

Holy Restlessness  
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“Holy Restlessness” Homily, Pilgrim Church UCC  
September 7, 2014 (Exodus 12:1-14)

A popular franchise these days with the young adult crowd is The Hunger Games. Suzanne Collins presents a dystopian future of the United States, imagining that there was a rebellion against the Capitol and once the rebellion was crushed, everyone was organized into districts. People are starving in her story and forced to work to send goods and materials onto the Capitol, where people in power live lavish, sheltered lives.

To keep people in line, every year the Capitol puts on the Hunger Games where a young man and a young woman from each district are sent as tribute to compete against each other to the death in an elaborate arena until one victor remains. This is reminiscent of the Roman Empire and some of the gladiator matches emperors would organize to instill fear in people who even considered rebellion. In the story, the victor wins a beautiful home and food for the rest of their lives as well as additional food for their district to celebrate. But really young people are selected to compete like lambs led to slaughter.

The main character, Katniss Everdeen (brilliantly played by Jennifer Lawrence), wins the Hunger Games and defies the Capitol in the process. She becomes a symbol of the peoples' hopes for freedom. The Atlantic called Katniss Everdeen “the most important female character in recent pop history” because she is such a strong female protagonist in a genre of literature where women are often the damsels in distress.<sup>1</sup>

Katniss volunteers for the Games to save her younger sister, Prim. By the second book, it's clear that events are spiraling and Katniss is caught up in a story far bigger than her own. Katniss tells Prim that she just wants to protect everyone and live in peace. Prim responds that they aren't really living, they're just existing, and people are behind Katniss as she becomes the Mockingjay—the symbol of the Revolution. What's fascinating about this story is the themes: on the haves and have nots, on fear and how fear can be used to keep entire populations in line, on power and how power corrupts, on society and class, and on the military industrial complex. Suzanne Collins is a pacifist and uses her books to teach young people the horrors of war and violence.

I thought of The Hunger Games as I read about Passover and the time the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt. Talk about power and fear and violence and an entire population exploited by the haves. This story in Exodus 12 presents Moses and Aaron in Egypt having a conversation with God about how they will commemorate God's saving act. It's fascinating because God hasn't even saved them yet, but God is telling them how to remember these pivotal events to come.

Unlike the Hunger Games being used by those in power to commemorate the failed rebellion of yesteryear, God wants God's people to commemorate Passover to always remember how God delivered them from oppression. Though it's a problematic story because violent means are used by God to deliver the people. It does beg the question—does God just love the Hebrew people and not the Egyptians? God says, “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.”<sup>2</sup> On many levels, it's a problematic story to unquestioningly celebrate.

But we hear in Exodus that it matters that you eat the sacrificial lamb in a hurry when Passover is remembered because that's how your ancestors had to eat—on the run, getting away from those in power, moving onto the freedom offered by God. Gird your loins (that means for men to prepare for battle by tying one's lower garment to protect one's whole self), make sure you have your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. We've got to get moving people, just as soon as this meal is in our bellies to give us strength for the journey! Everyone who shares in this meal needs to be ready to leave the Empire behind! This is a holy restlessness and it needs to be remembered, so says God.

I worry sometimes that we've totally lost this sense of urgency in the Mainline Church today. I worry that we got used to being the ones in power, at least in our neck of the woods. Just last week I spent a few days with young minister colleagues from around the country learning leadership tools together at the UCC Church House in Cleveland. I heard about churches in Texas and South Dakota and Iowa and Kentucky where the UCC church is often the only progressive church in town—the only safe worshiping community for folks who may not feel welcome elsewhere. There is a sense of urgency in their extravagant welcome, a holy restlessness about their work.

Thinking about our context in Lexington and discussing it with my colleagues, who of course asked about you, I affirmed being the Church in one of the most secular parts of the country, in one of the least religious states as the Gallup Poll affirms every year. We too need a sense of holy restlessness as we witness to the importance of a community of faith where we don't have to check our intelligence at the sanctuary door. We can witness to faith in God period, knowing that there are some who think us strange. It seems that this is the work we are called to do in intellectual, liberal, and fairly secular Massachusetts. It's different work from UCC churches in other parts of the country where people tend to go church because that's just what you do. But who's going to walk through those doors and join us if we never share the good and holy work we're about?

As UCC scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us, "When the community of faith no longer has this 'festival of urgent departure,' it runs the risk of being excessively and in unseemly ways at home in the empire . . . Christians, like Jews, are children of this hurried bread, postured to depart the empire, destined for freedom outside the norms and requirements of the empire."<sup>3</sup> Learning and practicing our Christianity here and then going out into our world and affirming our Christianity when that's not "normal" around these parts, perhaps that's our holy restlessness. Maybe that's how we are destined for freedom outside the norms we encounter in the cultural realities present in Massachusetts.

Because you see, God asking the people to remember and commemorate Passover emphasizes the importance of worshiping God in community where we have rich histories and traditions. We share this tradition with Judaism and have our own unique way of remembering a past event and keeping it alive in the present through our worship in our Sacrament of Communion. I say the Words of Institution—that we remember the last night of Jesus' life when he gathered around the table with his friends. Then the bread and cup are blessed and the consecrated elements are passed out among us, as a present sign of God-with-us here. Well, this is remembering an important event in our tradition and continuing to let Jesus' words and actions nourish us now so that we can go forth and tell the Good News and live as Jesus taught—doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. And we've got to get moving people, just as soon as this holy meal is in our bellies to give us strength for the journey!

Martin Copenhaver, now President of Andover Newton Theological School—where the coolest (and most humble) ministers study, had a recent Daily Devotional about Communion. He found

his mother's recipes and decided to make her Dill Stroganoff—even opting to not limit the amount of sour cream, thank you very much. He writes that as they sat down to eat the meal, “The aromas and tastes were transporting. And the stories flowed. It was almost as if my mother were there with us. The power in Communion is so much more than the power of memory. But when Jesus referred to a common meal and said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ at the very least, he meant something like this.”<sup>4</sup>

Worship celebrates holy acts and memories, like Passover and Communion. Worship affirms the sometimes painful past as we consider these stories that can make us uncomfortable. Yet worship looks with hope to the future, where God's promises can be realized if we just get a move on and get out of the empire mindset, if we can just tell people the Good News of the Gospel and live the Good News of the Gospel. Worship is the joyful response of the people of God to God's saving acts as we see today in Exodus. Worship helps us to acknowledge and praise God's presence in our lives and helps us bear witness to one another's lives as the Church. So no matter where your journeys have taken you this summer, welcome back to worship at Pilgrim Church. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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1 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/suzanne-c...>

2 Exodus 12:14

3 Walter Brueggemann, Exodus 12:1-28 Commentary, in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume 1*, 778.

4 Martin Copenhaver, “Do This in Remembrance,” UCC Daily Devotional, August 25, 2014.