

Postcards from the Edge of the Promised Land
“A Long Road, a Bumpy Ride”

[1 Peter 2:9-10](#)

Have you ever had that feeling of walking into a room and recognizing that you are surrounded by ‘your people’? Suddenly you know these folks are your home. It happens for me when I arrive at a meeting or retreat with other United Methodist clergy from our Conference. Sometimes when I’m at an Armenian wedding. Almost every Sunday here, as we begin worship. You are my people. I feel at home with you, like I belong here.

That kind of identity—that sense of ‘my people’—is deeper than just knowing each other. It’s an identity formed by shared experiences. We’ve gone through some things together. We’ve got each other’s backs. It means that when we are out in the bigger world, you are the people I would link arms with to remember who we are and that we will be OK.

That sense of being ‘a people’ is what bound the people of Israel together, for thousands of years, all through the stories that are contained in the Bible. Not every tribe gets its history laid out in the best-selling book of all time—like Israel does in the Bible. Right here, out in front of everyone, are both good chapters, when they were faithful and generous, and a whole bunch of shameful and embarrassing stories about moments when they lost their way altogether. Whole sagas of family conflicts, failed administrations, broken covenants, lost battles. The Bible is not an air-brushed story. This history has not scrubbed out its characters’ flaws. That may be what distinguishes the Judeo-Christian tradition from every other religion most of all: its willingness to be self-critical. This story is not about heroes; it’s about ordinary people who get lost...and are found again...and again and again. It’s about the God who never abandons those broken and flawed people, never stops loving them, no matter how many times they stumble or lose their way, no matter how far things go off-track.

For the next six weeks, we’re going to immerse ourselves in the Exodus story, which comes from the Jewish part of our Judeo-Christian tradition. It’s the tradition Jesus grew up in and practiced. The story he knew. The story of *his* people. And it has everything in it: brokenness and redemption, promises and betrayal, the people’s long search for God in their midst. All the ways God shows up.

From the very beginning, the Jews knew the story they were living was meant to be retold. It *happens* so that it will be retold—to children and grandchildren and their children. The story itself is what made them a people. Because every time they tell it, they remember: this story happened not just once. It *happens*, over and over again. It’s our Jewish ancestors’ version of the words we say every time we begin communion. Every time you do this—every time you tell the story—remember who you are, the ritual says.

And so as we tell these stories again, the appropriate question is not ‘Is this historically accurate?’ It’s ‘How is this story true for us?’

The Jews were slaves when the story of Exodus begins. Their ancestors had come to Egypt to find food because of a famine in their own land. Egypt was an inviting place; there was not only food, there was work. And so, they immigrated together, they were a community.

But Egypt was a land that beat them down and separated them from one another. The Israelites became slaves in Egypt not because they lost a battle or because of some evil leader. They became slaves because Egypt was an empire: a complex, multi-layered society, not so different from this one. And that's what empire does: it gradually divides people: free human beings and people who work like slaves.

And so, over generations, the children of the tribes of Israel became subdued. Their choices narrowed. Seven days a week they made bricks out of mud, carried them out of the desert into the city, piled them up on top of one another for pyramids that enshrined the wealth of kings. They didn't wear the physical chains of slaves; they didn't need to. Their dreams shriveled up because their hopes lived in cramped conditions. They forgot the promises that God had given their ancestors, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob: "I will make of you a nation; through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed". Their expectations for their lives had become Egypt-shaped, rather than God-shaped.

And then God stepped in. Moses is the leader we will follow through the Exodus story, but make no mistake: Moses did not volunteer for that job. God found *him*, caught Moses' attention in a burning bush. God's first words to Moses were "I have seen the affliction of my people." I see they are suffering, God said. This life is not what I had hoped for them. *I* have not forgotten the promise.

And God began to spell out to Moses a life fuller than anything that generation of Israelites had imagined for themselves. Tell the people, God said to Moses, "I have heard your groans. I will release you. Redeem you. I will set you free. Slavery is not what I created you for, God said. I will take you as *my people*, and I will be your God."

And that's what the story of the Exodus is about: the long road that transformed an assemblage of former slaves who had been stuck, beaten down by institutions that seemed unmovable. A long journey that turned them into a people who knew that together, they had been seen. Saved. Given a purpose. They went from seeing themselves as individuals victimized to *a people*, chosen by God. God's partners in the work of repairing the world.

The road they traveled on was not a direct route. It was full of potholes. The distance from Egypt to the place they ended up could have been covered in about two weeks' travel, even then. Instead, it took them forty years. There were many days they were not happy or hopeful. Sometimes they looked back and said, I wish we'd never started this trip. They often lost sight of the God they thought was supposed to be paving the way for them. Lost the thread of what they were trying to do, where they were headed. Many days they were hungry and tired and discouraged. But God never gave up on them.

The story of the Exodus is so deeply true that it can work for us like a metaphor—a frame that also gives meaning to the events of our lives. The parting of the Red Sea, the sculpting of a golden calf, the food that fell from the sky every night, just enough to sustain them for one more day—did all of that happen as a recorded event in history? I don't know. Maybe. But I know this story is true. The story of a bedraggled, dis-united group of slaves who were set free from an empire, who found their way through forty years in the desert, and who came out knowing themselves to be *the people of God*—that story has changed history. It's been an endless supply of hope and courage. To slaves in America. To prisoners in concentration camps. To refugees—from Africa, Syria, Central America. Maybe to the people of Campbell United Methodist Church.

You too are God's people. That's what Peter wrote to those early Christians in the letter we read from this morning. It's like a name tag you wear, visible to the whole world. We have been called out of a dark place, it says. We have been seen and loved by God. My life has been saved. Our life has been saved.

We have been named God's people. I have no doubt about that. Chosen by God for the important work of letting the world know, by the way we live, that more life—whole-er life—is possible. We wear those virtual name tags for the sake of the world. But we also do it for God. So that whenever God is hanging out with his creation—which is to say always—God can wander into this place and say, 'Oh yeah. I recognize this place. These are my people.'

May it be so.