outside garden and an online office. While others live in overcrowded boats with limited food and little else.

Plagues reveal reality as Covid-19 does. The coronavirus is invisible, but it is extremely revealing. It reveals the real reality of inequality that exists all over the world and especially in South Africa. Like other plagues before it, this present plague points to the consequences of an economy of exploitation of plant and people. It calls us to change and to start over with a renewed reverence for all of life by living with limits. For many of us this will feel like we are dying as every addict kicking a habit can testify. Truth is, we are coming alive. As Jesus said: “For whoever will lose their life for my sake shall find it” [Matthew 16:25].

Flattening the Curve – Economy as Jubilee

Therefore, hand in hand with flattening the curve of the spread of the virus, is the necessity to flatten the curve of inequality. If we do not do this then every other curve of crisis will be far more widespread and life threatening. The freed slaves of the Exodus and the first disciples in the book of Acts made this their priority. Hoarding was seen as deathly and not a sign of success. They made sure that those who had much did not have too much and those who had little did not have too little. They imagined a joyful economy called Jubilee – where the curve of exploitation would be flattened every 50 years. This policy was carved in stone – such was their seriousness to remember it, for they knew how forgetful they could be.

We too are forgetful. We say nothing will ever be the same again after Covid-19, but we are mistaken for in the same breath we crave our old deathly comforts. We must protect ourselves from our forgetfulness. We do this by writing these crucifying and resurrecting truths, freshly revealed to us, into policy.

Policy that honours the sacred worth of all of creation. Policy that protects soil and society from exploitation. Policy that prioritises the vulnerable of all life forms. With regard to humanity we do this by investing in the common goods of health, education and housing. We afford this by turning our budgets of destruction into budgets of nourishment. By prioritising ploughshares over swords and energy from the sun and wind over coal and oil. This will result in a slower and more localised way of living for sure, but we have already had hints of the abundant life this will usher in. Living with limits is to have life in abundance. This is the joy that awaits us.

Grace

We have seen the pics and read the posts of clear canals in Venice; of dolphins and deer returning to places no one ever remembers they ever were; of bird song heard in noise-quietened-streets and of smog-free blue sky. This return. This recovery. This resurrection resulted from humanities forced retreat. We don't deserve such grace to see almost instantly a glimpse of what life awaits us if we stop and change and start over more humbly, more mercifully and more justly. But that is grace for you. The Grace of the Creation.

Yet, if we are serious about encouraging these returns, recoveries and resurrections, we must have the courage to face the horrid truth that we have been responsible for the destruction and death of much of the web of life and the general health of this planet. This is especially so over the last 250 years. In literally a blink of an eye of the earth we have destroyed millions of species and ecosystems. Since human beings started cutting down forests, 46% of the world's trees have been felled. No one in their right mind would cut off their own arm or leg, yet we cut out the earth's lungs and destroy the natural ventilation systems that we rely on to breathe.

As we struggle with a shortage of ventilation machines in hospitals, the present plague is warning us to stop and radically change. The way we have been doing life isn't working. This is the crucifying horror we are called to face.

Jesus is calling us to meet in Galilee. To start over.

Easter Hope

The hope of Easter is that we will not turn our back in numbed indifference to the death we have brought on ourselves and planet. The hope of Easter is that with resurrection light we will have the courage to start over with Jesus – this time a little less afraid to enter with him into the shadows of this world's suffering. The hope of Easter is that like Jesus we too will be set free from fear to give our lives in cross-shaped-mercy for the healing of the world [John 3:16] returning it to its right mind as our Pharaoh-like-hearts soften.

If there is any truth in these words – may it settle in our hearts.

Amen.

Alan Storey
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