

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David Powers
Sunday, September 20, 2026

All right, friends. As we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to get comfy in your pews, and let's take a couple deep breaths together. Let's take a deep breath in and breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in

and breathe it out slowly.

Breathe in God's mercies.

And breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies. And breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That by your power, you would quiet any voice within us but your own, that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, if you weren't here with us last week for kickoff Sunday, then you might not be aware that we not only began the programmatic year together, but we also began a sermon series entitled Hebrew 101. We are spending four weeks studying the language of what we call our Old Testament. And we believe that there are ancient words that have really important wisdom to communicate to us as Christians in this day and in this time. So each week we're picking a different word. We're studying it. What I shared last week is that it is impossible. In fact, it's not the nature of the language, whether it be Hebrew now or in a couple weeks when we study Greek, that a word have a singular definition. Okay, this one comes the closest, the word that we're going to study this morning, which is Mitzrayim. Mitzrayim. It is the word for Egypt. Egypt. Okay, we're going to read from the book of Exodus in the first chapter, but we're starting in verse 8. So, I want to give you a bit of context for the first couple verses. I want to tell you about the story of Joseph, which is one hopefully you are familiar with. Joseph, the son of Jacob, is sold by his family into slavery in Egypt. In Mitzrayim, he finds favor with Pharaoh because God has given him the gift of helping to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. As he does this, he gains more and more power in Mitzrayim, in Egypt. He helps by his work to sustain Egypt and even his family during a time of great famine. What's interesting for us and important for us to note is that Joseph lives within a system of power in Egypt where he has privilege because of gifts that God has given him. But what he learns is that his position, his privilege is much more tenuous, much more fragile than he imagines. And the insidious thing is Joseph doesn't use his position, doesn't use his influence with Pharaoh to help advocate for the creation of a more equitable

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system when he has such influence. What we see prior to this text and what we'll see in the text that we read is that when institutional memory evaporates with the death of a pharaoh, the Israelites' position in society changes quickly and Joseph's with it. So there's a story within a story here. The lesson within the lesson is that we should always leverage privilege and position to create equity and just systems. That shapes the scripture that we read this morning, beginning in verse 8 of the first chapter of Exodus.

Now a new king arose in Mitzrayim, Egypt. This king who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore, they set task masters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. So that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Mitzrayim, Egypt. It's how it's understood by the Hebrews. It is quite literally a physical place on a map, but it is a place that brings with it all sorts of dimensions of meaning. For the Israelites, Egypt is the place where they have been enslaved. It is the place where their identity both corporately and personally is defined by what they do. Egypt is the place where the value of the Israelites is based on how much they produce. Egypt is the place, Mitzrayim, the place where they are most disconnected from their true identity. They've been sent to this place, this physical location on a map, sent into exile in this place. And as they leave their home, they leave behind a deep part of their identity.

And even with Joseph finding favor with Pharaoh and for a short time the Israelites finding a bit of reprieve from their work, things change quickly for them.

There are many stories throughout Exodus about the hard labor that the Israelites will do. But on this side of the story, we're able to recognize the good news for the Israelites that the God that they worship is in the business of liberation. We know the story of their liberation. Moses rises as a leader, and through a series of divine events, the people are ultimately freed. They are able to move from slavery to freedom. Exodus as a whole book teaches that the heart of the story of God and God's people is the story of that movement from slavery to freedom, from bondage to liberation. It is foundational to how the Israelites understand themselves and the work of their God. But there's a deeper meaning to Mitzrayim beyond the simple physical location of Egypt. There's a connection through a root word with another Hebrew word.

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Jews have long heard a connection between two Hebrew words, Mitzrayim and Meitzarim.

Mitzrayim and Meitzarim. They are written, actually, these two words with the same Hebrew consonants. Meitzarim means not Egypt but narrow places or places of constriction, places of bondage. So in the Jewish tradition, they have often taken these two Hebrew words and understood them as being in relationship with one another. So that then Egypt not only becomes a place, a physical place on a map, but even more so it becomes a spiritual condition, a place of constriction, a place of limitation, of narrowness, of bondage. The way in which these two words are bound together means that Mitzrayim Egypt is...it's not simply a physical place. It is a condition of the soul, of the heart, and of the mind. And to me, this is where it gets really interesting for those of us who call upon the name of Jesus, as we learn more about the depth and the meaning hidden within Hebrew words.

When faithful Jews think about Egypt and the heart of the story, the movement from slavery to freedom, from bondage to liberation, they are not simply talking about a historical event of deliverance from one physical location. They are talking about that. But that's not all they are talking about.

They are also contemplating the power of God to deliver them from every place of bondage, from every place of constriction. If we were to locate Egypt today, it would most certainly—it is certainly a physical place on a map. But more so than that, Mitzrayim is any dimension of our world and of our lives that keeps God's people in bondage. That keeps us in bondage. Okay? So let's talk about bondage now. Let's talk about it communally first and then personally. When we think about any dimension of the world that keeps people in bondage, we can think of it first communally. We can think of Mitzrayim communally. Mitzrayim communally would be any system of oppression that holds God's people in bondage. What us Presbyterians might call any power or principality of our time. So when we're talking about it in the modern day, we're understanding this bondage as, let's say, the system of mass incarceration in our country, right? Built on the idea of bodies being incarcerated producing money and profits for private enterprise, right? That affects everything downstream from it. We have those in our midst working against that system right now. When we're talking...when we talk about bondage, Mitzrayim, what we're talking about are economic systems that enable a widening gap between the rich and the poor, or systems that perpetuate gender inequality or racial discrimination. These things that are baked into our larger and wider communities. These are the present day communal Egypts. Hard to locate on a map but no less real.

