

God Takes a Side
A Sermon on Exodus 12 and Romans 13 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ September 6, 2026

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: *Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

This is the central message of the New Testament. It's interesting that Paul never heard or read any of the Gospels, because Jesus gives the same message in the Gospels. In John 13, at the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples, *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

If someone who had never heard anything about Jesus or the New Testament asked about the main idea of the New Testament, what would you tell them? God asks us to love one another. This means that we are supposed to take care of each other and act in trustworthy ways. Loving one another means not thinking we are better than other people, but respecting each person as a person created in the image of God.

My question for us today is related. What is the main idea of the Hebrew Scriptures? That might seem like a more complicated question. It might be harder for us to find the answer for two reasons. The Hebrew Scriptures are longer and the collection of books is more diverse. The books of the New Testament were put in written form over seven or eight decades. The collection of Hebrew Scripture books was put in writing over seven or eight centuries.

In the New Testament there is a single, main character: Jesus of Nazareth. Who is the main character in the Hebrew Scriptures? We learn about the main character in Hebrew Scriptures by paying attention to what is most important for our Jewish sisters and brothers.

The first five books of the Bible are the most important for Jews, in the same way that the first four books of the New Testament are most important for Christians. Jews call the first five books *Torah*, which means 'instruction' or 'law'. The main idea of Hebrew Scripture is found in the five books of Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The first book, the book of Genesis is more or less an introduction for the rest of the story. Genesis explains how descendants of Abraham happened to come to live in a foreign land: Egypt. The next four books tell the story of Moses and his work. More than any other character in the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses listened to God.

So Moses is the main character in the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses led the people for more than forty years. Moses was constantly trekking up the mountain, away from the people to listen to God and argue with God. Moses was the most important leader and the most important prophet of all of the leaders and prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Moses' people are known as the children of Israel, because they are all descendants of a man named Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel back in Genesis 32. The children of Israel have been living in Egypt for more than 200 years. They have been enslaved by the Egyptians, and have been abused and oppressed the way slaves are treated in other times and places.

Last week we read the passage from Exodus 3 where God speaks directly to Moses for the first time. A few chapters later, in Exodus 5 Moses is sent by God to speak with Pharaoh. Moses tells Pharaoh, *Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a worship service with me in the wilderness.* But Pharaoh said, *"Who is the LORD, that I should listen to him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go."*

During the next six chapters the conflict between Pharaoh and the people of Israel accelerates. Moses follows God's directions, and repeatedly goes to Pharaoh to tell Pharaoh to give

the slaves permission to make this religious pilgrimage. Pharoah refuses. With Moses as God's agent, God inflicts ten plagues upon the Egyptians. Each plague is worse than the one before. In the middle of each plague Pharoah promises to relent, and to let the slaves participate in the religious pilgrimage. But Pharoah always breaks his promise, which results in God sending another, worse plague upon the Egyptians.

Let's notice that Moses and the Hebrew people are not asking for anything outrageous. They are asking for freedom to practice their religion by taking a week to go on a religious pilgrimage. Then they will return.

Let's notice that Pharoah behaves like a tyrant. He does not take time to deliberate and make important decisions; he does not rely on the advice of wise advisors or scientists. Pharoah acts impulsively. Everything depends on how he is feeling in the moment. He makes many promises and breaks every single one of them. Pharoah sometimes sounds like he is sincere, but he is always absolutely untrustworthy.

So God announces the tenth and final plague. Pharoah has oppressed the children of Israel, and he has broken every promise he has made. God has tried everything else, so the final plague will be so terrible that Pharoah will respond by chasing the slaves out of Egypt forever. God will send the angel of death to kill the firstborn child of every family in the land of Egypt. It is a terrible thing, but God has tried everything else.

All of this leads to the story from Exodus 12 which Kira read a few minutes ago. Chapter twelve is the inflection point in the story. Many changes will happen after this point. The people of Israel are instructed to kill a lamb and put the blood of the lamb on the doors of their homes. This will be a signal, and the angel of death will pass over the homes of the people of Israel.

You probably remember much of the rest of the story of Moses. He led the people of Israel out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and into the wilderness of mountains surrounding Mount Sinai. The people, and specifically the adults, often showed a lack of faithfulness and complained about Moses and his leadership. So they wandered through the wilderness, barely surviving. But after forty years, God led the children and grandchildren of the slaves into the promised land.

Most of the other stories in the Hebrew Scriptures are connected in some way to the story of the Exodus. This is one of the ways we know that the story of the Exodus is the central story, the foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures. And so we come to the main idea of the Hebrew Scriptures.

God takes the side of those who are oppressed. In the story of the Exodus, in the writings of the prophets and throughout Hebrew Scriptures we see that God's primary concern is for those who are in need of deliverance, for those who are enslaved, and those who are in danger. God fights against tyrants who treat people cruelly, with no concern for whether innocent people are being hurt. God is not neutral in the fight. God takes a side in the fight. This is the main idea of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Sometimes people, including Christians, treat the story of Moses engaging in the conflict with Pharoah, and leading the people of Israel out of slavery as if it is ancient history, as if it is irrelevant. The story of Moses engaging in conflict with the tyrant, Pharoah, and leading the people out of slavery will never be irrelevant as long as there are tyrants in the world. The story of the Exodus will never be irrelevant as long as there are people who are suffering at the hands of others. The story of the Exodus is not ancient history; it is our sacred story.

It's our sacred story because there is a fight in the world today between God's people and those who are hurting God's people. God takes the side of those who, like the slaves in Egypt, don't have a lot of power. God takes the side of those who are being hurt and those whose lives are at risk.

Right now, in the United States of America, there is a large group of people who are in danger. Their lives have been put at risk by people who are behaving like Pharoah; their lives have

been put at risk by people who act without regard for the lives of others. Most of them are immigrants to the United States, or their parents were immigrants to the United States, just like most of our ancestors were immigrants to the United States.

In the past 18 months more than 600,000 immigrants have been deported. A story in the New York Times this week describes a group of people, all originally from Latin and South America, who were taken from ICE custody and flown to Africa, a place where they had never lived and had no family connections. The deportees described being treated cruelly while they were living in detention centers in the United States.

Members of St. Paul's congregation are especially following the tragic stories of Haitian who are being deported, because several of our members have spent years establishing and supporting a school Haitian children in Paulette, a village in Northwestern Haiti. After a Supreme Court ruling in June, 350,000 Haitian immigrants are in danger of being deported. Plane loads of Haitians have been sent back to Haiti, but the planes cannot even land in the capital city, Port au Prince, because it is too dangerous.

There is a fight in the world today between God's people and those who are hurting God's people. People who are not in danger, people who live comfortable lives, people who have beds to sleep in, and plenty of food to eat sometimes hunt through the details of Supreme Court arguments and immigrations status, trying to figure out which side is right and which side is wrong.

For disciples of Jesus there is no question. God is not neutral, standing on the sidelines. God takes the side of those who, like the slaves in Egypt, don't have a lot of power. God takes the side of those who are being hurt and those whose lives are at risk. This is the main idea of the Bible.

For disciples of Jesus there is no question. Jesus gave us a new commandment, that we love one another. Jesus' ministry and preaching were deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the main idea of the Hebrew Scriptures is that God takes a side in the fight. Will we be on God's side or not?