Strangers in a Strange Land

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
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"I have been a stranger in a strange land." Moses, in Exodus 2:22

"Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." -Exodus 23:9

". . . and [God] loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." -Deut 10:19

Once upon a time, there was a nation built upon the backs of slaves. Yet out of that nation- out of an intolerable and inhumane history- came an iconic story about human liberation.

The Exodus story is about a people who- despite centuries of slavery- somehow did not succumb to hopelessness. Instead, they confronted injustice, outfoxed the most powerful and wealthy people on the planet, saw their window of opportunity and grabbed it- so they and their children might live. Every year at Passover, we are invited imagine that we, too, were once strangers in a strange land...

and to see what this ancient story could possibly have to do with us today.

This year, as I reflect on Exodus, I've found myself wondering:
Is our land becoming more like the Promised Land or just a bit more like Egypt?
Are we heading towards greater human liberation, or are we so thoroughly enslaved by our addictions of all sorts that we don’t even know how deep in bondage we are?
Are we in need a spiritual exodus- an intellectual, emotional, religious exodus- out from the land of denial, lies and illusion to a land where we can speak of- and rely on- truth and love?

Don’t get me wrong: I feel like I had the good luck of being born into an incredibly fortunate period of human history, into a land of freedom, of democracy, of government by the people- not corporations. I was born almost- but not quite- half a century ago into a land overflowing with milk and honey,
a land of green trees, rivers, hills, marshes, seas, blue skies
and seasons never too harsh for human life.

But I've been noticing- and maybe you have too-
that this land is beginning to turn into a strange land—
no longer as familiar, predictable and stable as it once was.
There is, quite literally, a “sea change” going on.
There are shifts taking place in the seas, the skies and in the earth
thanks to our addiction to fossil fuels,
and we're just starting to feel in the storms, floods and earthquakes
that signal more changes to come.

On Friday, Earth Day, 60 heads of state signed the climate change pact
known as the Paris Agreement,
a major commitment to keep global temperature rise at 1.5 degrees-
one degree of which we've already covered.
And yet the Agreement has no plan for achieving its temperature targets.
The plans put forward so far will result in about 4 degrees of warming instead of 1.5.
One researcher notes that a 4 degree rise is
“incompatible with any reasonable characterization
of an organized, equitable, and civilized global community”.
Unless the politics change fast, we're heading for a strange and stranger land.

I've also been noticing- and maybe you have too-
that it seems more and more of us are strangers to one another.
Government policies and the wealth gap have led to segregated communities.
Money and politics have led to division and utter alienation among blue and red states.
Racism and Islamophobia have led to increasing resentment and suspicion.

Here's just one example:
As some of you know, three of us from North Parish attended a conference
about racial justice last weekend in New York City,
where one of the interfaith leaders and speakers was Hussein Rashid,
founder of an organization dedicated to religious literacy and cultural competency.
Rashid has an undergraduate degree from Columbia and a Ph.D. from Harvard,
and this is how he describes what it’s like to be a Muslim in the U.S. today:
“Permanently foreign, potentially terrorist.” A stranger in a strange land.

Another speaker at the conference was Valarie Kaur,
a Sikh whose family has lived in the U.S. for 100 years.
She told us that recently, when she boarded a plane,
someone had accused her of carrying a bomb because, as a nursing mother,
she was carrying a breast pump in a bag. And just days before the conference, her father had been on the beach with her infant son, and someone asked if he was wearing a suicide vest because, as a doting grandpa, he was wearing an infant carrier while his grandson played at his feet.

It doesn’t matter if one’s family has been here for generations. If you are overheard speaking Arabic on a plane, or if, as a Sikh man, you wear a turban, or if, as a Muslim woman, you wear a hijab, you are increasingly seen as “perpetually foreign, potentially terrorist,” a stranger in a strange land.

So what does all this have to do with us?
Are we OK with being strangers to one another?
Are we OK with living in a stranger and stranger land?
Are things fine as they are, or do we need an Exodus?
Do we need to throw off our bondage to our addictions—whatever they may be—to numbing substances, to lots of stuff, to fossil fuels, to our own comfort, to white privilege and white supremacy, to Christian supremacy?
Do we need to cast it all off, and move out toward truth and love?
Let’s see if the story can give us any clues.

Egypt was a strange land at the time of Moses. It was an impressive civilization. It was a great power, a nation with huge cities and public works projects, massive memorials and public art installations that we can still see in ruins today. But it was also a nation built upon the backs of slaves. It was a nation built upon the idea of a hierarchy of human value—a hierarchy based on ethnicity. It was a nation built upon the extraction of wealth— from both people and the land. It was a strange land.

In Egypt, some people—some people’s bodies— mattered more than others. Egyptians mattered more than Israelites. An Israelite could even be killed without real repercussions.

