

Deborah Sokolove: Promises and Pathways to Freedom

Sermon for Recommitment Sunday at Seekers Church
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by Deborah Sokolove

Promises and Pathways to Freedom

Lately, it has started to bother me that as part of our Sunday worship we read only the Gospel, and not the other lessons of the weekly lectionary. It particularly bothers me that we don't read aloud the lesson from the Hebrew Scripture, since that part of the Bible is not very well known to many Seekers, and it is hard for me to see how anyone can understand the New Testament without knowing the foundation upon which it is built. Of course, since I am part of Celebration Circle, I guess I could raise it as an issue, but then I would also have to figure out what we could leave out of our Sunday time together, and still be courteous to the Ecumenical Service. In any case, I was glad that Ken used the Golden Calf incident for at least part of his reflections last week, and – though I wasn't here – I understand that Peter talked about manna a few weeks ago. But in case you haven't been reading along, or if reading one short section per week leaves you, as it does me, without a sense of the sweep of the story, I'd like to bring us up to date on the last several weeks of first lessons in the lectionary – a more-or-less continuous reading of Exodus.

We began with what one writer has called "the most ominous words in the Bible," *Then arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.* Where earlier rulers had been grateful to this man from the

desert who saved the whole nation from extinction, this new Pharaoh feels threatened by the alien workers who have too many children and insist on keeping their own customs. We read of this ruler's attempt to exterminate the Israelites by killing their male children. We find this attempt foiled by the courageous lies of the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who declared that the Israelite women were so strong that they gave birth without any assistance. We read of Moses' miraculous rescue and adoption by Pharaoh's daughter, his murderous rage at the casual mistreatment of Israelite workers by their Egyptian bosses, and of his unwillingness to take a position of leadership among a people he barely knew, when God spoke to him out of the burning bush. At last, he agrees, and goes to tell Pharaoh "Let my people go."

Eventually, after many signs and wonders, Moses, his brother Aaron, his sister Miriam, and the Israelite people cross the Sea of Reeds, pursued by the entire Egyptian army, and begin to travel through the wilderness as a free people. But it turns out that they do not really know how to conduct themselves without the structure that had been provided by their now-defeated overlords, and they continuously grumble and threaten mutiny because of the harsh conditions in the desert. At least, they mutter, we had leeks and cucumbers to eat and water to drink back in Egypt.

God hears their complaints, and gives them miraculous food to eat, and brings water out of a rock when they are thirsty. At last, they make camp in the wilderness at the foot of a mountain. In the midst of a terrible storm, full of thunder and lightning and earthquakes, Moses ascends the mountain to receive God's instructions for how they are to live now that they are no longer slaves. Because he is away a long time, the people grow restive, thinking that both God and Moses have forgotten them, and they convince Aaron to lead them in worship of a golden calf that has been created out of their donated jewelry. As Ken recounted last week, Moses intercedes

for them in the face of God's justifiable anger. God relents, and the now completely impoverished people commit themselves to a life of communal freedom, to be lived under a set of rules which both define who they are as a people, and help them to live harmoniously with one another, and with God. Moses reads the terms of the Covenant, or book of instruction, to the people, and they answer "We will hear and obey."

But before the Covenant between God and God's people is finalized, Moses has one more attack of doubt. In today's lesson, Moses asks for one more sign, one more miraculous moment, one more face-to-face encounter with the Divine, to prove to himself and to the people that God will, in fact travel with them. Moses says "If your presence will not go with us, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." The Holy One agrees, and then Moses says "Please show me your glory/honor/burden," and the reply is, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the Unpronounceable Name, and I will be gracious to whom I shall be gracious, and will show womb-love on whom I will show womb-love. But," the Unnamable said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live. And," the Holy One continued, "see, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory/honor/burden passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." And then, we are told, Moses and the people continued on toward the promised land, a marked-out people, conscious of their covenant with God and with one another.

