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There's such power in stories.

When I was in high school, I spent part of a summer studying humanities in the Governor's Scholars program. In my favorite class, the professor asked us to bring something from home that helped to define who we were. So I brought a stack of books that my mother had given to me over the years. Not just because I loved to read, but because the stories and characters in them had become part of who I was, or at least who I wanted to be. Stories of young women doing bold and brave things. Stories of justice and compassion. Stories of love and travel.

Stories continue to shape me, as I am sure they do you, too. Our Bible is full of stories that we turn to each week, looking for meaning and truth, or sometimes just comfort.

And we have stories that shape the communities to which we belong. Like the story of the long history of Christ Church.

We have national stories that shape us, too. Last weekend, our family was in Philadelphia, and we went to the National Constitution Center. There we saw a presentation of the founding of American democracy that contained beautiful storytelling about who we are as a nation and how we got our start. At the end of it, Patrick said, "I've been kind of down on the United States lately, but that actually made me feel patriotic."

There's power in a story well told.

But what I appreciated most about the presentation at the National Constitution Center was that they balanced celebrating the story of American democracy with extensive exhibits of truth-telling about who was excluded in our democracy for much of our history.

There was an exhibit on the Civil War and Reconstruction, highlighting the three constitutional amendments added between 1865 and 1870, which ended slavery, required states to respect individual rights, promised equal protection to all people, and expanded the right to vote to African American men.

There was also an exhibit on the 19th Amendment and women's long fight for voting rights and their continued fight for equality.

The message that I took away from the National Constitution Center is that we can be patriotic and celebrate our great experiment of American democracy, while acknowledging the wrongs of the past and the ongoing struggle for equal access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness promised in our declaration of independence. If we

only tell, or are only willing to hear, a story of American exceptionalism with no flaws, we'll never be able to confront our past with open eyes and make a better future.

Now you may be wondering what any of this has to do with the Exodus story that we heard this morning. A story we've been hearing for over a month now that finally reached its climax today with the release of the Hebrews from Egypt and slavery. I asked Carol/Carl to read from Brian Wildsmith's *Retelling of the Exodus* because if we had used the biblical text to hear all of the Plagues explained and then the journey of the Israelites as they crossed the Red Sea while being pursued by the Egyptian army, we'd be here all day.

It's long because this is the foundational story for the people of Israel. And it's a great one. This Exodus saga demonstrates the power of story. Can't you just imagine the elders around a campfire telling a circle of children about the terrible plagues that were inflicted upon Egypt so that Pharaoh would allow the release of their ancestors.

With the power of God, Moses did this, but Pharaoh wouldn't let the people go. And then Moses did this, but still Pharaoh wasn't moved. And then. And then. And so forth. Until that last plague. The killing of the firstborn.

I can still remember Catherine's shock and horror when she was old enough to really understand this story. "Wait a minute. Stop," she demanded as the wheels were turning in her head. "God killed all of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians? But they didn't do anything wrong, did they? Why would God do that?"

Out of the mouth of babes, right? The questions we don't really want to have to answer. Because we can convince ourselves that the plagues that came before...the bloody Nile, the invasion of frogs and insects, and flies, the boils, the destruction of crops and the death of cattle...perhaps these plagues didn't do long-term damage. Although...how could they have not? But the death of children. That's harder to gloss over.

So what did I tell Catherine when she asked me why God would kill the Egyptian children? That, of course, God wouldn't.

This part of the story reflects our human behavior, not God's. The Hebrews were struggling for their liberation. Pharaoh was the oppressor. It should not surprise us that it took the death of his precious son to convince him to let the Hebrews go. This is not a story unique to Israel and Egypt. How many sons and daughters have died throughout history in fights for liberation?

Because violence and death...that is too often the way that humans act—perhaps there are times when it's out of necessity to save more lives, but let us not imagine that this is how God works.

The power of this story is not in the violence and the deaths, but in the promise that God hears the cry of the oppressed. That God will take on the pharaohs of the world who

build their power and wealth upon the suffering of others. The power of this story is in believing that God uses flawed folks like Moses and Aaron, like you and me, to fight against oppression.

But like the dangers of our American story of freedom and democracy, the Israelites had to be careful not to believe in their own exceptionalism...that they were chosen and special and set apart because God freed them and established a covenant with them.

And this is where the Prophets come in. Throughout the Bible, they will challenge the notion of Israel's exceptionalism again and again. They will remind Israel, often at their own peril, that while God desires to be in relationship with them and will lead them, God also asks that they welcome the stranger and to care for the poor. In fact, God will remind them of their time in Egypt...that they were once sojourners in a foreign land, and the gift of freedom they received means that they are now obligated to care for the stranger in their midst.

We can never underestimate the power of stories and how much it matters which ones we choose to tell. Or how important it is to be willing to challenge the stories we've been told, like when Catherine asked, "Why would God do that?"

If we're honest, we know that there are lots of stories in our Bible that make us ask, "Why would God do that?" Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, gives us a helpful tool for discerning where we see God's behavior in the Bible and where we see human behavior. Curry says, "If it's not about love, it's not about God." Freeing people from their oppressors...that sounds like love and sounds like God. Killing firstborn sons...even of an oppressor...that doesn't sound like love so it can't be from God.

So as we tell our stories that define who we are, let us not be afraid to ask questions. And to seek prophets who remind us of who God desires us to be. Let us be willing to ask about the "other" in our stories and to remember that we're all God's children. We must tell our stories in the most truthful way possible if they are to have power to make us better as individuals, as communities, and as a nation. Amen.