

## **We are a delivered people**

A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
Edmonton, Alberta  
by Carol Penner  
on September 20, 2015  
Text: Exodus 19:1-8

Everyone has before and after moments, watershed moments. You tell the story of your life and you say, “That was before I met your father.” “That was after we lost the farm.” Or “That was before we moved to Canada.” Many of you can think of events that change you profoundly: there is a before and an after in your life.

The same is true of our lives as a nation. We talk about things being after 9-11, or before 9-11. Those of you who are older talk about how things were after the Depression was over. We tell stories about our own lives, and about our lives together, and the great events that happen to us that shape how we tell our stories. That give them a before and an after.

Today our scripture text is about an event like that. A before and after event. An event that shaped the people of Israel forever, a turning point in their relationship to God. An event that can and still does shape our understanding of God. And it’s all here in the book of Exodus.

I am continuing on, today, with our fall series about identity. Last week we talked about being God’s people. God heard the cries and suffering of the Hebrew people in slavery in Egypt. They came to understand themselves as a “heard” people...God was listening. And today we see what happens next.

Today the title of my sermon is “We are a delivered people.” The descendants of Jacob are enslaved in Egypt at the beginning of the book of Exodus. By the time we get to Chapter 19, where we started reading today, they are no longer under the thumb of the Egyptian pharaoh. They are no longer slaves.

Someone hearing this story for the first time might ask, “How did they escape?” But the word “escape” is not a good describing word for this event. Escape is always something you do for yourself. I escape. I do it for myself.

In Exodus the word we hear over and over is “deliver”. The people of Israel were delivered. Deliver is not something you do to yourself, it is something that is done for you. Israel was delivered. They were slaves, and God intervened, God snatched them out of Pharaoh’s power.

In the story today God says, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” It is God acting, God intervening, God saving.

And that is the event, the galvanizing event that brings them to this moment in scripture that we read today. To a mountain in the wilderness, where Moses will go up the mountain to meet God. There they will be given the law. And the beginning of the Ten Commandments tells us, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." (Exodus 20:2)

And as you read the rest of the Bible, you see this event, this event of deliverance from Egypt, being referred to over and over again. There are ten different Psalms that specifically refer to deliverance from Egypt. The prophets often refer to God's saving power in the Exodus. And of course the Exodus was and is remembered in the rituals of Jewish life, in everyday prayers and in the celebration of Passover every year. They never wanted to forget that they had been delivered. The Exodus was the big before and after event.

For Christians, the references to the Exodus continue in the gospels, in fact that is where we see them truly flowering. I read an article this week that had pages and pages of examples of how there are parallels between the story of the Israelites in Egypt and the people of Jesus' time, parallels between Moses and Jesus. Through Jesus Christ we are delivered. It's not something we ourselves do. God delivers us. It's a before and after experience for us too.

I have talked to many people about their relationships with God. And I've heard many stories of deliverance. I've heard people saying how thankful that God has delivered them from the guilt of past sins. We do things we regret, we feel sorry about that, and that guilt weighs us down. God, through Jesus Christ, forgives our sins. Many people here have felt the relief as that weight falls off us, as we lose the fear of punishment. A lot of the gospel hymns we sing celebrate that deliverance.

Many people speak of this as if it was the only way we are delivered by Jesus, Jesus takes away our sin. But Jesus came, as we read in our call to worship, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. Jesus offered that to the people he ministered to. He offers that to us, deliverance that is as literal as a people walking free from slavery.

People have told me about literal deliverance. Sometimes they have been ensnared in habits and ways of living that are destructive and hurtful. We are used to these patterns in our lives, we are addicted to them. People share with me how God delivers them. Sometimes it's miraculous...a craving for a drug disappears. Or their awareness of God walking with them, as they choose every day to live without alcohol. Or maybe God delivers us from negative patterns of thinking, God helps us hold our tongues from harsh words, God breaks the power of money and delivers us from miserliness.

Other people talk about deliverance as a transformation in their outlook on life. Before they could only think one way. They were selfish or self-centred. God entered their life and they emerged, as from a prison, suddenly filled with love for everyone.

Yet others talk about deliverance from despair. Where once they felt defeated by the problems of the world, now they see God's hand guiding and protecting. Trusting in God, we are content to be the foot soldiers of compassion, loving in the trenches. Working like yeast and salt, trusting that God has the big picture.

I often hear people share about their belief that their loved ones are delivered from death. Jesus conquered death by dying and rising from the dead. And so now instead of being frightened of death, we see it as a gateway into a new life.

These are just some of the ways I've heard Christians talking about deliverance. Often people are struck deeply by one type of deliverance, and that's the before and after experience they focus on. In church, it's important for us to tell each other our stories of deliverance, about God's mighty power in our lives. Thanks be to God!

But I want to spend a bit of time today on the in between stories. About the spaces we hover in before we are assured of deliverance. The wilderness experience. Israel was delivered from Egypt, but they spent a long time in the wilderness, where they were often puzzled, often afraid, often doubting. They did not write their great story of Exodus in the wilderness. That would come hundreds of years later, after as a people they had a great deal of time to digest all these events and tell them and retell them.

While some events in our lives are crystal clear and sparkling with deliverance, other times we are muddled, wandering in circles, not sure.

I want to tell one of these muddled stories of deliverance...it happened to my grade three teacher, Werner Fast<sup>1</sup>. When Werner was a little boy, seven years old, there was a knock on the door, a knock that his parents had been expecting, had been dreading. It was the KGB, the Soviet Union's secret police. They arrested Werner's father and took him away. Werner remembers very little of the night, but he does remember his father putting one hand on his shoulder and one hand under Werner's chin, lifting his tear stained face and saying, "Werner you are the oldest, so it will be up to you to take good care of your mother while I'm gone." From that day on, every night Werner's mother would pray with her family for Werner's father, for his safety and that he would be returned to them.

