

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
November 11, 2018

Exodus 23:9-16

“Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt. “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed. “Be careful to do everything I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips. “Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. “Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv, for in that month you came out of Egypt. No one is to appear before me empty-handed. Celebrate the Festival of Harvest with the first fruits of the crops you sow in your field. Celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field.

An Intentional Person

When our friendly neighbor invited me to join her at her yoga studio, a place up Route 3 in Marshfield, I said yes, thinking it would be nice, but not for a minute thinking I’d soon be contemplating making yoga a regular practice.

But I love this place – Unplug and be Mindful it’s called. It has a clean wide-open space, just entering it makes you feel peaceful. It has women instructors who seem well grounded and who speak in a loud enough voice to be heard. It has an introductory offer of two weeks for twenty-five dollars, unlimited classes, so you can check out all the many offerings.

There are many reasons to think about making yoga a regular thing. There is a back that has started hurting, for one. Yoga stretches things, and it makes you have a stronger core. It helps you remember to breathe – a good thing in life, and in a somewhat stressful profession. In fact, it is all about breath and flow, and how you use your energy. In week one of the two week trial period I have remembered that when I do yoga, I feel stronger, more resilient, less likely to sweat the small things...more at peace.

And I love this one particular part. When you first get on the mat and start to relax, focusing on your breath, the instructor asks you to name your intention. What are you hoping to get out of this time today? I have been struck by how what comes to mind each day, is never exactly the same thing, but is somehow precisely what I need for that particular day. On the day of the election, in yoga that day, I asked that

this days time would open my heart, that I might have a heart of compassion. I carried that into my work interactions, later in the day, I was amazed how non-reactively I was able to watch the election results and listen to the discussion of it.

This week I got there four times in five days. and each time, I must confess, I felt it was a luxury, an indulgence to make this kind of time for myself. Still, I know that taking care of myself is something I do need to be intentional about. And I know that in many ways an intentional life is a good life. That seems to be the feeling of the passage we read this morning from the book of Exodus. Exodus is, of course, the book that tells the story of the people of Israel leaving their situation of bondage in Egypt. The passage we read today is part of a “covenant code” which is to say behaviors that will be required if the people are to stay true to God in their new home in the promised land. They must not forget their history. They must not forget what God has done for them.

Their behavior is to be shaped by the experience they had of being led out of Egypt. They should not oppress a stranger, for they were once strangers in Egypt, they themselves know the strangers vulnerable heart. They should let the land rest, for there was no rest in Egypt. They should rest, and their animals too. They should keep a feast to God, three times a year. One for the wheat harvest, which is around the time of Pentecost, in the spring. One for ingathering, in the fall harvest, (which is what we are marking by the way next week with our offering of food for the Plymouth Food Pantry.) And of course in the middle of those two, and the most important, the feast of unleavened bread, remembering the very night the Israelites left Pharaoh’s repressive regime, moving so quickly they could not wait for their bread to rise.

Such feasting is more than making merry. The food, the drink, what is said, how things are decorated are all ways to remember history, to remember God. Marking the feasts three times a year is a way for the people to remember their identity in God. Oh, there are daily things to also help remember, but these are special occasions.

Recently in our house I got the old family photos up. The farmhouse where my father grew up, the place that held so many happy family memories has a central place. But there is also Aunt Hazel in her nursing garb... she could be rather persnickety and grim if you want to know the truth and a grandfather who I swear looks like a Hitler youth in his pantaloons and sullen young man expression. There is Aunt Louise who would do anything for someone she loved, her sweet face in there with these more curmudgeonly family members, There they are all together on the walls. It was an intentional act to create these photo walls. Now I look at the family photos. I remember. I give thanks. I am humbled. These, I say to myself, all these are *part of who I am*.

Well, we had a very lively discussion in bible study this week about our religious identity – what it means to have particular intentions in being Christian. Someone

made the comment that while our passage today commands and requires, in the UCC we aren't that into those strong verbs. We like the soft verbs – encourage, invite. But surely there are some things *that are required of us* in living as followers of Jesus. An open heart. A voice that will speak up about injustice. A heart that seeks to practice forgiveness. Worship. Prayer. Love.

Maybe, we said, we need more time to reflect on the basics. Maybe we could set that as an intention for our church in the new year. An intentional life is a good life, and we'd like to be more intentional about our faith, about how to practice our faith in our day to day lives.

