

Delivered Into Celebration

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[0 : 0 0] Well, thank you for that introduction, Anthony. I'm not sure I've ever had quite an intro. Hopefully it'll be as exciting as that made this sound. But good evening, everyone. My name is Lexi, like Pastor Anthony mentioned, and I serve on the Justice and Compassion team here at the table, as well as the Slides team. Shout out to Skylar on Slides this evening. It is a hidden, but very important job. And as Anthony said, in the last month or two, we've been walking through the book of Exodus, focusing on the theme of the multifaceted nature of salvation. We've also been using words like deliverance and liberation. These are just kind of interchangeable with salvation, and they help bring a richness to the idea. But ultimately, Exodus is a story, the founding story of Israel, about the God who saves, who delivers, who liberates. And we've talked about what this liberation looks like from many different angles, but tonight we get to look at the Israelites' response to God when God delivers them from Egypt. Their response is one of celebration, complete with singing and dancing. And in the next 20 or so minutes, we're going to dig into this theme and explore how celebration relates to liberation. But first, let's rewind a little.

As we know, Exodus tells the story of God liberating the Hebrew people. Early in the story, God meets with Moses in the form of a burning bush, and he tells Moses that God is going to free the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt and deliver them to the land promised to their ancestors, the land of Canaan. God doesn't tell Moses exactly what this liberation is going to look like, but he does say that it's not going to be easy. Pharaoh is going to put up a fight. Last week, we heard about the plagues that God sent to Egypt to convince Pharaoh to let the people go. There was a river of blood, an infestation of frogs, little bugs, and big bugs. The tenth and final plague is the one where God kills the firstborns of Egypt. But he tells the Israelites to put a sign on their doorposts so that they would be spared. This way, Pharaoh would know that this powerful God called Yahweh had chosen sides. After this tenth plague, Pharaoh relented and sent the Israelites away.

As Aaron mentioned last week, Pharaoh, in his pride and lack of imagination, immediately regretted this decision. How am I going to run my nation without the labor of the Israelites? I can't imagine a society that doesn't exploit labor, so I need to go get those people and bring them back. And this is where we find ourselves in this story today. The Israelites are on their way out of Egypt, but Pharaoh's army is close behind. They're being pursued by the powerful army of their oppressor. They're also camped out at the Red Sea with no way to get across it, or so they think. It seemed like a dead end. At this point, some of the Israelites were seriously doubting this whole thing, saying it would be better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness. It kind of sounds like that might be what we'd be saying if we had an army behind us in an ocean in front of us, but God wasn't finished with the story of liberation. He had more miracles to perform. And this brings us to the miracle at the Red Sea. There's a beautiful artwork that I found that I'll just leave up behind me as kind of spark your imagination for these next few minutes. But what happens at the Red Sea is God tells Moses to stretch out his staff and that God would part the waters and allow the Israelites to walk through on dry land. And Moses does this, and God does what God said God would do, and they walk through on dry ground with a pillar of cloud behind them so the Egyptians couldn't see where they were headed. The Egyptian army tries to follow them into the sea, but they don't have this powerful God parting the waters for them, and they drown. The Israelites make it to the other side unharmed, freed from their pursuers, but they're now at the start of a long journey through the wilderness.

Our central text today is a song. It's different from what we've been reading so far, which has been narrative and story. This is a song sung by the Israelites in response to God's triumph over Egypt.

[5 : 18] And if you have a Bible or somewhere you can find Bible, I'm talking about your phones, your iPads, your various devices. Could you please turn with me to Exodus chapter 15? Give a moment.

I love it. Seeing people actually pulling out their Bibles. And the reason I'm asking you to do this is I'm going to be skipping a few verses, but there's really interesting stuff in there. So if you want to skim along and check out what I missed and ask me about it later, that'd be really fun for me. I don't know. Why is that fun? Because I'm a nerd.

All right. From verse one. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation. There's that key word of ours, salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him. My father's and mother's God, I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior. The Lord is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea. His picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.

[6 : 41] The floods covered them. They went down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy. The enemy said, I will pursue. I will overtake.

I will divide the spoil. My desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword. My hand shall destroy them. You blew with your wind. The sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

You stretched out your right hand. The earth swallowed them. Skipping ahead to verse 20 now, if you need to scroll. Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.

And Miriam sang to them, Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

[7 : 59] So this hymn is interchangeably called the Song of the Sea or the Song of Moses, or, if you will, the Song of Miriam.

