

## Exodus 1: 1-14

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

## SERMON:

Stacey describes her family when she was young as ‘working poor’, a family that mostly relied on public transit to get around. And so when she and her parents were invited to the Georgia governor’s mansion as one of the high school valedictorians back in the early 1990’s, they took the bus to the mansion and walked across the street to the guard booth.

This is how she tells the story: “And the guard looks at me, looks at my parents. He looks at the bus that’s pulling away. And he tells us we don’t belong here. She goes on:

He assumed we were visitors coming to just view the governor’s mansion as tourists. And my dad says, no, no, you know, this is my daughter, Stacey. You know, she’s one of the valedictorians. But the guard didn’t look at the list that he had. He didn’t accept the invitation my mom had in her purse. He just kind of sneered at us. And he said, look, you don’t belong here.”

You don’t belong here... well after some heated conversation, Stacey continues the story for us...

Start [recording at 1:36 - 2:06](#)<sup>1</sup>

The only thing Stacey Abrams, one who has worked tirelessly to get out the vote in GA, the only thing she remembers from that day is being told ‘you don’t belong here’. That moment of alienation and rejection helped shape the trajectory of her life.

Our stories shape us. Our stories shape us as individuals, as families, as communities and as nations.

Christian author Brian McLaren speaks of ‘framing stories’. A framing story “gives people direction, values, vision, and inspiration by providing a framework for their lives. A framing story tells them who they are, where they come from, where things are going, and what they should do.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/919110472>

<sup>2</sup> McLaren, Brian. 2007. *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*. Thomas Nelson.

In a recent daily meditation, Catholic priest and writer, Richard Rohr, writes: “While we all have stories that answer those questions on a personal level, a “framing story” dictates the general beliefs of a culture, nation, religion, and even humanity as a whole.”

If our cultural framing story tells us that the purpose of our life is to gather more and more stuff and seek out as much pleasure as possible, then we will have little reason to manage our consumption.

If our national framing story tells us that we are in life-and-death competition with each other . . . then we will have little reason to seek reconciliation and collaboration and nonviolent resolutions to our conflicts. . . <sup>3</sup>

If our framing story reminds us that our God is one who breaks the chains of slavery, who provides a way out of no way... if our framing story reminds us again and again that no matter how tired, how beaten, how hopeless life seems, that our God is with us, providing manna in the deserts of our lives, then we might just live a little differently.

The story we began today - in this first chapter of Exodus is a framing story. Exodus literally means ‘going out’. It’s the road out of Egypt, the road to freedom, created by God, led by God.

The book of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew bible, the one that comes right before Exodus, speaks of God as the God of your ancestors - The God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob. Here, beginning in the book of Exodus and for the rest of the scriptures, God is known as the God who brought us out of the land of Egypt.

The Israelites from this time forward worshipped the God who brought them out of the land of Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

We enter into this framing story - a time of transition for the people of Israel. This ancient story of the Exodus tells them who they are, where they come from, where things are going, and what they should do.

It is a story for us as well. This story, written millenia ago, continues to be a framing story for our understanding of the God who delivers us from slavery to freedom.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://cac.org/a-new-framing-story-2021-01-11/>

<sup>4</sup> [Narrative Lectionary 004: Exodus](#)

So let's look at the text for today -

It begins with a list; a narrative continuity with Genesis, listing the names of Jacob's sons. 70 in all - Seventy is symbolic - seven and its multiples represent completeness in the ancient world. 70 is a number signaling to the reader that this is a story about an entire people - a story of all Israelites, in all times.<sup>5</sup>

The text goes on: 'But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.'

Do you hear echoes of the book of Genesis, emphasizing the Israelites obedience to this first divine command to be fruitful and multiply?

And recognition of this people's obedience to God's command threatens the powerful. Here we meet this new, unnamed pharaoh, the one who says 'you don't belong here'; the one who employs a strategy to try and crush the Israelite people by creating intolerable working conditions.

This pharaoh, the oppressor, said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them...'

**This pharaoh, fearful yet aware of their potential, calls the Israelites a 'people'. Here, in Hebrew, the Israelite people are called 'am. 'Am is a kinship term, as distinct from the political term, goy, 'nation' used up until this point to describe the Israelites.. This is the first use of the word 'people' as kin in the bible.<sup>6</sup>**

This framing story in Exodus begins with the people no longer being just a nation, a political group. Now they are much stronger than that. They are kin. They are a people being transformed from ones who follow the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, into a kinship who worship the God who brought us out of the land of Egypt.

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<sup>5</sup> Meyers, Carol. 2005. *Exodus*. Cambridge University Press. P 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P 34.

The oppressor may say 'you don't belong here', but they are strong. God is on their side, they can and will endure whatever comes their way because the seed has been planted - their God is the God who sets people free. This framing story is setting the stage for resilience to be found in the midst of profound suffering and struggle.

## PAUSE

We have seen, played out in our current political context here in the US, that words matter. Stories matter. They shape, lead, define us. Our stories can focus on fear and violence as the answer, or they can remind us that we are all kin - we are all connected, and become stronger, more resilient, more loving and creative, when we focus our attention on our kinship.

In a heart-felt speech offered last Sunday, January 10, former movie actor and Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, spoke of his own story. He began by naming that he is an immigrant to this country, born in Austria in 1947, just after the end of WWII. He recalls the painful memory of the beatings he and family endured at the hand of his father, one of the many broken men who were living out their guilt over their participation in the war. Schwarzenegger recognizes that many of those men of his youth were not rabid antisemites, but just ordinary folk who went step-by-step down the path of buying into the lies and intolerance of the time. And from that framing story of intolerance, life spun out of control.

In that speech, Mr. Schwarzenegger named another framing story from his youth. Growing up Catholic, he went to church and to Catholic school. There he learned about having a servant's heart - serving something larger than yourself. This became his framing story, one he encourages all of us to embrace at this time.<sup>7</sup>

My friends, what are the framing stories that shape us, that give us meaning and purpose, showing us how to live?

Just as Christ loves us, so we are to love one another, for we are all kin - all created in the image of God.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/arnold-schwarzenegger-video-speech-transcript-on-capitol-riot-attack>

As those who seek to follow Jesus, our framing story invites us to walk with him, on this convoluted journey of loving both neighbor and enemy.

Oh but this journey to love is full of broad open plains and steep, winding, treacherous terrain, where it's easy to lose our footing.

My friends, to truly love, Sociologist Brene Brown says we must both hold others accountable AND not dehumanize them. Dehumanization, she says, is the process of demonizing the enemy; making them less than human.<sup>8</sup>

And so we all must watch our thoughts, our speech, our actions - we must be aware of the ways we talk of "the other".

Jumping ahead and calling for a false unity is not what love looks like in our time. It's not the path to peace. No, loving one another means holding one another accountable *and* being aware of our tendency to dehumanize.

Out of fear, Pharaoh instructed his people to treat others less than human, demonizing them. We have a different story. A different call.

Jesus calls us to live into our kinship with all. See everyone as worthy. Be aware of how each of us holds the capacity to dehumanize the other and choose the way of love instead.

What a journey!

In the weeks ahead as we wander with those stubborn, resilient, sometimes worn out Israelites of long ago, I ask you to consider: what stories frame your life?

How are you finding meaning and direction in these stories?

May we look to God, the God who shows the way to freedom, to lead us through the wilderness.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-on-words-actions-dehumanization-and-accountability/>