Today, our small community – along with the other independent churches who once made up the Church of the Saviour – renews its commitment to live a life of service and joy. We make

promises both explicit and implicit to be with one another both emotionally and materially, in the crises and milestones of our lives. We commit to God and to one another to laugh together, to cry together, to work together, and to play together – not all of the time, but enough of the time that our words about "community" are more than just empty mouthings.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we are now in a time of wandering. We have left the security of being part of the Church of the Saviour, and now are searching both for a new physical home and for a vision – a book of instruction – to guide our future life together. Now, I don't want to push this metaphor too far, because Church of the Saviour wasn't Egypt, we were never slaves, and Gordon certainly isn't Pharaoh. But we have left our old home behind – spiritually, if not yet physically – , and we have not yet crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land.

In our wilderness wanderings, it is often difficult to realize that we are coming ever nearer to that river crossing. We have our scouts out – the Homemakers Mission Group, and perhaps others – and soon, we hope, they will bring back word, either of giants in the land, or of bunches of grapes too heavy to carry. Like Moses, we ask for signs, guarantees that God will continue to be with us.

I believe that we have those signs, that God has given us those guarantees. We have not seen the face of God – which would be so glorious and terrible that we could not bear it – but God does permit us to see traces, tracks, beauties and wonders trailing from the hem of God's garment. And one of those wonders, one of those signs, is the covenant that we make with one another today. As the "chain of faith and commitment" so graphically demonstrates, we are linked not only with one another, but with current and past members of this expression of the Body of Christ, with other Christians living today, with the entire history of Israel and of the

Universal Church, and with the future, with people we don't yet know and people who have not yet been born. We here today are among the heirs of that specially marked out people of so long ago; all of us are chosen because we choose to love God and to love one another.

I want to examine this notion of being heirs, of being part of God's people, a little closer. What did it mean in earlier times, and what does it mean, now in 1996, to us as relatively privileged citizens of the most powerful nation on earth, to be heirs of that band of freed slaves who knew themselves, somehow, to be God's own people?

In the first instance, and for many hundreds of years, to participate in the Covenant meant to be one of those who were believed to be lineal descendants of the individuals who participated in the great covenanting ceremonies at Sinai and Shechem. These people – known variously as Hebrews, Israelites, or Judeans – by Roman times were known as "Jews." After the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman armies in 70 CE, though they lived almost exclusively as landless people in foreign territories, they kept the memories of their ancient homeland, and many of their tribal customs. It is through this line of descent that, for most of my life, I could lay claim to being an heir of the Promise.

But however exclusive that story may appear at times, in fact many individuals – and sometimes whole groups – were adopted into the Covenant. One theory regarding the origin of the 12 tribes is that they were not, in fact, literally descended from Jacob and the small band that went down to Egypt. Rather, at least some of the tribes were peasant groups that had continued to live in Canaan, and joined up with the refugees under Moses and Joshua, taking on their story of liberation and defiance of their Egyptian overlords. The Bible's own testimony records that Moses' own wife, Zipporah, was the daughter of a Midianite priest, and that both she and her father Jethro traveled with those who escaped from Egypt.

There are other stories, also, of outsiders who became an integral part of the people. Perhaps the most famous is that of Ruth, the Moabite woman who became the grandmother of the renowned King David, and the ancestress of Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps these stories tell us that, as Ken pointed out last week, chosen-ness is less a matter of being chosen than of choosing.

In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul makes the case that gentiles who follow Christ are the adopted children of Abraham, the first ancestor of the Jews. We know, from seeing among us families with adopted children, that adoption is not some kind of ethereal, spiritualized kinship. A child who has been adopted is firmly, permanently, **really** the child of those parents, just as though he or she had been born out of the bodies of those who love and care for them. Adoption means, by definition, that those who were not so previously, are now part of the family.

But a strange thing happened in the course of history. Those whom God had affirmed as chosen became estranged from one another. This happens in families, sometimes. Eventually, the familial customs of the two groups grew very different, and some branches of the family became unable even to converse civilly, or to recognize one another as relatives. Each remained convinced of its own chosen-ness, and each continued to adopt in new members.

