

Dangerous Memory

Rick Axtell, Centre College Baccalaureate, May 20, 2018

Texts: Exodus 3: 1-10 and 14: 21-29 and Qur'an Sura 20

Deuteronomy 6: 10-12; 20-24

Amos 9: 5-7

Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 10b

Let my people go!

Imagine the courage and audacity of demands like this; demands issued to those in power by those at the margins of that power.

The story of Moses is the foundational narrative of Judaism, retold annually at Passover to ensure that the Israelites would never forget the horrors of slavery. It was Passover that Jesus observed with his disciples on the night before his death. And in the Qur'an, no prophet appears more frequently than Moses.

His story has shaped the imaginations of all who dream of deliverance. American slave owners were naively comfortable with slaves who sang about "gettin' to the Promised Land," not realizing that they weren't singing about *heaven*; they were singing about *Ohio*. (I realize that David Mauer will argue that Ohio is heaven, but here in Kentucky, we don't believe that).

Fifty years ago, on the night before his death, *America's* Moses, Dr. Martin Luther King, spoke these words, echoing the biblical story of Moses: "*God has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.*"ⁱ

So, today, with Moses as our guide, I want to explore this foundational narrative for what it might say to *our* moment, and to you, as you graduate.

For, yes, we have met your most urgent demandⁱⁱ; *we are letting you go!* Today at 3:00. ...
Of course, Centre is hardly Egypt, but it's time.

Your wilderness wanderings are about to begin. For *you* have encountered a flame that does not consume ... and *some* of you, apparently, took off a great deal *more* than your shoes...
Let's focus on that *other* flame.

The story of Moses begins with Hebrew midwives named Shiprah and Puah, slave women whose heroic civil disobedience saves the lives of Hebrew children.ⁱⁱⁱ

The *mother* of Moses, born into slavery, also disobeys the Egyptian authorities who were bent on the extermination of the Hebrew children under their yoke. When she can no longer hide her child from the dictators' enforcers, she acts in desperation, placing her infant in a basket and floating him down the Nile.^{iv}

In the story's ironic twist, Moses grows up in Pharaoh's household, but is raised by his mother, who surely passed to her son the legends of their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, Rachel and Leah— memories passed orally from generation to generation.

Moses so identifies with his people that he *kills an Egyptian* for beating a Hebrew slave. Like an ancient Nat Turner,^v Moses now poses a *threat* to the powers that be, and Pharaoh orders the death so shrewdly evaded years ago by the Hebrew women.

So Moses flees to Midian and settles into life among its desert tribes, fellow descendants of his ancestor Abraham.^{vi} Here, he takes a wife and names their son Gershom, or "Sojourner," saying: "*For I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.*"^{vii}

After years in the desert, Moses encounters that mysterious flame, a theophany of the God of his ancestors—ancestors whose stories lived in his memory. This is *dangerous* memory.

The phrase *dangerous memory* comes from German theologian Johann Metz,^{viii} who developed his "political theology" in light of the Holocaust. Narratives of suffering are *dangerous* precisely when they call us beyond ourselves, and place us within movements that challenge the privilege and power behind that suffering. Moses' calling. *Our* calling?

Moses has been conditioned by the memory of his people's misery to comprehend that the God *calling from the flames* is a God who hears the cries of the oppressed. This God sees their affliction, knows their suffering, and acts to deliver them into the Land of Promise. And Moses will be the deliverer.^{ix}

This God on fire, whose flame is not extinguished, is none other than the Promise of Justice pulling history forward by means of the dangerous memory of human anguish. For by means of that memory, we learn to comprehend the suffering Other, and to *act* out of our common humanity.

The parallel narratives in the Torah and the Qur'an picture the stunning victory over a Pharaoh^x who is never named in the texts. Because Pharaoh is the archetype of every oppressive system whose cruelty denies the dignity of the human person created in the image of God — the image of Love and Justice.

This Love, this Justice, is symbolized as a dry path in the sea when Moses raises his staff — a reprise of the primordial waters of chaos divided in the divine creative act,^{xi} *now* a divine act of deliverance. The slaves are *free* at last, free at last.

Now there's one more aspect of the story to highlight: Moses is both deliverer and lawgiver. And the *social* legislation of the Torah is stunning in its humanitarian focus — laws that challenge concentrations of power and wealth that marginalize the powerless.

Here's a passage from the Covenant Code in Exodus: *You shall not oppress an alien; You know the heart of a stranger, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.*^{xii}

And one from Deuteronomy: *You shall not oppress a hired servant who is needy, whether one of your kindred, or one who sojourns in your land ... You shall not pervert the justice owed to the alien or the orphan, or take a widow's garment in pledge (for a debt), but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt... When you reap your harvest and leave a sheaf in the field, do not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow... **Remember** that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.*^{xiii}

The Priestly Code in Leviticus even requires regular economic reckoning that includes debt forgiveness, release of debt slaves, and land reform every 50 years to prevent the concentration of wealth! Why? *"Because, I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt..."*^{xiv} Remember.

