
A Passionate Exodus

Luke 9:28-43a

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When I think of the Exodus, I think of the following:

*When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.*

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
Let my people go!*

*No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go;
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go.*

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
Let my people go!*

This is the story of the children of Israel oppressed by the Egyptians, forced to do hard labor in mortar and brick. We hear that the Egyptians were “ruthless” in their imposition of oppression and the king of Egypt desired to kill every Hebrew boy. But God raises up Moses and Moses returns to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to let God’s people go free. Eventually the enslaved Israelites escape and are led to freedom by crossing the Red Sea, causing Moses, the Israelites, and Miriam to sing, “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” “Oh Mary don’t you weep, Pharaoh’s army got drowned in the sea, Oh Mary don’t you weep.” This was an exodus to a promised land flowing with milk and honey. But we should remember, however, that before they reached the promised land (and some of them did not!) they had to go through a wilderness. This is the traditional Exodus narrative. A movement from bondage to freedom. A metaphor for the Christian life—from bondage to freedom.

Yet there’s another exodus that we rarely talk about. An exodus that begins on a mountain. It’s not an exodus to a promised land. But it is still an exodus. “Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of

his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” In Greek, his departure literally means his “exodus.” But the exodus of Jesus is not necessarily one from bondage to freedom like the traditional Exodus story.

First of all, why would anyone want to leave this mountain with all of its glory? God’s glory, God’s voice, God’s presence in the clouds. Angels and heavenly beings are usually the ones clothed in white and they see white, so why would anyone want to leave this holy spot foreshadowing the dazzling resurrection? An exodus is a departure and shouldn’t we want to be in God’s presence? This is where people strive to be, to be with God, to hear God’s voice, and to see God’s glory. This is spiritual nirvana. Isn’t this what we are to be moving toward? There’s no Pharaoh. There’s God’s presence and voice. There’s no hard toil of physical slavery. There’s a prayer meeting going on. Why would there need to be an exodus? This is the *telos* of all of our spiritual striving, isn’t it?

It’s almost the Mardi Gras moment of the Christian life—and we so badly want to stay there and dwell in that moment. That’s what Peter wanted—“master, it’s so good for us to be here; let me make some dwellings.” This is too good to be true. We want to remain in that moment of celebration and dancing and drinking of water that never runs dry. We want to spiritually splurge and have a fat faith day, not just a Fat Tuesday. We like it here, on the Mardi Gras mountain with God in all of its glowing glory. But remember that Mardi Gras happens before we arrive on the doorstep of Ash Wednesday and Lent. All the reveling of Mardi Gras is actually a reminder that it will not be forever. Life is not an eternal fiesta. And after Mardi Gras there is the purging and repentance and a wilderness wandering with its temptations. After all of the hype of glory, Jesus is actually found alone and the disciples who were with him are silent. The music of Mardi Gras eventually fades away because it is momentary.

It’s momentary because, secondly, the exodus or departure of Jesus, means you have to come down the mountain. You can’t stay in the clouds and push the repeat button on ‘This is my son, my Chosen.’ The truth is that we can’t stay on mountain highs forever. We have to leave the mountain, stumble home after Mardi Gras, to engage the world, without any anticipation of earthly glory. Because when you come down, when Jesus comes down, we may realize that for many every day is a Good Friday not a resurrection Sunday. The exodus of Jesus means we have to leave our comforts and know that God is not solely in the context of ecstasy but is present in times of tragedy and turmoil. An exodus spirituality in the mode of Jesus means that we shouldn’t be satisfied with just being with God in prayer because ‘being with’ is not enough when it comes to the ministry of Jesus. You can’t just sit with Jesus and make him a dwelling because Jesus is on the move which is why you have to follow him and following Jesus, especially the exodus Jesus, is never safe. Jesus departs and leaves the glory of God for the gore and suffering of everyday, a wilderness of sorts. He’s transfigured but headed for trouble. The mountain was so invigorating but encountering Jesus leads you to encounter the world.

The irony is that this passage comes before Lent. You may have the highs before you hit some lows. You may encounter God before you have to encounter your demons. One prays in order to nurture the resources to face the pain of life, to face a man’s only son whom they meet the next day after they come down the mountain. The transfiguration nudges Jesus to meet someone tormented. A little child convulsed by a spirit until he foams at the mouth; “it mauls him,” his desperate father cries. This is what happens when you come down the mountain and encounter the world—you meet people in need of healing. You meet the walking wounded. You meet children affected by contaminated water in Flint, MI. But if you never leave the mountain, you’ll never experience the exodus of Jesus.

I know that this is not the traditional exodus story from slavery to freedom. And this exodus is more than just coming down the mountain to face the jagged edges of life. It is an exodus, a departure, which Jesus was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. That means it is an exodus to death, his death on a cross. Before this story, Jesus tells the disciples that they have to deny themselves and take up the cross and follow him daily. And before that, he predicts his great suffering and death. That means to follow Jesus is to die. To follow Jesus is a portal to death and life—"for those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." And after this story, Jesus foretells his death again and in this story the mention of Jerusalem makes sure that we don't forget his bloody death. A Clorox bleached Christ won't suffice for a broken world.

Jesus doesn't leave bondage but leaves glory to find his passion consummated on a cross. His passion is his suffering love. Passion, *pascho*, means "to suffer" or "to endure," linking to the suffering of Christ and his paschal mystery. Passion is not about emotionalism or feeling good but it has to do with being immersed into the life of Jesus, particularly his suffering. The exodus of Jesus is an exodus to passion, a passionate exodus. Passionate and compassionate—literally to suffer with those who suffer and mourn, those who are maim and lame. The phrase from career counselors—"finding your passion"—or someone asking, "What is your passion?" is like asking, "For what are you willing to die?" This exodus shows us that you have to leave your glory and all of its perks, relinquishing it in order to discover what is real passion. It is a letting go of life, your life, for death, for suffering, for love. It is taking up a cross to follow Jesus. This exodus doesn't have a crossing of the Red Sea but it does have a cross.

This may not be the kind of exodus we've always thought about. Maybe we thought exodus was only to leave slavery and to be free when there is clearly another type of exodus in which one might have to leave glory (and power) to find freedom. Although one might be free, one is still bound to God and others through suffering and called to serve with passion. Exodus is not always a movement to the promised land. It is a movement toward passion, toward those who are in pain and sorrow. It is a movement toward com-passion, to suffer with those suffering—the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, the prisoner, the refugee, the immigrant, the abused and used, or even a mauled little boy. Through this exodus you will lose your life and save it at the same time because you will discover your passion in life, once and for all.