In Egypt, this hierarchy of human value was part of the air people breathed. All its institutions were set up to perpetuate Egyptian power. This hierarchy was even enshrined in religion and concepts of the divine. In Egypt, get this—images of the divine all looked Egyptian—and an Egyptian guy—Pharaoh—was seen an earthly manifestation of the gods.
So it was a land of idolatry and deeply ingrained lies.
Of course, there was no real basis for this hierarchy of human worth. The Israelites were not inherently less worthy than the Egyptians, we know that! Indeed, as the story goes, at one time an Israelite named Joseph had been Pharaoh’s Right Hand Man. In fact, Joseph played a crucial role in consolidating Pharaoh’s power. While he was Pharaoh’s advisor, there was a famine in Egypt and Joseph took advantage of the people’s desperation. He gave them bread— but only in exchange for their land and their labor, so Pharaoh could own it all. Power, wealth and access to resources was concentrated in the hands of a few. And so it was when Joseph’s own people, the Israelites, became refugees, when they became desperate and crossed over into Egypt in an attempt to survive, those who didn’t die in the desert found they were in a strange land. It was a land where a privileged class enjoyed abundant life at the expense of the many, the poor and marginalized. The ruling class of this land enjoyed their power and were loathe to lose it. So many generations after Joseph died, they started paying attention to population trends. And they realized that their own kind— the Egyptians— would no longer be a majority. They got worried about what that meant. They got worried that the Israelites might resent them a bit. They got worried that the Israelites might even turn on them in war. In their eyes, the Israelites were permanently foreign, potentially terrorist. Well, they knew they couldn’t change the demographics, so they decided to prevent the demographics from changing the country. They figured out how to block any sort of shift in power. Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites— which further solidified the hierarchy based on ethnicity. For the slaves, there was no way out. Even to have a child was to reproduce bondage and profit for one’s masters. We read that the Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 430 years. 430 years. 430 years of bringing children into bondage. 430 years of living and dying without a glimmer of hope for liberation. How remarkable that they ever left— that they ever had the courage to move out. But they did. A small window of opportunity opened up, and they moved out. It opened up, we read, with the arrival of this character, Moses, a pushy Israelite who’d been raised in privilege, in Pharaoh’s palace. Moses did not know his place because he had never been a slave.
He saw through the lies. He saw his people suffering.
He demanded that Pharaoh let his people go.

What do you think—is there anything at all in that old story
that might relate to us today?

Of course, in our land, slavery lasted just 250 years,
followed by 90 years of Jim Crow.
And the demographic shift that has some folks in a panic
won’t take place for another 25 years, when whites will no longer make up the majority.
And the refugees crossing our borders are not Israelites,
but people from Mexico and Central America,
5 of whom die in the desert about every 4 days.
So there are some differences between us and Egypt.

But, like Egypt, our society has concentrated power,
wealth and control of resources in the hands of a few.
It has relied on extracting wealth from the land and people.
It has perpetuated a hierarchy of human value based on ethnicity.
And what we have found is that this creates strangers of all of us,
and leaves us wandering around in a land that’s getting stranger and stranger.

So let’s talk about some windows of opportunity!
Let’s talk about those who are following in Moses’ footsteps, seeing through the lies,
and making demands—because there’s simply just too much suffering.
This past year, some of you have become Moses people,
and you’ve been sharing your passion with the rest of us.
Some of you have grabbed the window of opportunity opened up by Climate Justice movement;
others have grabbed the window of opportunity opened up by the Movement for Black Lives, and you’ve been inviting us to listen to their demands.

Some are demanding prison reform, saying “Let my people go!”
Some are demanding police reform, saying “Let my people breathe!”
Some are resisting voter disenfranchisement, saying “Let my people vote!”
Some are resisting new gas pipeline infrastructure, saying “Let the pipelines go!”
Some are promoting a sane energy policy, saying “Let the sun and wind power us!”
Some are trying to figure out how this Meeting House can be carbon neutral by 2050, saying “Let us put solar on our roof!”
Some are changing their own lives, saying, “Let me, my family, and all beings live!”
You know, sometimes it seems we are living in an age full of stories of epic, Biblical proportions. Just this week we witnessed floods and earthquakes in Houston and Ecuador and Japan. And then there are the Exodus stories happening in real time, all around us: Exodus from Syria, as refugees pours into Europe and too often, drown in the seas. Exodus from Central America, as refugees pour into the American Southwest and too often die in the desert. And there will likely be more—Exodus after Exodus—as the seas rise and climate refugees watch their coastal cities and nations sink below the ocean waters.

So this year, Passover for me is not about looking back, but imagining forward. I’m imagining a land where refugees don’t die of drowning or dehydration, but find safety, food and shelter. I’m imagining a land where we’ve transitioned to 100% renewable energy and are no longer extracting fossil fuels from the ground. I’m imagining a land where we no longer account for 22% of the world’s prison population, where we spend money training and supporting the police instead of militarizing them, where every person has a vote, and families who’ve been here for centuries are not treated like strangers. I’m imagining a land with less denial and illusion, and much more truth and love.

In 4 years, in 2020, we will celebrate our 375th birthday as a congregation. Will we be heading towards a more promising land? In 29 years, in 2045, we will celebrate our 400th birthday—what about then?

I hope that in 29 years, on the 400th birthday of this congregation, we will be remembered as a people who did not give in to hopelessness, who outfoxed the most powerful and wealthy people on the planet, who saw their window of opportunity and grabbed it—and waded into the water—so they and their children might live.

Sing it with me now—“Wade in the water, wade in the water children, Wade, in the water, God’s gonna trouble the water....”

*This sermon was informed by the work of the Rev. Michael-Ray Matthews, director of clergy organizing for the PICO National Network, who shared the framework of the dominant national narrative being focused on a hierarchy of human value, extraction of wealth from people and the land and a focus on the individual rather than communal needs.*