It's clear why the Israelites must tell their children the story of slavery and the Exodus;^{xv} why the story is ritualized at Passover *so they will never forget*; why centuries later *Jesus* expressed his Jewish identity by observing Passover on the night before the Empire assassinated him — a ritual now celebrated by Christians as the Eucharist.^{xvi} Remember.

So here's the image occupying my thoughts: Thousands of people fleeing; men, women and children escaping one of history's cruelest dictatorships, displaced due to unimaginable oppression, dwelling for years in camps in the desert.

Of course it's the story of the Exodus, but it's also the story of 21st-century Syria. It's no surprise that the Oct. 19, 2015 cover of TIME simply labeled the Syria crisis "Exodus" —bringing together one of the great tragedies of your college years with this foundational narrative of three great religious traditions.

Our hearts break over this *modern* Exodus unfolding in the deserts of the Middle East and the waters of the Mediterranean, where almost 9000 refugees *drowned* in 2015 and 2016, including Alan Kurdi,^{xvii} the 3-year old, who, at the beginning of your Sophomore year, washed up on the shore of a sea *whose waters never parted*.

There was no Moses to raise the staff of Love's protection.

Is it possible that this calling is *our* calling? On this momentous day, we, too, stand on the holy ground of the cry of the innocent, in the presence of a God called Love who *is on fire*.

Here in Danville, CentrePeace and other campus groups, plus the Presbyterian Church, Trinity Episcopal, Grace Presbyterian, First Christian, and the Islamic Society of Danville were watching with burning, broken hearts, standing on the holy ground that calls for action. So this community raised thousands of dollars to resettle Syrian families through Kentucky Refugee Ministries.^{xviii}

Let me tell you something worth remembering—a story I tell with permission from the families. They want you to enter into their story.

Mahmoud, Rana, and their three children had a good life in Syria. Mahmoud was a tailor who had enough work to build his own home, and then a home for his brother's family.

As the war intensified, both homes were destroyed in a bombing. ...A neighborhood left in flames... They have no idea why. In our first conversation about this, all Mahmoud could say was "*Bashar al-Assad—bad man. Assad evil.*" So the family fled, and lived for four years in Jordan.

After two years of intensive vetting,^{xix} the family arrived here on October 26, 2016 – 13 days before the U.S. election. October and November were a flurry of activity – getting housing, stocking the kitchen, arranging transportation, school registration, job search and yes, a baby shower for a new American citizen. The Bonners took charge of After School tutoring for the kids, with Stacy Crescencio, Eh Nay Thaw, and Emma Jackson leading the way.

The second Syrian family arrived here a month before the new President's Executive Order declaring a freeze on refugee admissions, revoking 60,000 visas already granted, and decreeing a travel ban from six majority Muslim nations.

The home of Shaban and Basema was also destroyed in the bombing, and they'd fled to Lebanon and Egypt before settling in Danville. But it's important to know that our nation's divisive rhetoric has consequences. One weekend, harassment from neighbors in their building became so threatening that the family had to be relocated.^{xx} What has America *forgotten*?

What I'm saying today is that you who gave so much to this effort placed yourselves within two narratives—the *modern* Exodus from Syria and the *ancient* narrative of the Exodus from Egypt.

They are, of course, one continuing story, a dangerous memory of the suffering of the innocent; a story that has shaped our civilization's most noble impulses about how to treat the stranger, the widow and the orphan—and a memory that threatens every system that excludes and marginalizes.

These social aspects of Hebrew covenant law were *derived from the memory of being a migrant people*. This sojourner's truth is the memory that was to shape the character of the covenant community and forever deconstruct the categories of insider/outsider; native/alien; those who belong and those who don't...

So, for me, here's the crux of the matter: *I don't have that memory.*

Many of you do, but most of us don't have the perspective from the margins that's essential for deconstructing all of those insider and outsider categories. We may be standing inside a very different narrative.

If the story of the slave, the immigrant, or the refugee does not burn within us, the flame can be quenched with a blind complacency that simply cannot *know*.

Latin American liberation theologians call this reality “epistemological privilege of the poor.” For us, here’s the meaning of their insight: *Perhaps we only know the truth about our campus community, our society, or our world, from the perspective of the margins.*

Fortunately, on this increasingly diverse campus, we’ve had colleagues who could bring that perspective; who’ve told us stories we need to remember. People like Eh Nay Thaw.^{xxi} We’ve conferred about telling his story. He wants us to know the truth.

