

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: July 7, 2013  
Sermon Title: Egypt, the Bible, and US  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Genesis 12:10-20

## Genesis 12:10-20

*Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife"; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.' When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.*

*But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, "She is my sister," so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and be gone.' And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.*

\*\*\*\*\*

For those of us who look to rock 'n' roll for wisdom, we will remember Janis Joplin's take on freedom:

*Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,  
Nothing don't mean nothing honey if it ain't free, now, now.  
And feeling good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues,  
You know feeling good was good enough for me,  
Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee.*

For her and Bobby McGee, freedom was the bottom of the barrel. When you have “nothin’ left to lose,” but also an idealized absolute, “it ain’t worth nothing if it ain’t free.”

I scrapped my sermon today because, watching events unfold in Egypt during our own July 4<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, I felt a great need to look at Egypt and us and freedom. We do this in our church all the time. We are constantly looking to connect our world and our faith.

Popular literature, popular music, popular culture, and everyday politics rub up against the world of religion all the time, prodding us to understand our own faith in relation to the world. For example, when the new “Superman” movie presents Superman blatantly as a Christ figure, it’s a great opportunity to look more closely at Christ.

Well, today, it’s Egypt sending us to the Bible. Egypt appears prominently in the Bible, at least three times, and each time it teaches us about freedom. In our Scripture lesson, Abraham and his family go to Egypt to escape famine. Four generations later, Joseph is a slave in Egypt.

You remember the Broadway musical “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat”? Most of that takes place in Egypt! God saves Joseph, who is in prison, from slavery. He becomes a top government official in Egypt, in charge of famine relief, just in time to save all the rest of the Israelites when they come into Egypt looking for help!

Jump ahead 400 years, and we have the whole story of Moses and Pharaoh and “Let My People Go!” By that point in history, the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years till Moses led them to freedom. Charlton Heston at the head of the liberation movement, leaving Yul Brynner’s oppressive regime behind, with Edward G. Robinson crying, “I want to go back!” But Charlton Heston wins, taking the Israelites to the “Promised Land.”

Jump ahead another 1,500 years, a couple of weeks after the first Christmas, you may remember that the Wise Men told King Herod that a new “king” had been born, and the old king wasn’t happy about that. So the old King Herod tried to find the baby Jesus to get rid of the competition. In Matthew 2:13, we read, “An angel appeared to Jesus’s father and said, ‘Get up, take Mary and Jesus and escape to Egypt.’ So they all got up during the night and left for Egypt (where they stayed for two years).”

There you have it. The up-and-down history of freedom in Egypt. In the Bible, Egypt is a place to escape TO and a place to escape FROM; it's a place of refuge and a place of bondage; a place of slavery and a place of freedom.

Freedom isn't easy. It's hard to get, hard to keep. And even though I love Janis Joplin, I have to disagree with her: it ain't free. Just look outside our church window, 6,731 flags, three more since last Sunday, our latest cost of freedom in defense of ourselves and in an attempt to bring freedom to others.

Our Scripture lesson can be an interesting analogy about freedom. Abraham's family consisted of nomads; they didn't have a country. They had left ancient Iraq looking for the Promised Land, but that was still 500 years away! Meanwhile, famine hit the countryside, so they went to Egypt looking for food. They must have gone to Egypt for two reasons: it was fertile, thanks to the Nile River; and it was hospitable. Strangers welcome. Long before the Statue of Liberty welcomed the tired and poor, Egypt was doing it. One problem, though. Abraham's wife, Sarah, was "hot." The Bible tries to dance around it, but you read that Scripture, you'll see what the Bible is saying: Sarah was hot.

The Bible reports when Abraham got to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarah was very beautiful, so Abraham said to Sarah, "You're a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you, they will kill me so they can have you! So let's pretend that you're my sister. That way, people will treat me well."

In other words, Sarah was hot. She stopped traffic. Even Pharaoh noticed — and oops, took Sarah for his own wife! God was not happy. Abraham didn't seem to mind. He was prospering. The Bible says he "acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants and camels," so he's happy. But this wasn't God's plan. When Pharaoh figured it all out, he sent Abraham, Sarah, the donkeys, camels, sheep, and slaves, sent them all packing.

A little window into freedom, a freedom abused. The window is closed. Sort of like Egypt today. They got a little taste of freedom. Abused it. Now it's up for grabs. One step forward. Two steps back. Three steps forward. One step back. Total progress: one step. So we keep at it. Abraham sought freedom. Freedom from famine, from poverty, from despair, from ruin, from death. He found that freedom in Egypt, not the enlightened freedom of American democracy today, but not bad for 3,500 years ago! Give them credit. But Abraham let his fears and anxieties overrule his faith. He surrendered his integrity, he schemed and manipulated, operating out of his own weakness rather than God's strength.

And yet, one fact remains. When God's chosen leader, Abraham, needed help, Egypt was there.

I don't often get a chance to quote Donald Rumsfeld, but when things weren't going as promised in Iraq, he said, "Democracy is messy." Someone else famously said, "Democracy is a horrible form of government, but it's better than anything else."