In a few minutes we will be moving to the part of our service known as the Chest of Joash, something that is also about living an intentional life. I bet more than a few of you came here today not knowing a thing about this. Rest assured, if you come forward with others today, it is fine to simply place your hand on the chest – if you are a first-time visitor, or relatively new to this place, you simply may not be ready to make a pledge of financial commitment to the ministry of this church. But we'd like everyone today to leave here knowing who Joash was.... And I should say, that before I came to this church I had been a pastor for nearly twenty years and I didn't know a single thing about Joash. Soon, stewardship season came around, and suddenly I'm hearing his name, hearing about this odd sounding "Chest of Joash ceremony."

So here goes. Joash – and you could google this too – was a king in the 9th century BC. He became king of Israel when at age 7 when the people rose up and deposed his evil grandmother Queen Athaliah. They got tired of Queen Athaliah slaughtering her political enemies and running the treasury dry – so they ran her out. Joash being crowned king is the subject of our bulletin cover, a kind of Sunday school picture there – pretty big crown for such a little kid, and you can bet there were adults helping him rule for quite some time. One day, when he was an adult, Joash looked at the temple and saw it was in bad shape. He said something should be done about that. So the people gave money, but the corrupt priests kept it for themselves, letting the building further crumble. Joash, a man of action, found a chest and placed it in the entrance to the temple. The people gave their money to see the temple restored, and this time it was. It's all right there in Second Chronicles, chapter 24!

Given what we've been working on here for the past few years, it is a good story to remember. I think of Norm Bingham Maas, the chair of the Building committee, five years ago pointing to the stained roof, and the rain buckets on the carpet down below. As many of you remember, the new roof and the organ restoration were the first part of the capital campaign. (Our Chest of Joash wasn't used for the capital campaign, though now that you know the story you know that that use would have been biblically accurate.) I am told that Hector Patenaude, Johnnie Jean's father, was the one who made this chest, and it was always used in our congregation for the purpose of pledges made not for the building but for the ongoing support of the general mission of the church.

We don't know a lot about Joash. We do know he was an intentional person. He saw something that was important to him that needed to be done, and he helped make it happen.

In bible study I shared about Ben Guess. Ben was a classmate of mine at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville Tennessee. He was a smart guy, a most handsome and charismatic person, and an openly gay man. When he went to find a call after graduation, he found that at that time, in the early nineties, there weren't all that many churches, particularly in the south, that would consider calling a gay man. Ben went to an urban church that was close to closing. They had about thirty in worship, and there were about ten older women who pretty much ran the place. He took the first year or so to befriend these women, to walk with them and in that, he earned their trust. Ben was a fine pastor and a very good preacher and in time, the church began to grow. A few years in, Ben instituted Covenant Sunday, which was when people not only brought forward their pledges, but also their own personal covenant – a series, if you will, of personal intentions, a covenant between each person and God. This might be how they hoped to grow in their relationship to God. How they hoped to be more active in prayer, or in service. It could include a promise to work on forgiveness, or read all four gospels. With the pastors guidance in preparing for this, the people stated their intentions for the year to come.

It was a church that grew in number, and in commitment – and it soon had several hundred attendees. But they were more than “attendees” – they were people who were being helped to grow spiritually -- there was something really compelling about this kind of intentionality. So, I asked the bible study group: Would we welcome something like that? What might it mean for us to be more intentional about our lives and about our faith practices? I bet just about every one of us could think of something we'd like to learn more about, or a practice we'd like to cultivate. When our youth are confirmed, we ask them to share what the church means to them. Maybe we could move to next year, at pledge dedication time, asking adults to share how they want to grow in faith and understanding, in service, in Christian identity.

There is an old children's song that says the church is not a building, The church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, The church is the people. The people, yes, and people who see it as part of their baptism belovedness to grow in love of God and neighbor and to grow in their capacity to follow Jesus.

In a few minutes you will be invited to come forward to place your pledges in the Chest of Joash. As we do, I hope we'll remember that long before most of us stepped foot in this place, others before us walked up these aisles and made an intention for themselves, about how they were going to grow in giving. They saw their giving as a sign of their commitment, a way that they were “all in” with the work of Jesus

as they saw it and experienced it happening here at the church. Today, we take our places in that line. Today we are not contributing to building restoration, but to the ongoing ministry.

I hope this ministry has made a difference in your life, so much so that you can take part -- heartily joining in to sing Draw the Circle Wide and, in this very intentional act today, doing your part to help us make it so.

Amen.