

# *“Forward to Freedom”*

*Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15*

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From the Pulpit

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## Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15

<sup>2</sup>The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’

4 Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

9 Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.”’ <sup>10</sup>And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. <sup>11</sup>The Lord spoke to Moses and said, <sup>12</sup>‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, “At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.”’

13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup>When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of

the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. <sup>15</sup>When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

Prayer: God of Abundance, Hope and Promise, we pray this morning that you will open our hearts, minds and souls. Let us see the world, the community, and our lives for what they are and what they could be. Let us live into your promises. May the mediation of our hearts and the words of my mouth, be acceptable to you. In your name, we pray. AMEN.

So here is the situation...the Hebrews have escaped slavery in Egypt and are wandering in the wilderness. They’re hungry. They’re probably tired and dirty. They start imagining that they were better off back in Egypt and they sat by the fleshpots and ate their fill. Who were they kidding? Remember, this whole thing started when Moses went to Pharaoh and asked for time off to go and pray to the LORD. Pharaoh got so mad that they would even think about taking time off of work, that he doubled their work load and stripped them of supplies. No, they were slaves with a harsh burden. They did not eat from the fleshpots but that’s how they remember it. They start to turn on Moses (and Adonai). Their minds have been captured by Pharaoh’s narrative.

The Hebrews had not known freedom for generations. Their consciousness was thoroughly dominated by Pharaoh's narrative so they could not "see" that they were free. What do we mean by Pharaoh's narrative. Well, if you go back to the book of Genesis, we find it. Pharaoh has a dream about feminine, scarcity. He is filled with fear and anxiety that there will not be enough. So he starts to hoard as much grain as he can. Then, when the famine hits, the excess grain becomes a tool for monopoly. He gets the Hebrews and all of the people to give them first their money, then their livestock, then their land, and finally themselves. (Except for the priests because Pharaoh always needs someone to "bless him".) It never occurred to Pharaoh (or Joseph) to give away the grain or lend it at no (low) interest. The narrative about scarcity, fear and despair rationalizes monopoly.

The Hebrews who grew up in Egypt had internalized that narrative about the world. As they sat in the wilderness, they could not imagine that they were free. They could not imagine anything but scarcity, fear and despair.

In his 1932 book, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Carter Woodson wrote, "when you control a man's thinking, you control his actions. You do not have to send him to the back door. He will go there of his own accord. If he does not find a

backdoor, he will cut one out for his own benefit. His education makes this necessary.”

In the classical Greek works, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer described the Aegean Sea as “wine dark”, not blue. The word “blue” did not exist in ancient Greek. There have been a variety of explanations for this phenomenon, but what seems pretty clear is that is that people’s ability to see a whole range of colors is derived from language. In other words, if you don’t have a name for something, it is not likely that you will “see it”.

What does any of that have to do with you and I. We have the word blue. We know that we are free; heck, we’ve got a Lee Greenwood song to tell us that fact. None of us can possibly be captured by Pharaoh’s narrative...can we?

Well, let me ask you a question. When you have company from out of town, where do you take them to show off Columbus:

- The Zoo:
- The Shoe
- Battelle
- Art Museum
- German Village

- Good restaurants, craft breweries and distilleries.
- The State Capital
- Parks
- Easton and Polaris
- Jeni's Ice Cream

What is the story that you tell about Columbus? It's a thriving city with lots of young people. It's growing. Lots of arts and good restaurants.

One of the stories that people told us when we moved here 22 years ago is that Columbus is a great place to raise a family. Have any of you heard that story. Is it true? Is Columbus a great place to raise a family?

Let's think about some other places that you might take out of town guests to "show off" Columbus.

- Columbus City Schools Administrative Building and tell them about how one of the largest Student Attendance scandals was orchestrated by key CCS administrators. BTW, would you tell them that about one half of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders failed the state reading test in 2016.
- Would you take them to show off the Headquarters of ECOT which cheated thousands of students out of and

education swindled Ohioans out of tens of millions of dollars in another attendance scandal.

- Would you drive them by the gleaming Checksmart Corporate Headquarters in Dublin and tell them how they make so much money off the disgusting practice of predatory payday lending?
- When you drive by Children's Hospital, do you tell people how infant mortality in Franklin County is twice the national average (and almost four times for African Americans)?
- If you were to drive by Abercrombie & Fitch, would you tell how Abercrombie marketed padded bikini tops for six and seven-year-old girls in 2012.
- Maybe, when you drove by the new County Jail under construction, it would provide a chance to tell your friends that the state of Ohio locks up more people in prison than 36 States in 2016. In fact, if Ohio were its own nation, it would have the second highest incarceration rate in the world, just a fraction behind the United States as whole (thanks to a handful of states that are even worse than Ohio).
- You might not drive up Cleveland Avenue in Linden or down Sullivant Avenue in the Hilltop. But if you did, you would pass shuttered grocery stores, and you could

explain that Columbus is the second most difficult place in the whole U.S. for poor children to escape poverty.

