

God Frees Us From the Oppressor

My thoughts today are inspired by Rev James Bhagwan, general secretary of the Pacific Council of Churches. James is a pastor in the Methodist and Anglican churches in Fiji. His family is a mix of indentured workers from India and First Nations of the Pacific Islands.

We have reached that part of the Exodus story where Pharaoh has finally allowed the Israelites to leave after the tenth plague, the one where the first born were killed except in the Israelite households that had followed the instructions to mark their doorways. Having packed up and left, the Israelites are not taking the shortest route to the promised land as that is through the territory of the Philistines and that would likely end up in a fight.

After saying yes, Pharaoh has realized the foolishness of letting them go, as now he has no one to work for him, no one to farm the fields, to make the bricks and to building the magnificent buildings.

Pharaoh has allowed the people to leave ... but he still believes that they belong to him; their bodies, their labour and their future are his property. The empire does not release easily. Pharaoh uses his technology – the horses, the chariots and drivers and the army to pursue the Israelites.

The Israelites have come to the shores of the Red Sea, lead by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. As they arrive at the shore there is a realization that there is no bridge, no boat, no passage. Behind them is the rapidly advancing Egyptian army, at least the faster moving chariots. As the saying goes, they are caught between a rock and a hard place. They complain to Moses that they are trapped and argue that they would have been better back in Egypt as slaves.

Here the people are to learn that the sea is not their real enemy. Pharaoh is. The sea has not enslaved them, has not taken their labour or ordered the killing of their children. And now God is about to fulfil the promise of salvation, the one that God gave to Moses from the burning bush. That God's people would be freed from oppression.

The cloud comes down to separate the Israelites and the Egyptians; then the wind, an east wind, the breath of God, the Holy Spirit begins to blow. Gently at first, gaining strength until Moses, lifts up his staff and raises his hand over the water. The waters divide and Israelites cross the sea on dry land.

It was a story of colonization. Of one country controlling another's land and people. Even when the colonizer leaves the empire does not release easily. It did not end with Pharaoh. In every century since, groups of humans have dominated or colonized other groups of people.

All across the world humans have colonized other peoples. Including here in Canada with the colonization of the First Nations Peoples and Turtle Island by the Europeans.

In many parts of the world the people may be politically free while living under the economic, racial, cultural or ecological domination of the past colonizer.

And humans in many parts of the world have colonized and dominated nature. Using it, abusing it. It was not so many years ago when sewers – with untreated waste – were emptied into oceans as oceans were seen as so large that it did not matter. The pollution would get washed away from where the pipe emptied out. It was not so many years ago when toxic oil and other chemicals were poured into the ground, and no one thought anything more about it as it seeped into the soil and was absorbed by the creatures and plants nearby. While we have greatly limited these actions here, they still occur in other parts of the world, where resources are lacking to deal with the pollutants.

The Israelites would spend forty years wandering in the desert to rid them selves of the Pharaoh's way of thinking, to rid themselves of the empire.

The First Nations Peoples of Canada speak of the healing of the seven generations. At 25-30 years per generation, that is about 200 years to rid themselves of the empire.

How long might it take for humans to stop colonizing, dominating creation? And how long will it take creation to heal?

God did lead the Israelites through the desert and into the promised land. It was not always an easy journey. There would be hunger and thirst and strife within the community.

Reconciliation with the First Nations is a work in progress, the road has been a bumpy in places. The First Nations see creation – the plants, animals, birds, water and soil – as part of their communities; rather than a resource to be used and discarded. We might do well to take some lessons from them.

Miriam takes up her tambourine. The women dance. Celebrating that slavery and violence and the machinery of domination do not have the final word. Pharaoh is not eternal. However, we cannot sing Miriam's song while silencing others. We cannot celebrate liberation while denying it to others.

James Bhagwan noted: "God opens a passage towards freedom. But those who cross must learn to live without chariots — to walk gently, protect life, resist domination and build communities of justice and peace. The ocean is not empty space between us. The rivers, lakes, wetlands and seas are not merely resources around us. The waters are part of us. The ocean is us."

Let us invite women, children, Indigenous peoples, migrants and others whose voices are often pushed to the edges to lead a song, prayer, poem, testimony or movement of liberation.

Let the final word belong neither to Pharaoh nor to fear.

Let the final word belong to the God of life—and to a people crossing together towards freedom without becoming another Pharaoh. And let all God's people say Amen. Amen!

Readings: Exodus 14:19-31
Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21