But Werner and his family themselves faced danger as a world war came right to their doorstep. They were forced to flee. For months and years they were refugees. Walking across national borders, seeking freedom. They lived with uncertainty. Would they survive...would they be delivered? Every evening they prayed for God's help, and they always prayed for the safety of their father and that he would be returned to them.

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<sup>1</sup> \*Werner Fast, "A Story of Family" Conrad Grebel College Review, 18 no. 2 (Spring 2000), <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/spring-2000/story-family>

They found themselves at the end of WWII in Soviet occupied East Germany. Trapped. They desperately wanted to be delivered from the Soviets. They prayed for deliverance and miraculously they were able to get to the western sector, where eventually they connected with Mennonite Central Committee and three years later were able to emigrate to Canada and safety. They were delivered. And still their prayers every night were for safety for their father, and that he would be returned to them. Werner was confident that since God had shown such mercy delivering them, that this prayer too would soon be answered.

Werner recalls that in their new home in Canada, his mother had a large portrait made of his father from a little photo she had of him, and it hung on their living room wall. One day, Werner came home from high school, and the picture was gone. He asked his mother where the picture was. Tearfully, with a shaking voice, his mother told him that she had heard news about his father. He was living in the Ukraine, but he had remarried and had a new family, new children. He wasn't going to be coming to them. She said his father no longer deserved a place on their wall.

Werner retreated to his bedroom, burying his head in his pillow, consumed by a turmoil of emotion. How could his father have done this? He wanted to write an angry letter to him, but his mother urged him not to. She explained that when his father was released from prison, he heard they had immigrated to Canada. He was in the Soviet Union that did not allow emigration. Communication was impossible after the war. He gave up hope that he would ever see his family again. They were lost to him. So he began a new life.

Filled with emotion, Werner remembers a turning point, where he could finally cry, and begin to forgive his father. He started corresponding with his father, something he did for decades.

Years later, when Werner was 53 years old he was able to visit the Ukraine on a tour. He was to meet his father at a hotel. As Werner got off the tour bus, many people around him were greeted by relatives, there was much crying and laughing going on. Werner looked around but didn't see anyone that looked like the picture of his father that he had from 46 years earlier. He saw a man wistfully standing on the edge of the crowd. Werner went up to him and asked him in low German, "Do you know Johann Fast?" The man looked at him and said, "Werner, is it really you?" Then they were crying on each other's shoulders, and Werner was meeting two men, his father's sons, his brothers.

For three days they visited, and on the last day, his father and his wife told Werner about the terrible guilt they lived with throughout their marriage, about this broken family. Werner confessed how angry he had been at them. Together they prayed and asked for healing and forgiveness. After this, they felt a new sense of freedom and joy in their visiting.

Werner had brought along money to buy his father a new suit. His father insisted that he did not need a new suit, but Werner insisted he should buy one; Werner's mother had given him the money for that purpose, to buy his father a suit. Eventually his father's sons picked something out for him.

When they said good-bye, Werner didn't know if he would ever see his father again. The following year, Werner's father was granted permission to immigrate to Germany with his family. He died just a few weeks later. But his widow and her sons emigrated, and Werner was able to visit them in Germany 11 years later. He asked his brothers, "Did Dad ever wear that suit we bought him?" They told him no, he had never put it on. But they had put it on him for his burial.

Werner wrote this story down, but I heard him tell it in person. He told me that his mother had gone through terrible things in the war. Separation from loved ones, losing their home, trekking as a mother with young children through a war zone, witnessing terrible violence, nearly dying of starvation. But he knew without a doubt that the most painful thing she ever experienced, the thing that hurt the most, was the betrayal of her husband when he married someone else. She had waited for him to be delivered, she had prayed for this. She never saw her husband again. She never remarried. Werner told me she eventually came to a place of peace, a place of understanding, but it was the great sorrow of her life.

Deliverance. I don't know where you are at this morning. Some of you are in a place of peace. There is a before and after in your life. God has delivered you, and your life will never be the same. Maybe it's deliverance from pain, or from grief, or from addiction, or from sickness, or from danger, from sin. Like the Israelites liberated from Egypt, you rejoice. You have a before and after story and you thank God fervently that you are in the after part of your story.

But for others, you are stuck. You have been praying long and hard, your prayers have gone up to God. But there you are in the wilderness, not feeling safe, not feeling like you are in a place of peace. I told this story about my grade 3 teacher because I think it illustrates the complexity of deliverance. Werner's mother never got the deliverance that she prayed for, that she longed for. Not in this life. For Werner, he was reunited with his father; not in the way he wanted, not in the way he prayed for, but in a completely different way, but in a way that bought peace.

Our hearts can be stuck in the wilderness for long periods of time. We don't know how to tell the story in a before and after way because we are still feeling in-between.

It's challenging preaching the story of the Exodus in a time when we are witnessing an exodus of refugees that has not been seen in a lifetime. Some are reaching freedom, we will celebrate with some of them when they reach the Edmonton airport, their promised land. But others are in the wilderness, others are stuck in the middle.

It's a time where it's challenging to trust in a God who delivers. We need to live into that faith. God loved the people of Israel in Egypt. God loved them in the wilderness. God loved them in the Promised Land. So we hold each other tenderly, wherever we are.

This week, let's tell each other stories about deliverance. Completed, happy, joyful stories, and also half-finished, ambiguous stories that fill us with doubt. Together, we wait in hope for a God of deliverance, who will provide an ultimate ending that is more beautiful than anything we can ask or imagine.