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## *Life Beyond The Place of No Exit*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener**  
**The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A**

Sigmund Freud once referred to a particular stage of childbirth as “the place of no exit.” He was describing that stage in which a fetus has entered the birth canal but, for a brief time, goes no further. Everything stops. Contractions stop. Pushing stops. There is no going back—the baby cannot retreat through the birth canal and return to the womb. And, yet, for this same brief period, there is also no moving forward. The moment of birth—the moment towards which this entire arduous process has been building—the moment of birth is simultaneously near and far, both imminent and delayed.

This morning’s scripture reading from the Book of Deuteronomy finds the ancient Hebrews in their own sort of “place of no exit.” They are about to enter the Promised Land, about to be “birthed” into the inheritance God swore to give to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Everything in the Hebrew people’s long and arduous journey out of slavery in Egypt—that hurried last meal, that desperate run for the border with Pharaoh’s soldiers in hot pursuit, the strangeness and discomfort of the wilderness journey, the temptation to compromise their identity as the People of God in order to be accepted by others—everything in their long and arduous journey has been building toward this moment, this moment when they stand on the edge of fulfillment.

The Hebrew people cannot, they will not, go back to Egypt, though, lord knows, there’ve been times when that’s exactly what they’ve wanted to do! Remember all that grumbling they start pretty much right after they escape Pharaoh and his henchmen? The complaining they begin even while the sounds of the horses and chariots are still rattling in their ears? *Moses, we are so hungry! Sure, it’s nice not to be laying bricks for Pharaoh all day, but at least they gave us a decent lunch. Oh, for the flesh pots of Egypt! Oh, for the certainty of a meat and three! This freedom business is hard, man. Maybe it’s not for us. Maybe we’d rather be held captive than starve.*

Well, maybe. Maybe. Because here’s the thing: All through their long journey towards the land that God has promised them, the Hebrew people have to struggle with this very same recurring impulse to go back. This impulse to go back to the place of captivity—if not literally, then, at least, in spirit. They have to do battle with the impulse to return to another form of slavery, one in which they are entrapped by the worship of idols instead of liberated by devotion to the one true God.

So it is that Moses, in today’s reading from Deuteronomy, finds the people in this “place of no exit”—appointed by God for greater things than laying bricks for Pharaoh and yet somehow not able to get beyond this emotionally and spiritually—Moses finds the people in this “place of no exit, and so he gives them a nudge. “Choose life,” he implores them. “Choose life.” “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” Choose life, which means choosing God and God’s ways of freedom and release over the ways of bondage and captivity. Choose life so you can get yourselves unstuck and so that the generations that come after you can move forward in faith, hope and love.

Now I know—you wouldn’t think Moses would have to say any of this. Not after God has brought the people all this way, feeding them, leading them, protecting them; organizing all those fantastic plagues on their behalf, parting the Red Sea, sending water gushing from a rock, forgiving them for the big keg party they throw while Moses is up on Mount Sinai. Surely after all this, the people would never choose the path of captivity and golden calves over that of freedom and a relationship with the living God. But as any of us who have ever gone through a difficult time will surely attest, the old and familiar can often seem preferable to the new and strange,

even when the old and familiar is also the old and terrible.

Think about it. You and I, like the ancient Hebrews, often find ourselves leaning back into the past in all sorts of deadening, enslaving ways. That parent who hurled constant criticism our way when we were young has been gone for years, but we continue, in periods of stress, to regard ourselves as incapable and unworthy. We know, deep down, that having a bigger house or a higher paying, more prestigious job is not what brings lasting happiness—we know this because we have experienced this truth over and over and over again—and yet the minute we encounter pain or disappointment, our first instinct is to self-soothe by acquiring something. We say we want our children to be themselves, to forge their own paths—we say this, and yet we find it well nigh impossible to stop pushing them to become who we wish we ourselves might have been. We celebrate Black History Month as, among other things, a way of marking the progress this country has made in race relations through the years. But there is a movement going on in our nation right now to stop telling the truth about that progress and about how long it has taken and how far it is from being complete. All of which, of course, means that we, like the ancient Hebrews in this morning's reading, are not yet to the Promised Land. There is a part of us that's still trying to decide. Which way will we turn? Towards justice and love or towards oppression and hate? Towards God or towards an idol? Towards life or towards death?

And so Moses' words in today's lesson are not only for the ancient Hebrews; they are for us as well. Choose life. In a world fixated on death, choose life. Choose love and the way that leads to true freedom. Choose God so that you and your descendants may live. And not only that. Do it today. Choose life today. Whatever our past mistakes may be, we need not be held captive by them forever. We can move forward, by the mercies of God.

Now is the time when God calls us. Now is the time when God invites us—invites us, not shames us—now is the time when God invites us out of those places in our lives where we have been stuck, those places from which we suppose there is no exit. Now is the time God longs to release us from all that binds us. From what might God long to release you?