It falls into the genre of a post-battle hymn. And these occur throughout Hebrew scriptures and other ancient Near East texts, and usually depict women singing and dancing and playing, fun fact, a hand drum, not a tambourine.

There were none of the jiggly things. As a way to welcome their soldiers back from battle and celebrate their victory over the enemy of the day. It's a war song, so there's a lot of violent language in here.

And I suspect, knowing who some of you all are and the values you hold, this violent language might feel a little troublesome. God's violent victory over Egypt makes me a little uncomfortable, too.

Not just this song, but that plague from last week is still weighing on me. That tenth one. The rest were bad, too, but that tenth one. And if you're disturbed by the violence, that's a good instinct.

[9 : 15] Jesus himself is the one who says to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute us. However, if discomfort at violence is your main reaction to the text right now, I want to invite you, talking to myself here, too, to consider where this instinct is coming from to empathize with a powerful army seeking to capture their runaway slaves.

It's important who we choose to empathize with as we read Scripture and practice looking at it from different angles. This is all I'm going to say about violence in the Bible this evening, though there is a lot of violence in the Bible and therefore a lot to say about it.

But we only have a few minutes. Where I would like us to spend the rest of our time is on this theme, this idea of celebration as a response to God's liberation.

And I want us to explore celebration three ways. As discipline, as resistance, and as an act of hope. First, celebration as a discipline.

We may have different associations with the idea of celebration. For me, it's bubbly wine. I originally wrote champagne, but I realized I usually buy, like, the cheaper stuff.

[10 : 38] So it's bubbly wine. But if I want to celebrate something, I pop over to the corner store and make sure I have a bottle or two. But at its heart, however you celebrate, whatever your practice is, celebration is about acknowledging the goodness of something, to mark it, to honor it.

Ultimately, to celebrate is to say, we will not let this occasion pass by unnoticed. It is worthy of our attention.

Celebration involves choosing to inconvenience ourselves, to pause, and to pay attention. Now, if I were among the Israelites during this Red Sea miracle, I think I would have had a hard time pausing to celebrate.

It was pretty cool what God just did. But what do we do now? We've left the only home we've known for over 400 years, and we just have wilderness ahead of us.

What's our plan? What are we doing next? How will we live together? How will we meet our needs? There's a very long list of questions that I, if I were in this story, would want answers to quickly.

[11 : 58] And I'd probably organize a committee to start identifying our questions and getting to an answer. But what I wouldn't do is dance. There's no time for dancing.

And I can often have this attitude in my own life as well. There's so much to do. There's so little time. If I've accomplished something or something amazing has happened around me, it's like, great, cool, but there's like 20 other things on my to-do list.

Time to get a move on. And we're busy people here in D.C., so this might resonate with you. Maybe you're the kind of person who's hurrying along from one thing to the next, day after day, week after week, until you're feeling burnt out.

Or maybe you have loads of energy and burnout isn't the problem, but you are just so committed to seeking the next goal that once you achieve something, all you can think about is the next mountain you want to conquer.

At the beginning of this series, Pastor Tanetta talked to us about this dynamic and encouraged us to rest, reminding us that we have been delivered from ceaseless toil and into Sabbath.

[13 : 09] I believe we are also delivered into joy and celebration, but we have to take hold of it and make it a reality.

Instead of following the current of busyness and hurriedness, it's up to us to pause and celebrate. Now, celebrate doesn't mean we're ignoring or forgetting the hard stuff.

This whole sermon around celebration might feel kind of weird to you right now if you've got some hard stuff going on, and that's real, and celebration is not about ignoring it.

But just like lament is a discipline where we stop and we pay attention to the hard things and grieve, celebration is a discipline where we stop and pay attention to the good things and enjoy it.

It's like the writer of Ecclesiastes said, there's a time to mourn and a time to dance. I was reminded of how important this discipline of celebration was back when Connor and I got married in spring of 2020.

[14 : 18] And y'all, this is my third sermon. This is the third time. This might be the fifth time I've mentioned Connor. He's great. One of these days, you will get a Connor-less sermon, but today is not the one. But many of you know that the whole pandemic really threw off our timelines for planning a big wedding.

And we decided that we'd rather get married now than wait to see when the whole virus thing would end. In hindsight, great decision. Well done. We kept it simple.

It was a small ceremony in a stranger's backyard. We had some songs and readings. It was meaningful, but there was no pomp. But then a friend of mine offered to bring a couple bottles of champagne.