In Burma (Myanmar), Eh Nay’s mother was a nurse and his father worked on a fishing boat. In a convo, Eh Nay told us, “Once we all had lives, homes, churches, and schools in Burma... [but] we were forced to leave it all behind and flee for our lives because of the dictatorship.”

One military general made this threat: “one day, if you want to see the Karen people, you’ll have to go and see at the museum.”^{xxii}

Eh Nay is Karen. And much like the more visible Exodus of Rohingyas into Bangladesh,^{xxiii} Burma’s military leaders are also driving the Karen people from their land. Eh Nay’s mother carried him as they escaped a military offensive that burned down their village, killed their animals, and hunted the fleeing villagers.

Once in Thailand, Eh Nay lived in the crowded Tham Hin refugee camp with its homes covered by plastic sheets. In retrospect, what he missed the most was not a nice house, or having a car, or shoes to wear, but *freedom*.

In an unforgettable image, Eh Nay likens life in a refugee camp to a bird in a cage — regularly fed by the U.N., but unable to fly; even forgetting what it *means* to fly.

After 10 years, Eh Nay and his family resettled in Louisville, where new hope took wing. His parents have passed to him the stories of their history and their culture. It is dangerous memory.

So, Eh Nay returned to Burma last summer and worked with Internally Displaced Persons. His passion led to a mobilization of Centre’s campus that raised 4 million Kyat (\$3100 U.S.), delivered last December to an IDP camp that hadn’t had food shipments in months.^{xxiv}

Eh Nay says that his memories, *and* his *gratitude*, were what motivated his work with Internally Displaced Persons in Burma, *and* his desire to tutor two boys from Syria newly arrived in a strange land.

You see, the flames that burned that village consumed neither memory nor hope. But these are dangerous memories. Eh Nay wants you to know that the Generals’ plan did not and will not succeed. He is *Karen*!

I don't have such memories. For those of us who don't, people like Mahmoud and Rana, and Shaban and Basema, and Eh Nay, and many others on this campus, have been our teachers, reminding us of something essential about who we are and who we are called to be.

This is theophany. Holy ground. A flame that does not consume and is never extinguished.

For those who do have such memory, the challenge is to never forget, to pass the memories to others, and to live into the *universal* and *inclusive* implications of holy memory.

As the prophet Amos had to remind the Israelites when their Exodus story of liberation became a new assertion of privilege: “*Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O Israel?*” says the Lord. “*Did I not bring up Israel from the Land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?*”^{xxv}

Rabbinic commentators even taught that God silenced celebration over the plight of Pharaoh's army: ‘*The work of my hands is drowning in the sea, and you desire to sing songs?*’

This radically inclusive solidarity understands that *dangerous* memory disallows othering narratives of exclusion.

And for those who dwell comfortably within *insider* narratives of privilege, power, and ease, our challenge is to stand in genuine solidarity so that movements for justice become the stories we inhabit. Not appropriating someone *else's* story. Not settling for charity that only reinforces a position of advantage. But allowing our consciences to be so seared by the flame that calls us to the ongoing story of *justice*, that we cannot help but act.^{xxvi}

So, as you graduate, we hope you'll seek out diverse communities once you leave this place, so you'll be shaped by stories that transcend your own experience.

In an era of deliberately manipulative and divisive newsfeed, with media camps that are echo chambers of ideology, it's time to *turn from our screens* and *listen* to the human story of a neighbor. This is to stand on holy ground.

Frankly, your Centre education has prepared you to do very well in the grand palaces of Pharaoh's court. But you're *also* prepared to be a holy danger to every modern Pharaoh that thrives on systems of oppression. You must choose the story you will pass to the next generation.^{xxvii}

In this historical moment when you're newly aware of law enforcement systems rife with bias, of neo-Nazis and white nationalists unashamedly on the march, of sexual aggression exposed by the ‘me too’ movement, and of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-refugee labeling, it's worth noting that these things are *not* really getting worse— they're simply being *revealed*.^{xxviii}

Where you stand always determines what you see. The challenge is to stand *within* the *Exodus* story, both ancient and modern, and to inhabit that story so fully that you create the inclusive beloved community that is *our* Promised Land.

Dangerous memory creates a dream that can pull us out of the current wilderness and toward the Promise. At its best, this memory is the catalyst for both empathy and solidarity.

Dr. King put it this way (as Amaryst Parks reminded us in her Honors Convo speech^{xxix}): *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere... In a real sense, all of life is interrelated. [We] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.*^{xxx}

Class of 2018, 50 years after America's Moses was taken from us, *there is still something calling to us from the flames.*

Let us remove our shoes. Let us listen attentively. Let us raise our staffs and part the waters.

The Land of Promise beckons.

