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Who's Telling Our Story?

A sermon on Exodus 1:6-4 and 5:15-6:1 and the words of Chief Dan George

Eventually, Joseph, his brothers, and everyone in his generation died. But the Israelites were fertile and became populous. They multiplied and grew dramatically, filling the whole land.

Now a new King came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph. He said to his people, "The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are. Come on, let's be smart and deal with them. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land." As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work. They had to build storage cities named Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread. So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

Then the Israelite supervisors came and pleaded to Pharaoh, "Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is supplied to your servants, yet they say to us, 'Make bricks!' Look at how your servants are being beaten! Your own people are to blame!"

Pharaoh replied, "You are lazy bums, nothing but lazy bums. That's why you say, 'Let us go and offer sacrifices to the Lord.' Go and get back to work! No straw will be given to you, but you still need to make the same number of bricks."

The Israelite supervisors saw how impossible their situation was when they were commanded, "Don't reduce your daily quota of bricks." When they left Pharaoh, they met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them. The supervisors said to them, "Let the Lord see and judge what you've done! You've made us stink in the opinion of Pharaoh and his servants. You've given them a reason to kill us."

Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, "My Lord, why have you abused this people? Why did you send me for this? Ever since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has abused this people. And you've done absolutely nothing to rescue your people."

The Lord replied to Moses, "Now you will see what I'll do to Pharaoh. In fact, he'll be so eager to let them go that he'll drive them out of his land by force."

Friends, I first need to say thank you. Thank you to Joan and Judi for reading these rich and challenging texts, and thank you to all of you listening. In my excitement at being back in the virtual pulpit and my eagerness to make this a meaningful few months together, I have dived straight into the deep end with these texts and am going to swim, with you, into some interesting waters.

I recognize that by starting right away with texts that are complex, nuanced, and intimately linked to our national past, I am asking for a lot of trust from you. I haven't met most of you, and even right now I'm either just a face on a screen or a voice on the phone, so it's even harder to get a sense of who I am.

But I decided to take this risk anyhow because you are people who have loved, supported, and listened to Kathy and Armand over the years, and so my guess is that you are people of heart, people of courage, and people of faith.

So let's swim into these passages together, trusting that Jesus is walking on the waves toward us.

Let us pray.

Beloved, holy, and tender God, bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts. May you flow through me so that my message may comfort, strengthen, and inspire your children. Together, may we know you in the wisdom and guidance of these words. Amen.

SERMON:

I used to work in construction. I was a struggling actor in need of a day job, and I found myself doing first aid and then safety management in the construction industry. In 2015, I had my first full-time job, with a boss who was charming, funny – and a bully. Six months into the job, I felt battered, frightened, exhausted, and miserable. My boss was never satisfied with my work; I was never fast enough or could get enough done for him. I knew I wasn't lazy, but I was so worn down from being told I was insufficient that I started to believe it myself.

Who tells us who we are? Who tells us what we are? What are the stories we believe about ourselves? What are the stories we believe about others?

Pharaoh tells the Israelites that they are lazy. We know they aren't - they are pointing out to Pharaoh the reality of the situation. They're saying to Pharaoh: "You've moved the goalposts. You've changed the rules, and they're unrealistic and unfair."

What does Pharaoh say? "You are lazy, you are lazy" (Ex 5:17) Pharaoh is telling his own version of reality, and he is refusing to let the facts get in the way of his belief.

Not surprisingly, the Israelites turn on Moses and Aaron: "The Lord look upon you and judge, because you have made us offensive in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (Ex 5:21) In other words, "Are you happy now? You've made it worse. You've signed our death warrant. Why couldn't you just leave things as they were? Why did you have to stir up trouble?"

Pharaoh oppresses the people through harsh physical labour and impossible demands, but also by usurping the right to tell them who they are. To quote the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."

Pharaoh says the Israelites are lazy, but God tells another. We will hear next week God's response to the oppression and suffering of the Israelites, but in essence, God's promise to the people of Israel is that God will stay in relationship no matter what: "I will take you for my people, and I will be your God". God will offer the people another identity: not lazy bums, but children of God.

All of us are required to choose an identity, and choose who will define it for us. What are the stories that are being told about you? If you're a woman, are you beautiful enough? If you're a man, are you powerful enough? If you're an elder, have you been told you don't matter anymore? If you're not white, have you been told that you don't count? If you love someone of the same gender as you, have you been told that it's not real? Whom are we going to trust – Pharaoh, or God? With whom are we in relationship?

That's where freedom lies: in the reclaiming of our stories. I cannot stop old school construction alpha males from being bullies. But I can choose whether I believe their opinions of me.

And as I gain that freedom, I am also entrusted with the responsibility of making space for others to tell the stories that define them. Because our scripture is not just about the freedom of individuals, but about the freedom of a people. That is what we heard in the words of Chief Dan George: a raising of Indigenous voices to tell their own stories. They refuse to be defined by stories of alcohol abuse and reserve corruption - not because they don't exist, but because they are not the only story.

We need to hear their stories. We need to listen as they tell of the wisdom of their traditions, the strength of their children, the tenacity of their elders, because our ability as Christians to live into God's vision of justice, mercy, and love is bound up in our ability to allow others to be free.

It isn't always easy. I was 27 before I had any real contact with any Indigenous people: I was volunteering at the 2010 Olympics and was working with representatives of the four host First Nations. I was so anxious: the only story I knew of Indigenous people was the story of the residential schools. I couldn't see them just as people; I saw them as victims. I wanted to profusely apologize for everything they had suffered, and beg them not to hate me. It took a few days before I could relax and realize that they were people just like me. They were funny, talented, knowledgeable people.

Can we see ourselves in each other? Can we build a world in which all God's children are free to tell their own stories? Can we build a world in which our power and comfort do not depend on the exploitation of another people? Can we have the humility to realize when we have inadvertently aligned ourselves with Pharaoh, and the courage to align ourselves with God?

That's where our freedom lies, my friends. That's the freedom to which God is calling us. May God bless us with the courage to follow into the wilderness.