And you know me and champagne. And then a week before the wedding, my mom called and told me that she had ordered a cake and she was going to drive it down from New Jersey. In the midst of a lot of fear and uncertainty, these people who loved us put in an effort to celebrate us.

They would not let this moment go by uncelebrated. Life is one with pain and joy that coincides.

[15 : 36] And when we acknowledge both, we're free to enjoy God's good gifts. Celebration is a discipline. So switching gears.

I'm really bad at these three-point sermons. The transitions are like womp. Now we're talking about celebration as resistance. So some celebrations are sanctioned and even encouraged by those in power.

Do you have any ideas of what those might be? Two that come to mind for me are Christmas.

Capitalism loves an occasion for us to buy more stuff.

And the 4th of July. The state loves that we're expressing our national pride. Now there's not necessarily anything wrong with these celebrations.

But they reinforce the status quo. Other celebrations, power finds offensive. The celebrations of marginalized people are often policed.

[16:39] I'll give you a low-stakes example. And then we're going to raise the stakes. Low-stakes example. And this one rarely lands with the D.C. crowd, but I'm going to give it a shot anyway.

Do I have any football fans out there? One, two, three. You're my people. For those who are not football fans, I want to introduce you to a penalty called excessive celebration.

This is a rule supposedly about sportsmanship, but I think it's a little bit more about respectability. It enforces a norm that players need to remain unemotional and constrained, even after they've just had an incredible play against a rival, whatever.

It's a rule that seeks to restrain the player's joy. And how often do we hear things said to athletes like, shut up and play when they're showing their personalities, emotions, and passions?

I believe that joy has a place in football. Can I get an amen? Amen. Go Birds. Yes. Yes, Messers.

[17:52] I love it. Joy and celebration also have a place among the marginalized in our society. And one of the most incredible, beautiful, iconic examples of celebration as resistance is...

Any guesses? I know. It's awkward to guess, because what if you're wrong? It's pride. We celebrate... Yeah, Meg knew it. Next time I need to hear from you, Meg. We celebrate pride in June, and the iconic pride parade is hosted in cities all over the world.

But pride originally began to commemorate the Stonewall uprisings, where hundreds of people gathered to resist police violence at the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar.

And the first pride parade was organized for one year later, originally called the Christopher Street Liberation Day March. And despite fear of more police violence, thousands of New Yorkers showed up.

And this first pride was undoubtedly a protest, a struggle for civil rights. It was also full of dancing, laughter, and courageous joy.

[19:05] Courageous joy fuels movements to continue the work of liberation. Celebration as resistance also shows up in the Black Joy Movement, in a white supremacist society that portrays narratives of Black suffering, and especially in a time where images of Black death are circulating widely.

Black folks are rewriting the story by celebrating everyday joy, love, and accomplishment. The founder of the Black Joy Project says, when we acknowledge we exist in an anti-Black world that is set up to ensure we do not survive, to choose life, to enjoy life, is a radical act.

Celebration that offends the powerful is all the more important. It invites us to imagine a new and different world, and it fuels the work of liberation.

Celebration is resistance. Lastly, we turn to celebration as an act of hope. And here we can turn back to the Exodus story.

As we know, the story is about God's liberation of God's people. Specifically, God tells Moses he's going to bring God's people out of Egypt, where they've been oppressed for 400 years, and into the land of Canaan, promised to their ancestors, flowing with milk and honey.

[20:37] And the book of Exodus tells us a little bit about the first part of the promise, God delivering the Israelites from Egypt. But as the Israelites depart from the Red Sea, Egypt is behind them.

The wilderness is still ahead. They've not yet tasted the manna that God's going to rain down to sustain them, and they've definitely not arrived in the land of milk and honey.

We know from the scriptures that it'll be 40 years from this moment that they will finally arrive in Canaan. And yet, they celebrate.

There's a Jewish song sung at Passover called Dayenu, or It Would Have Been Enough. And it has lines like, If God had killed the firstborn and not split the sea, it would have been enough for us.

If God had split the sea and had not taken us through on dry land, it would have been enough for us. If God had pushed down our enemies and had not supplied our needs in the wilderness, it would have been enough for us.

[21:54] This song has dozens of stanzas, and it demonstrates that God's liberation is not a one-time thing. It happens bit by bit.

God sends the plagues. He splits the sea. God rains down manna. God sends them and sustains them through the wilderness and finally brings them into Canaan. And even then, God continues to liberate by setting up the temple, etc., etc.

