Two weeks ago, I made the claim that the fundamental story of the Hebrew Scriptures is the story of the Exodus. In my reading, the central character of the Old Testament is Moses. The central theme of the Old Testament is God’s commitment to freedom and justice for those who are oppressed.

In the Sundays of August, September and October we are leapfrogging our way through the book of Exodus. Last week we read from Exodus chapter three; God calls Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery into freedom. Today we jump ahead to the twelfth chapter and the story of the Passover. But before looking at the reading for today, let’s consider the eight chapters between chapter 3 and chapter 12, in a Reader’s Digest style condensed version.

Back in chapters 4-6, the Lord gives Moses a staff with supernatural powers, so the people of Israel will see his authority comes from God. Then Moses makes his first visit to Pharaoh. Moses says, “Let my people go, so that we may celebrate a festival to the Lord in the wilderness.” Pharaoh replies, “Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.” Pharaoh is incensed at this idea of letting tens of thousands of slaves take a week off of work for a religious pilgrimage. So Pharaoh increases the demands on the slaves: “Let heavier work be laid on them.”

In response to Pharaoh’s cruelty, God determines to inflict a series of plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians, to force them to let the slaves go free. In the first plague Moses confronts Pharaoh at the Nile and turns the Nile River and all of the water in the land into blood. All of the fish die and the stench fills the land. Yet Pharaoh refuses to let the slaves participate in the religious festival in the wilderness. So the Lord sends a second plague, a plague of frogs. The frogs are everywhere. Pharaoh begs Moses to get rid of the frogs and promises to let the Israelites attend the religious festival. Moses calls on the Lord, and the Lord kills the frogs, but then Pharaoh reneges on his promise.

So the Lord sends a third plague, a plague of gnats. Pharaoh refuses to yield, so the Lord sends a plague of flies, then a plague of deadly pestilence which kills all of the horses, donkeys, camels and sheep of the Egyptians, while sparing the animals belonging to the Israelites. Then the Lord sends a plague of boils, which bubble up on the skin of the humans and animals throughout the whole land.

Pharaoh still refuses to relent, so the Lord sends a seventh, very deadly plague: a hailstorm so severe it utterly destroys all people, animals and plants that are not under shelter. Then the Lord sends a plague of locusts that eat everything edible and fill every home. Then the Lord sends a darkness so dense that the Egyptians cannot move. The darkness covers the land for three days and nights. Yet Pharaoh still refuses to let the Israelites leave for their religious festival.

Then, leading into today’s reading, Moses warns Pharaoh of the final, and most terrible plague: the firstborn of every Egyptian family will die at midnight. In today’s reading the people of Israel are given instructions for the Passover. Take a lamb for each family. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one. Take some of the blood and put it on the doorposts and lintel of their houses. The families shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water. Anything that remains in the morning you shall burn.

I imagine the Israelites at 7 or 8 p.m. on the night of the Passover. They were gathered quietly in their homes, surrounded by their large families or paired up with other smaller families. They were exhausted from years of harsh, forced labor. They were a people ravaged by generations of oppression, including the killing of an entire generation of their sons at birth. Now they have entered a period of shock and disorientation. They have witnessed a series of nine plagues, including several they have experienced directly, such as the swarms of frogs, the gnats, the boils and the destruction of their food supplies.

This is the time of the Passover. It is a time of exhaustion and devastating tragedy. It is a time of one trial followed by another. It is a time a monumental change for the nation. It is a time when they will begin to turn from being victims of oppression to being a free people. It is a time of endurance. It is a time when God is working actively in their midst and they turn to God for help. This is the fundamental story of the people of Israel.
This is also our story. This is our story, because we seem to be moving toward a Passover moment in our generation. I pray that this is our Passover moment, a time of monumental change for the 21st century. In the past several years we have endured one plague after another. Allow me to attempt a brief description of some of the unprecedented, disheartening challenges we have endured in recent years, for the sake of understanding our situation.

Five years ago, we began to see authoritarian governments like Russia and China escalate their interference in democratic processes in the United States, Hong Kong, Great Britain and other countries in Europe. Climate change is accelerating, with the each of the hottest years on record occurring in the past five years. Our democratic norms and laws are under assault. Five years ago, we began to see political candidates and elected leaders flagrantly break the norms of our democracy, such as threatening to jail their opponents. In the last three years white nationalists have been emboldened by lack of moral leadership from our elected leaders. At the same time the United States gave up its status as a nation providing moral leadership in the area of refugees and immigrants. Border officials enforced a harsh policy of separating young children and babies from their undocumented parents.

The plagues we are facing have brought devastating losses to our communities and to our families. For the last several years we have seen new examples almost every week of disregard for the lives and safety of black and brown citizens in America. The new coronavirus has brought tragic illness and loss of life to many countries, but none has been more devastated than the United States: over 185,000 of our families have lost at least one family member to the virus. The coronavirus has revealed the failure of our nation and communities to be places of hope: In the 10 counties that stretch from the Pennsylvania border through Syracuse to the Canadian border, more people have died of drug overdose than of COVID-19. In the past six months we have been visited by a new plague of job losses: Compared to March of this year, about 12 million fewer Americans are working today.

I am sorry to tell such a sad story today, but this is our actual situation. It is the story we have been living for the past five years. Hope does not come from avoiding the truth. Hope comes from telling the truth, with all of its grief and fear, and yet seeing God journeying beside us.

I am sure it is exhausting for you to hear this list of the plagues we have endured during the past five years. More to the point, I am guessing that it has been much more exhausting for you to make your way through the tragedies I have just listed. I am guessing that you and I feel like the Israelites in Egypt on the night of Passover, more than we ever have before.

This is our Passover moment. Like the slaves in Egypt, we are exhausted. Like the slaves in Egypt we often feel overwhelmed by the sheer violence, by the anger and fear of our time. As it was for the slaves in Egypt, God is working among us in a way we do not understand.

This is our Passover. Like it was for Israel in Egypt, life feels chaotic and uncertain. Like it was for Israel in Egypt, we have come to the time when our lives are changing suddenly and profoundly. Like it was for Israel in Egypt, we do not know what lies ahead for us.

This is our Passover. As it was for the people of Israel on the night of the Passover, we have never been through a time like this before. Unlike them, we do not have the greatest prophet in all Israel to lead us. Unlike them, we do not have a set of instructions to guide us. So we turn to Holy Scripture for guidance. Let’s learn from God’s instructions to the children of Israel. We learn three things.

First, more than any other time, this is the time for us to work together and to support one another. Accusations and divisions might feel good for a few minutes or a few days, but will only lead us further on the path to the death of our communities and our civilization. Second, this is the time for us to discern what is really essential and to give our attention to that which is really essential. Most important, we learn God is working beside us in the midst of the chaos and grief. We may not understand exactly what God is doing, but we stand with oppressed and enslaved people in every place when make our work part of God’s work for the sake of freedom.