And if there is communally an idea of Egypt, there is also most certainly that personally. We can think of Egypt personally as the things that constrict us, the things that bind us. Some know all too well the bondage of addiction. Some know all too well the way in which alcohol and drugs

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and many other things can bind us, change the way we live our lives daily. Those are important Mitzrayims for us to imagine in this day. Beyond that, there's other seemingly more innocuous Egypts, social norms. Let's talk about the myth of having it all together. All of us who showed up in our fancy Sunday best today, right?

We show up here and we present in a particular way, but we all, we all know, we all know that the outward appearance speaks in no way to the inner life, right? But we're supposed to keep it all together. That's what we're supposed to do. Or I have conversations with some of my good friends on their parenting journey, maybe early on or later on as fathers, as mothers. There's this idea that they're supposed to have everything figured out, this expectation of perfection and and really comparison, right? These social norms that bind us whether we're even recognizing it or not, or the expectations that have been set by our families for what it means to be a good sibling, a good child, a good spouse, a good friend. These are more insidious because we might not even know we're swimming in the water that we are.

I think about young people and the bondage or the constriction that they feel from the social pressures that they have. The smart one, the pretty one, the handsome one, the sporty one, right? These ways of narrowly identifying, diminishing, and constricting people.

Some of us grew up in faith traditions that are like Mitzrayim. They are narrow places. Some of us grew up with really constricted ideas of what and who Jesus was in the world. Okay? And what faithful living as a Christian means.

Some of us have been able to move from that place. But others, boy, it's baked into us because we learned it when we were so young. Egypt then, Mitzrayim then, is the place where you feel bound.

Egypt is the place where your identity is defined by what you do. It is the place where you sense that your value is based on how much you produce. Mitzrayim is a place where you are disconnected most readily from your truest identity.

But thanks be to God that the good news for the Israelites is also the good news for those of us who call upon the name of Jesus. It is the good news that God is very much still in the business of liberation. That the same power that was at work drawing the people away from a physical place and has over time drawn them over and over and over again away from their places of bondage, that same liberating power is at work in you in Christ Jesus. Jesus liberates us, frees us not only from sin of any kind, but also the bondage that comes with it. As those who call upon the name of Jesus, we say that he not only frees us, but he gives us a brand new life. We practice that every single week when we confess together. This is the very character of our God, the center of the story, the divine movement from fear to freedom, from bondage to liberation.

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I had a friend do a Lenten sermon series several years ago. They entitled it Leaving Egypt. The congregants of my friend's church spent all of Lent discussing and wrestling with the things that enslaved them, bound them, narrowed their understanding of themselves and their neighbors. And then on Good Friday, their pastor invited them to bring physical representations of what enslaved them, of what bound them, up to the chancel. We don't have an altar in the Presbyterian church, but it kind of resembles one up front. And people would come forward on Good Friday in the midst of the heaviness of that day, and they brought symbols of what enslaved them. They wrote on little pieces of paper my phone, my social media identity, the expectations of my dad, the model of parenting that I received. Some brought bags of makeup, others clothing.

A friend describes one couple who brought a piece of paper, and they sat beside the big pile on the chancel for about an hour holding it and crying, and then they put it down, and they walked away. And on Easter morning when the congregation arrived expecting a huge pile there on the chancel, it was gone because the power and the promise of God in Christ is liberation from bondage. It is freedom from fear. The power of God in Christ is to deliver you and your neighbor and the world from bondage to freedom. And this isn't just an idea of our faith. Our faith is about real liberation that takes place in real time and space. It's not an idea. It is a promise of God.

And what that means for you this day is that you do not have to stay in the places that bind you anymore.

A way has been made for you. You can be freed from that bondage. You can be freed from that expectation. You can be freed from that identity. You can be freed from that situation. Here's what I don't know. I don't know what Egypt feels like and looks like for you.

But maybe, when you hear the words binding and you hear the words narrowing, maybe in your mind you immediately think about what feels like Mitzrayim to you.

What I want to tell you this morning is that the God we know in Christ is still very much in the business of liberation.

So my hope and my prayer for you this day is that you might trust that the same spirit of God that drew God's people millennia ago from the physical place of Egypt, but also from the spiritual condition, the soulful condition of bondage into freedom. That same God is at work in your life, too. What was good news for our Hebrew brothers and sisters is good news for us this day.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

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Gracious one, you know our Mitzrayim. You know it better than we do. It might be a physical place, but more so than that, Lord, we know it is a condition of our soul and spirit. You know the places we feel bound, constricted, narrowed, and you know that there is more for us than that. So what we pray for Lord is that you might meet us in our Egypts.

That by your power you might draw us out of them into a more promising land, more promising geography of soul and spirit. We trust that you are very much in the business of liberation. So help us to receive it this morning. We ask it in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.