

3rd Sunday of Lent
March 27, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

The Journey Out of Slavery

Exodus 17:3-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-8
John 4:5-42

The movement out of habitual sin can be likened to the movement from slavery to freedom. Our first reading today is part of the story of the Israelites' journey from slavery to freedom in the Exodus. It is a beautiful image of what happens to us as we move into freedom from our attachments and addictions. Knowing the steps that they went through can give us some important insight into the steps we go through as God heals us of our attachments. For the sake of simplicity, I have noted the Israelite's journey in seven steps and then offered a parallel.

1. The story begins with the Israelites living in Egypt as slaves for Pharaoh. When Moses went to Pharaoh and asked him to set the Israelites free, his request was denied.
2. It took the power of God to change Pharaoh's attitude.
3. The Israelites left Egypt in great victory and were led by God into the desert. Pharaoh realized what he had lost and pursued the Israelites, only to be defeated by the power of God. At every turn, God gave victory to the Israelites. In the desert, God explained to the Israelites that He was healing them.
4. God provided for them exactly what they needed when they needed it. They are not used to such poverty and they are not used to having to rely so much on God. They often grumbled and complained.
5. At one point, they even considered returning to Egypt. Even though it was a place of slavery, it was a familiar place where they could rely on themselves instead of on God.
6. When they realized they couldn't return to their former slavery, they tried to create a new one in the form of an idol.
7. God did not give up on them though, but instead, He provided them with the Law—an invitation into relationship with Him.

You and I make a similar journey when we finally decide to leave the slavery of our attachments and addictions.

1. Our journey to freedom from attachments begins with God intervening in a powerful way and helping us to realize the slavery that we've lived in. Leaving the place of slavery and attachment is not easy. Usually there is a voice like that of "Pharaoh" which tells us over and over again that freedom from our attachments is impossible. It might even cause us to suppress our desire for freedom.
2. The good news, however, is that God never gives up on us! His voice is louder and more powerful than the voices of slavery in our lives. He continues to encourage us to follow Him into the desert for healing and new life.
3. Usually, once we make a decision to leave behind our attachments and addictions, we go through a period of great grace, when we feel a new freedom. This is a wonderful time to remember God's love for us.
4. Often, however, we will begin to feel empty. We feel a certain kind of poverty, like the Israelites did. The psychiatrist and spiritual writer, Gerald E. May, explains this difficult time, writing—

Like the Israelites in the exodus, we know we do not want to go back to imprisonment, and we sense we are moving on to a better existence, but still we must mourn the loss of the life we had known. This is a [distressing] grief, yet somehow soft and gentle. With time, it will grow into compassion; compassion for the spiritual imprisonment of our sisters and brothers, and compassion for the many parts of ourselves that still remain in the chains of addiction.

--Addiction and Grace, pg. 105

Another way of understanding the grief and pain of healing is to understand it as a new space, more expansive than we've ever been in before.

5. This new place of freedom can often feel lonely and overwhelming. We are tempted, like the Israelites, to return to our former place of slavery, because it is familiar and comfortable. However, this space of poverty and grief is not a bad thing; it is actually a sign of greater freedom, inviting us to trust God completely!
6. Even if we conquer the urge to return to our former attachments and addictions, we are still tempted to replace them with new attachments. Just as the Israelites replaced their slavery to Pharaoh with the golden calf, we too are highly creative in substituting new forms of attachment in the desert of God's healing. Instead, we are invited to trust more deeply in God. Just as the Israelites learned to rely on God in the desert, we too learn to rely on Him completely as we move toward freedom from our habitual sin, attachments and addictions.
7. In the emptiness of the spiritual desert, we learn trust, we experience healing, and we are drawn into the very life of God, revealed to the Israelites as the Law and now revealed to us as the Holy Spirit.

The exodus story reminds us that our freedom is ultimately *God's work*; we are invited to surrender our wills and trust Him in new and deeper ways. Our participation in the work of God happens in a few particular ways. First, we must take time every day to pray. We don't have to have the right words, simply the desire for God's love and healing. Secondly, we must reverence the pain and grief that accompanies freedom. Just as the Israelites were tempted to return to their place of slavery, we too will be tempted to return to our attachments and addictions. Instead, we are invited to pay attention to what is going on in our hearts and to realize that the root of our attachments is a desire for God's love. Lastly, we need patience. It took the Israelites forty years to reach the Promised Land, which was *much longer* than any of them expected. God's healing often takes much longer than any of us expect, yet we trust in His perfect timing.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Slowly read through Psalm 106, which is a summary of the exodus story. What parts of the story resonate with your own experiences of habitual sin, attachments, and addictions? Re-read verses 44-48 of this Psalm. In what ways have you experienced God's grace in the midst of your habitual sin, attachments, and addictions? What does it do to your heart to read these words?