

Songs of Innocence and Experience

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Exodus 16: 1-15

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The people of Israel witnessed the wonder of God's deliverance. They stood on the distant shore looking back toward the land of Egypt, watching Pharaoh's army drown. Maybe they even heard Yul Brenner as Pharaoh speaking those majestic words of Moses: "*His God is God.*"

The people of Israel sang their new song, a song of deliverance replacing the song of lament and longing that had been on their lips so long.

"Sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted
The horse and the rider
he has hurled into the sea."

Safely beyond the reach of their task masters, the people rejoiced. And if this were all we knew of the ancient story of the exodus, we might assume that the liberated people of the Lord traveled straight to the Land of Goat Yoghurt and Regionally-Sourced Honey, and we would never touch upon the truth of their terrible journey into freedom, or learn what it means for us to walk the path they walked.

It is in this chapter, Exodus 16, that painful new realities emerge in our story. It is in our text today that we find ourselves standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the liberated slaves beyond the reach of Egypt, as the songs of joyful deliverance linger and die upon the wind, and the people of Israel turn their faces toward the desert and begin walking into an uncertain and unpredictable future. Yet, even now, yet another song is forming on the lips of the children of Israel, safe from the lash of their task-masters, safe from Pharaoh's archers, but footsore and hungry and unsure of what tomorrow will bring.

And it is here that the contemporary poet Louise Gluck's stark words speak to our hearts also, as though she were singing Israel's song of the wilderness road.

"The light has changed;
middle C is tuned darker now.
And the songs of morning sound over-rehearsed.

This is the light of autumn, not the light of spring.
The light of autumn: *you will not be spared.*

The songs have changed; the unspeakable
has entered them.

This is the light of autumn, not the light that says
I am reborn.

Not the spring dawn. *I strained, I suffered, I was delivered.*
This is the present, an allegory of waste."

(Louise Gluck, from "October," *Averno* (2006).

The people of Israel, delivered from the land of bondage, kept Egypt in their hearts. Their bodies had been set free from captivity, but their minds remained enslaved. Expecting, perhaps, the divine dependency of a heaven on earth, they were shocked to find themselves free.

I believe it was the British scholar Theodore Zeldin who said that freedom remains a disputed virtue because it requires responsibility. I'm not sure the people of Israel would have put it in those words, but those words might as well have been etched upon their inner hearts. They grumbled in their freedom.

Roughly six weeks after Egypt first appeared in their rear-view mirror, we are told, "the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron." They complained: *It would have been better if we had died in our beds in Egypt, worn out by Pharaoh's lust for monuments. We were slaves, but our masters fed us well enough. Moses has brought us out into this desert to starve to death.*

Now, I know this will be a stretch for us to imagine. We know so little about complaining ourselves. We are not grouchers, gripers, or grumblers. No. But we do know there are some such folk out there. If there's a Year of the Monkey and a Year of the Rat, then surely this is the Year of the Grouse. And there's been plenty to worry and grouse about!

But I feel bad for Moses. Knowing what will happen around the next corner in the story, I don't feel so sympathetic toward his brother, Aaron. But for Moses, I feel bad.

Moses has faithfully led the people from bondage to freedom. Imagine that! What wonders and terrors the people have seen! Plague. Locusts. Frogs. Lice. The Angel of Death. Pursuit by the best troops in the world. They survived it all. And by the mighty hand of the Lord God, they were delivered up out of the house of bondage.

And Moses, when he hears their complaints, is quick to remind them of this. They had prayed for centuries to be set free. God freed them. Moses was just God's instrument. "You aren't griping at me," Moses said, "You're griping at God."

And even in today's text the Lord God graciously heard his ungrateful and frightened people's complaint. And the Lord provided for them some sort of nourishing breakfast every morning (although, frankly hearing the description of manna and how it seemed to have risen from the moisture the night leaves behind) I might have stuck with just my coffee. But in the

evenings, quail! Grilled, baked, sautéed: a nice brace or two of quail can't be beat. That's something a Texas boy can get excited about.

But, it's not the dining that stands out in this passage, is it? No.

The people who followed Moses out of bondage wouldn't let go of their bondage. Their minds remained enslaved. They were more than ready to return to slavery, they were more than ready to endure the slave master's lash, just to escape the terrible uncertainty of freedom. "At least we got enough to eat," they grumbled.

Karl Barth once described the plight of men and women in Europe who hid in fear even after the Second World War officially ended, unaware that the Nazis had already been defeated.

We all know the stories of the original Juneteenth Day, when word finally arrived in Galveston, Texas, that the enslaved persons who lived in Texas had been emancipated, a declaration that had been kept from them for over two years. But this situation in the desert beyond Egypt is different from either of those historical moments.

In this situation, the people of Israel knew they had been set free. They were six weeks walking on the other side of the sea from Egypt and its bondage. No one and nothing had kept the word from them. They were like the prisoner whom Frederick Buechner once described, who languished in prison while the keys to his cell jangled in his pocket all along. The cell, the bondage, the enslavement that held these folks was not physical. It was in their own minds.

I would be getting ahead of our text today to say that there was a dire consequence for the physically liberated people of Israel who refused to take up the twin burdens of freedom and responsibility, who resisted stepping out into that uncertainty that is the hallmark of real life.

We know, however, where this story is headed. And we know the price the recently liberated people paid.

When the people of Israel left the aptly named Desert of Sin, journeying onward as God commanded, they grumbled again later of their thirst. Moses just about lost it on that occasion he was so frustrated.

And, later still, the people abandoned the Lord God who had delivered them, and with Aaron's help, they crafted and worshiped false gods of gold and silver. The consequence, of course, we know: God allowed this people to wander in the desert until they were replaced by another generation who did not cling to Egypt in their hearts.

There are times when the story says more than we can possibly say about it. This story has endured for millennia because it stands open like a door, admitting generations untold to find themselves within it. And so it is today.

With the land of bondage behind us, and with a promised land on the other side of yet another river, only we can determine what dominates our hearts.

Can we let the past of bondage go, all those ways of thinking and believing that do not serve us well as a people of grace? Are we willing to step out into that groundlessness that makes up the path all mortals tread, trusting ourselves to God's way of truth, mercy and peace?

Will freedom and the responsibility to use freedom well dominate our hearts? Will the courage to face reality and to accept the flux of life illuminate our minds?

Or shall we cling to some inner Egypt, some mental bondage, still rattling chains we wore for so long that we cannot now imagine living without them?

Amen.