I could go on, really I could: eviction rates, massive student loan debt, high rents and so on. In fact, part of the legacy of Washington Gladden was to see things as they really were. When Rev. Gladden was elected to Columbus City Council in 1900, he did a survey of cities in the United States and reported that Columbus was mediocre at best. The prophetic task is to see things not from the vantage point of those in charge, but from those at the margins. High infant mortality, failing schools, economic exploitation, prison & Jail, So, is Columbus...a great place to raise a family?

Columbus was a good place for the Aeschbury's to raise our three kids. Maybe it was for you as well. At the same for tens of thousands of families, it is brutal. Has Pharaoh captured your imagination? Has Pharaoh blinded your ability to see our City for what it is?

When Pharaoh's narrative captures your imagination, it is easy to get satisfied with what you have and become grateful that you are better off than someone else. In fact, I don't know how many times that I have heard someone minimize an awful situation by saying something like "at least I had insurance" or "at least I could afford it". One of my colleagues who is now a

community organizer but has worked for many years as a public interest lawyer with a specialty in education law. Her then six-year-old niece got expelled from first grade because she acted out in class. The grandparents flew Marjorie home so that you could attend the hearing and represent her niece. Then, the grandparents paid \$1,000 (15 years ago) for their grandchild to get a behavioral and educational evaluation. After all of that, they were able to force the school district to re-enroll the child, set up an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and provide special services. When she told me, this story, Marjorie said she was “lucky” ...Not really! The trauma on a six-year-old child to be expelled from school is not lucky. The time and energy to fly Marjorie home was not lucky. The money paid for a special education evaluation was not lucky. It was a failed system. Just because other people have it worse, does not make it “good” for you.

So when the Hebrews were hungry in the middle of the wilderness, what happens? First, God provides—manna and quail—more than enough. Secondly, when the people try to hoard the manna, it rots. God’s story is the story of abundance, promise, and hope as opposed to Pharaoh’s narrative of scarcity, fear and despair.

Then, the Hebrews a choice go back to Egypt and settle back into slavery, into Pharaoh's narrative **or** go forward, find freedom and live into God's story. Freedom in the promised land was not a picnic. In fact, it took them 40 years to get there. And then when they got there, it was a challenge to live into it. In the Middle Ages, the rabbis asked themselves, "why did it take so long to walk from Egypt to the Promised Land?" It's not that long a walk. The conclusion of some of them is that while you could take the Hebrews out of Egypt. It would take a generation to get Egypt out of the Hebrews.

The Justice Ministry at First Congregational Church and forty other congregations in Columbus strives to help us step out from Pharaoh's narrative and live into God's story of abundance, promise and hope. Jobs, housing, good schools, safe neighborhoods, economic opportunity are not beyond the capacity of our City. Those things are not a pipedream. We have sister Justice Ministry Organizations that are doing amazing things:

- FAST in St. Petersburg, Florida just got a \$92,000,000 investment from Pinellas County in their city's Housing Trust Fund.
- CLOUT in Louisville has Jefferson County School System on track to train every teacher, every administrator and every cafeteria worker, every school

bus driver in “whole school restorative practice” within five years. And time on task in classrooms is skyrocketing up and the number of out of school suspensions is falling.

- Justice Matters in Lawrence, Kansas has made sure that every single police officer has been trained in C.I.T. so that they are prepared to calm down situations when they encounter someone who is suicidal or manic rather than ratchet them up.

Our own Justice Ministry has already created new opportunities for Mental Health care, diverting children from the court system, and affordable housing.

These things and more are possible. But, embracing them means living into God’s story of abundance, hope, and promise. We have to give up the fear that rationalizes locking up people who are addicted and mentally ill and poor. We have to realize that there is more than enough to go around. We have to reject despair about poverty. And then, we must challenge the elected and civic leaders of Columbus to embrace practices and policies that will fulfill abundance, hope, promise and community.

In about a month, our Justice Ministry at First Church will launch its campaign to get us thinking about God's promises for our community by holding house meetings. You will be asked what keeps you up at night. This can be a step out of the wilderness and towards freedom. This is a chance to start living into God's story of abundance, hope and promise. There will be other steps that you can take along the way. I'm going to a house meeting. I'm going on that journey to freedom. Will you come with me? Thanks be to God for the ability to imagine and witness to abundance, hope, promise and freedom. Amen.

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