We could say the same of Christianity. Christianity as a religion has been frustrating, disappointing, confusing, and plenty of times downright wrong. And yet, the essential promise of Christianity, the essential idea of democracy, the essential hope of freedom continue to call us forward.

Jesus made a very strong statement: "If you hold to my teaching ... you will know the TRUTH, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32) Interesting. For Jesus, the key ingredient is truth. That's the goal. Freedom is the result.

Most of us have learned the hard way that freedom by itself isn't enough. Some of us learned that in college. Freedom from parents. Freedom from having to get up in the morning. Freedom from curfew. Sooner or later we realized freedom needs friends. Freedom and responsibility. Freedom and self-discipline. Freedom and common sense. Freedom and hard work. Along with Jesus's combination, freedom and ... TRUTH.

My favorite definition of "freedom" is "Your freedom ends at the tip of my nose." You are essentially a free person as long as you don't infringe on my freedom. If you want to go to bad movies, read lousy books, listen to awful music, or root for the Dodgers, you are entitled to your bad taste. And we express our opinions of one another's bad taste with outrageous t-shirts, bombastic bumper stickers, and at the ballot box. That's our way.

But it takes time. I used to go to Africa regularly in the '70s. The countries I visited had been free only a decade, but when I got back to America, people would always say to me, "When are those African countries going to get their act together and be like us?" I would gently remind them that it took a long, long time for us to be like us! Ninety years after we got our freedom, we slaughtered one another in numbers we don't even want to think about, in ways we can barely imagine, for reasons we don't want to acknowledge. Freedom takes time. And work.

In Wednesday's *New York Times* Robert Hicks wrote a beautiful Op-Ed piece called "Why the Civil War Still Matters." This is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

Battle of Gettysburg, and Hicks writes, "But the Civil War sealed us as a nation ... we went from being "these" United States ... to "the" United States." Quoting Abraham Lincoln, he goes on, "The battle consecrated the 'unfinished work' to guarantee "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." And Hicks concludes, "True, we have not arrived at our final destination as either a nation or as a people. Yet we have much to commemorate. Everything that has come about since the war is linked to that bloody mess ...." (Hicks, Robert. "Why the Civil War Still Matters." *New York Times* 3 July 2013: A25.)

Here's what I believe with all my heart. All over Egypt, there are moms and dads who get up every morning yearning for a "government of the people, by the people, for the people ... a new birth of freedom that won't perish."

Here's what I urge for us when it comes to Egypt or Tunisia, Libya, or the Arab Spring. Take our personal politics out of it. Whatever you think of President Bush or President Obama, don't let that stop you from praying for Egypt, rooting for Egypt. As Christians, we revere Jesus. We teach that Jesus was God in a human form, beginning life as a baby. As a baby, Jesus was fragile, innocent, entirely dependent. His parents were poor, scared, and pursued by an army. And Egypt took them in, sheltered them, protected them. Let's pay them back.

I'm not talking about the billion and a half we give each year in military aid, that's geopolitical stuff, done for our own national interest. I'm talking faith, personal and spiritual. Egypt is an ancient country, but when it comes to freedom, they're just kids. Just in our own lifetime, Egypt has been ruled by Britain, Germany, kings, dictators, and generals, fundamentalist and secularist tyrants. Now they're taking steps toward freedom, baby steps, still growing, still learning. And like babies taking baby steps, they fall down, they bump into things, they hurt themselves, they spit up all over you, they whine, they cry, they holler. That's life, growing up. Life goes from birth pangs to childhood "boobos" to teenage angst, to young adult fits and starts. It's true of people, of nations, and of faith.

In our Bible, there's constant affirmation of childhood. Jesus told us we must be "born again." He told us that unless we can be like a child, there's no place for us in His Kingdom. But childhood isn't a destination or an excuse. It's a beginning. That's why St. Paul ends up saying to us "When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I acted like a child. I thought like a child. Fair enough! But then I grew up. I put away childish things."

I'm not here promising anything. I don't have a crystal ball. But let's face it. The last couple hundred years have been a mess in the Muslim world, the Arab world. The last 50 years, the last 20 years have been a disaster. For them and for the rest of the world. They haven't done themselves or God any favors.

I started with Janis Joplin. I'll close with Buffalo Springfield. Remember them? In their greatest song, "For What It's Worth," they sang

*There's something happening here  
What it is ain't exactly clear  
There's a man with a gun over there  
Telling me I've got to beware*

There is something happening. Saddam Hussein is gone. Muammar Gaddafi is gone. Mubarak and Morsi are gone. The Tunisian guy is gone. The Syrian guy doesn't sleep well at night.

*There's something happening here  
What it is ain't exactly clear*

But if we believe in freedom, if we believe in democracy, if we believe in our own ideals, if we believe in the Bible, if we believe in Christ, then it all comes together in believing the best for everyone. To believe it, to want it, to pray for it.

Let's close our worship today by honoring both God and country and the yearnings of all humanity, by singing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee."