

*Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA; September 29, 2024*

We join the people Israel today on that long journey between slavery in Egypt and freedom in the Promised Land. They are wandering in the wilderness, stuck in the in-between time. They knew who they once were and they have a place to which they are going, but for now they are homeless, they are in transition; their identity is going from one thing to another and they're not sure who they are. And in the unknown, they even find themselves crying out for their former state: "Yes we were slaves, but we had food, water, homes, a place in the world." They can't see where they are going and can't always trust that they will get there.

Likewise, in this Gospel text from Mark. Last week, we heard Jesus telling the disciples what is about to happen—The Son of Man is to be betrayed, handed over, killed, and raised again—everything that you know about the world is going to be flipped upside down. This world you've know, this world where everybody is jockeying for position, for power and prestige, this world is going to be upended, when the God-in-flesh takes the lowest place, the place on the cross. Then we'll be in a whole new world, a world where you are won't be based on how much money you have, how many stocks you own, or anything else that ranks you above and below others.

And right after hearing this, the disciples argue amongst themselves about who is greater, and they now became angry and torn with jealousy over others doing the deeds they were doing.

These are texts of journey, of transformation, telling us about the Promised Land, the freedom, the salvation that awaits, that is coming. And three communities of people—the Israelites, the disciples, and us—looking around and wondering just where this freedom is to be found.

The Israelites saw God's loving care, the lengths God was willing to go to protect them, but long for slavery when they can't see the Promised Land.

The disciples saw Christ's saving power—opening the eyes of the blind, healing the sick, hearing that the tomb will be empty!—but they can't imagine a world where some are better and worse than others.

And we too have seen what God can do—we proclaim the tomb empty, the world transformed!—and yet we look around and see a world that looks anything but transformed. We look around and see madmen fighting wars for power. We look around and see neighbors enthralled with hatred for those who want more tolerance, more respect, more welcome for all. We look around and see people put in the back seat to profits and greed.

And maybe we're not sure just where this Promised Land is to be found after all. And not being able to see it, we reach back, back for all our old ways we've never really left behind. Freed from the need to be better than others, we still build societies where some struggle and are looked down on and others accumulate and are envied.

Hearing the assurance and promise that we are loved no matter what, we seek out validation and value in what we make, what we own, what we do, what others think. Witnesses to the love that never ends, is never earned, is always given, we still give in to the temptation to return the anger and indifference of others with our own anger and indifference.

Shown the Promised Land of salvation but yet seemingly in the Wilderness, shown what Creation was always meant to be—free, loving, caring—we too often fall into the patterns of our old world of bondage, and settle for our world where too many struggle needlessly, where too many are left behind and looked down on.

These stories that we hear today are about the future, yes—the Land of Milk of Honey, the coming Resurrection of Christ, the Salvation of All—but they are also about what is happening right now, in our very midst.

Yes, the people Israel are journeying toward the Promised Land, but they are doing so as the people that God has freed. They have seen the power of God at work in their lives already; God has come to them and rescued them from slavery, and said to them, “You are my chosen people, the people I will never forget, the people I will keep always.” And this God is present with the people, as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And it's true, over and over again the disciples fail to understand and keep wanting to return to their old ways. And yet, these are exactly the people the risen Jesus returns to. “Peace be with you. Here I am, God-with-you, just as I will always be.”

And the same is true for us. Despite the broken world in which we live, despite the pain and heartache that we have come to know well, we too have seen the power of God at work in this world. We have seen God come to us in the waters of our baptisms and free us. Just as God came to the people Israel freeing them and journeying with them, God has come to us, and freed us in these waters, and journeys with us.

And so when we see all the old ways still so prevalent, and when we are tempted to join in with those still living by the old rules, we can remember that we are already becoming what God has ordained us to be: children of God in all eternity.

When we are met with others anger, with their indifference to our suffering and the suffering around us, we will practice responding with patience, with understanding, with compassion, with love, remembering that we too were once in bondage.

When we are tempted to measure ourselves by the all the old ways, when others look down on—or up at—us because of what we do, what we earn, what we buy—or don't—we will touch that cross on our forehead and remember that baptismal promise: You are a child a God first, foremost, and eternally.

And when the world tells us that we can't make a difference, that inequality is inevitable, that some people will simply not have enough and we should just accept it—and when we are tempted to believe them—we will remember the abundance God promises to all and keep working for a world where everybody has enough—enough food, enough housing, enough safety, enough love—confident that we can build a world that works for everybody.

In these and so many other ways, we are able to participate in God's Reign now, to live in the Promised Land now. God is here, with us, among us. And we are the people who will continue walking with God. Amen.