The part of the family that called itself "Christian" got very large, and at times tried to get rid of the much smaller Jewish part, which it viewed as an embarrassment or worse, and the family quarrel became very bitter over the centuries. In recent times, some of that is being healed, as each branch of the family learns to respect and value the special insights and revelations that have been given to the other in nearly 2000 years. Despite the ugliness of much of the past, each is beginning to recognize that all who are willing to take on the responsibilities of the Covenant are in fact part of God's

Chosen People. Thus, those who are part of this Body, even if the most thorough genealogical search could turn up no Jewish – or even Christian – ancestor, are, through adoption, true heirs of those who have been choosing into the Promise made so long ago at Sinai, and reaffirmed over and over since then.

When I first came to Seekers, I had been in a kind of self-imposed exile from that part of God's People into which I had been born. I had stopped observing the family customs some time before, and was not actively part of any community of faith. I thought that I was a free and independent being, individually choosing to follow Christ. What I have found out in the ensuing years, is that one can be neither Jew nor Christian without being part of a community. The Covenant was given not to Moses as a unique, solitary individual, but as a representative of his people. The Covenant was not between God and Moses, but between God and each one of the People of Israel, the people of the Promise. If in following Christ I could no longer be a Jew, I found that I could be – and was – adopted in to that other branch of the family, the Christian side, where I have been welcomed as a true daughter and sister.

One day, soon after arriving in Washington, Glen and I went to Potters House, as we lived nearby. As he was looking at the books, I saw hanging on a nail a copy of the Potters House commitment statement. While it differs in details from what we have repeated today, it is in its essence the same kind of thing. Knowing nothing of the history of Church of the Saviour, it looked to me like the vows of a religious order. Neither monastic nor priestly, it bound its members not to poverty, chastity, and obedience, but to an intentional Christian life. Immediately, I knew that I was longing for this kind of deep commitment, this communality that I had lost in leaving my faith-family of origin. It was this understanding, that Church of the Saviour in general, and Seekers in particular, is a place where people are encouraged

to take their Christianity seriously, that drew me, and that continues to hold me, regardless of the little ups and downs that community entails.

Last week, Ken asked us to consider what next steps we could take in response to God's call on our lives. Since he is not himself a core member, but moving in that general direction, he is especially conscious of the specific commitments to disciplines which core members must make, and from which other members of the community are exempt (although they, too, are encouraged to take them up). As one who first signed the book of members four years ago (a mere moment, in comparison with many), I want to say that becoming a core member is not an end, but a beginning.

Like the Israelites in the desert, who confused freedom with license, and worshipped the Golden Calf rather than a God who gave them rules for harmonious living, I, too, often want to throw off all constraints and live exactly as I please, demanding that God meet me on my own terms. But, of course, I remember that in fact I tried that for a long, long time, and it was neither fulfilling nor, in fact, a particularly useful way to know God. Now, my daily practice of the disciplines of Scripture, introspection, and prayer makes slow, barely perceptible changes in me, and gradually I find myself turning into the person I would like to be – more patient, more prayerful, more grateful for the daily gifts of life and breath. My practice of proportional giving makes me aware that despite the small size of my paycheck, my tiny kitchen, and my 10-year-old car, that in fact I enjoy enormous wealth and privilege, in a world in which so many do not have adequate housing, food, clothing, or health care. My participation in, and accountability regarding, Celebration Circle, Core Members meetings, the School of Christian Living, and Seekers events connects me to the lives – and sometimes the deaths – of others in material, social, and spiritual ways. All of these disciplines work together to deepen my journey into a life of

faith. For me, the promises that I make each October, to God and to other Seekers, are not hardships or prisons, but the tools that God gives us to love one another, and all of Creation. They bind us as part of the chosen, eternally choosing, People of God. The promises that we make are the road to joyful participation in the sorrows of the world. And this road, which leads through Christ, is the pathway to freedom.