This song proclaims that each instance, each step on the way is worth celebrating. And surely this is true.

Each time we celebrate God's faithfulness to us, we build our trust in God and our hope that God will come through on all of God's promises, even those yet unfulfilled.

The celebration at the sea prepared the Israelites to endure the wilderness. And once they were in the wilderness, annually they celebrated Passover as a reminder of God's liberation to strengthen their hope that the faithful God would bring them to Canaan.

[23 : 05] We are also living in an in-between space. In a few weeks' time, we're going to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and Christ's miraculous defeat of sin and death.

Can I get an amen? Can't get an alleluia yet. Soon enough. Some of y'all know what I'm talking about. And we already participate in this resurrected life.

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. And yet, we await the day that God's shalom is fully realized.

The day that the lion lays down with the lamb and heaven and earth are one. Those promises are yet unfulfilled. But that doesn't stop us from celebrating.

Certainly not. If you've been to one of our Easter services, you know that we don't hold back our joy even as we wait in hope. We celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death as an act of hope that one day all will be made right.

[24 : 19] Celebration is an act of hope. So there we have it. Discipline, resistance, and hope. We celebrate to acknowledge what God has already done.

We celebrate in the face of oppressive power. And we celebrate in hope of what God has yet to do. We believe God will do it.

Church, I believe that among our community, there is much to celebrate. Many things, perhaps, that we've even missed giving their due honor among the hurriedness and busyness and all of the changes that we've been experiencing as a church.

So, yes, that was your cue. We're going to do an open mic. Hoo-hoo! Who's excited? I'm going to invite folks to think about something that they may have missed celebrating or that you've been celebrating on your own and haven't brought into this community for us to rejoice with you.

Inviting others to celebrate with you can be vulnerable. What if they don't think this thing is that worthy of celebration? If you're feeling vulnerable, I invite you to give your community the chance to rejoice with you.

[25 : 39] So here's how we're going to do it. Pastor Anthony has a microphone. Can you bring that around to people or are they going to need to come to you? Raise your hand if you have something to say and Anthony will find a way to meet you halfway.

Claps, snaps, cheers, amens are all welcome. Alleluia's are not yet. Stop trying. And I'm going to kick us off first if that's okay.

I want to celebrate the win action we had last Sunday. We met our commitment to bring out 20 people whether they were in the watch party, in person, or calling in.

And that is something that is worth celebrating as we seek to bring justice to our city. Yes! Y'all are good at this! Okay.

Who's next? Friends, it's me, Meg. I want to celebrate that I made myself take a long weekend off from work. And it was great.

[26 : 42] Highly recommended. Amen. Hi, everyone. My friends already know this, but last summer this church prayed for me while I was studying for the bar and very anxious.

And I passed the bar. Hey, everybody. I'm Shannon. I got into grad school to become a therapist. Yes! Yes! Shannon, we stand therapy so hard. We're, like, going to celebrate that for a while.

While y'all are thinking, I'm going to throw out one more. I want to celebrate that we brought on both Pastor Anthony and Pastor Jeanette in the last couple of years, and we're rolling and grooving, and we're doing it.

It's amazing. Thank you. Is it okay if I celebrate a few things? Okay.

[27 : 42] I am just really proud of someone in my life who, like, recently advocated for herself at work and got a promotion. All right! Yay! It wasn't me.

I'm not talking in the third person. And I would just like to celebrate that we're all alive and here today. Amen. Applause Hi, I'm Jessica.

I also got into grad school this week for speech and language pathology, so that's what I'll be moving on to. Applause Yes!

Applause Can we just... Who's a March birthday? Madison, Anthony. Is that Raya?

Aha! Amazing. Great. I love that. Good. Well, thank you for helping me with that, and thanks all for participating. I talked to Pastor Anthony, I was like, I want to do this, but it's risky.

[28 : 42] So, you made me feel less alone up here. Good. Well, I'm just going to pray and thank God for all the things that we have brought forth to celebrate, and then we're going to transition to a time of communion.

So, if you would join in whatever posture makes you feel prayerful and attentive to God's presence. God, you are the one who gives good gifts, and we love bringing honor to you when we celebrate we know that we are not yet in the fullness of what the new creation will be, but we are so hopeful and so grateful for the small taste that we get even today.

Would you help us this week to pay attention to your kindness and to celebrate in small ways, in big ways, and to invite others to celebrate with us?

We're grateful. Amen. Whoo! Yeah! Whoo! Just