ⁱ King's "I've Been to the Mountaintop" sermon was delivered in Memphis on April 3, 1968. For text and video, see <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

ⁱⁱ At what may be remembered as a historic three-day sit-in this spring, Centre students presented a list of demands to the College. The action resulted in dialogue and negotiation that was necessary, divisive, challenging, enlightening, and ultimately, it is hoped, productive.

ⁱⁱⁱ The subversive story of the midwives is found in Exodus 1: 15-21, where the names of these slave women are preserved for all time.

^{iv} Exodus 2: 1-10. Here, the story borrows from existing hero legends of the Ancient Near East, echoing the early Bronze Age birth narrative of Sargon of Agade, for example. The Qur'an's parallel is found in Sura 20: 37-40.

^v The story of the killing is found in Exodus 2: 11-15 and parallel in Qur'an 20:40. Nat Turner's famous revolt of Virginia slaves (August, 1831) led to his hanging and dismemberment in November 1831. See Henry Louis Gates, "Did African-American Slaves Rebel?" at TheRoot.com, in addition to the PBS Documentary Series he produced, "The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross."

^{vi} The Midianites inhabited territory in the Sinai Peninsula as well as east of the Gulf of Aqaba in what is now southern Jordan and western Saudi Arabia. They were said to be descendants of the son of Abraham and Keturah (Gen. 25: 1-6).

^{vii} Exodus 2: 22.

^{viii} Metz writes in light of the theodicy and anthropodicy questions raised by the Holocaust. For him, narrative (in particular, narratives of human suffering) is privileged over "history." Narrative's *symbolic* functions are ethical and prophetic. In the context of the Holocaust, theology is biography, but inherently political, and ultimately other-centered. To dare to hope for the Kingdom of God must be first to hope it for others.

^{ix} Exodus 3: 1-12; Sura 20: 9-16.

^x Sura 20: 25, 43; Exodus, chapters 7-11, 14. Scholars who see echoes of historical events behind these stories posit a 13th century BCE dating in Dynasty XIX, possibly during the reign of Rameses II.

^{xi} The division of waters to create order, as pictured in the Priestly creation narrative (Gen. 1: 6-10), borrows imagery from creation narratives like the Babylonian *enuma elish*, where Tiamat, a dragon of watery chaos is divided into a three-tiered universe similar to the ancient cosmology pictured in Gen. 1. The dividing of waters in Exodus 14: 21-29 and in the "Song of the Sea" (esp. Ex. 15: 8, 10) uses similar imagery, picked up by later Hebrew writers who reprise the mythic dragon symbolism—e.g. Isaiah 51: 9-11 (with allusions to dragon mythology that explicitly tie together creation and Exodus). See also Ps. 74: 13-14; Ps. 89:9-10. Job 41 is the Bible's description of the mythic chaos dragon this God is said to be taming.

^{xii} Ex. 23: 9-10; parallel in Lev. 25: 2-7. See also, Ex 22: 21-23: *You shall not wrong an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan.... I will surely hear their cry.* Lev. 19: 33-34 says: *When an alien sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.*

^{xiii} Deut. 24: 14-22; see also Lev. 19:9-10. The Deuteronomic code is two centuries later than the Covenant code in Exodus.

^{xiv} Lev. 25: 38, with the same rationale in this impressively progressive humanitarian chapter repeated in vv. 42, 55, as in similar legislation in Deut. 15: 15. In Ex. 21, Dt. 15, and Lev. 25 debts are forgiven and debt slaves are freed every 7 years. Leviticus declares a “Jubilee” every 50 years that includes a land reform. This later priestly law code develops after the 6th century BCE Babylonian Exile—a new story of deliverance that is a further “accumulation of meaning” of the Exodus story.

^{xv} See, for example, Deuteronomy 6: 10-12, 20-24. In the Qur’an as well, Moses knows that a key consequence of the deliverance that he and Aaron will bring is to glorify God and to *remember*. (Sura 20: 34).

^{xvi} Wesley Granberg-Michaelson notes that “the core liturgical act of the Christian community is communion. This is a celebration of remembrance. As theologian Scott Hahn noted, ‘Memory is more than just a psychological exercise of data retrieval,’ but the ‘faculty that tells us who we are.’” *An Anchor in the Storm*, in *Sojourners*, Vol. 6/No. 4, April 2017.

^{xvii} Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy of Kurdish descent, drowned in the Mediterranean Sea on Sept. 2, 2015. The International Organization for Migration records a million crossings of the Mediterranean in 2015 and about 14 drownings per day in 2016. 3800 drowned in 2015 and 5000 drowned in 2016. (*Courier Journal*, 12/24/16). Global refugee numbers are staggering: UNHCR reports more than **21 million refugees** in the world (defined as those escaping “war, persecution, or natural disaster and unable to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution or violence”). More than **5 ½ million** of these refugees are from Syria, the largest contributor to the global refugee population. Seven million Syrians are *internally* displaced (*not* defined as refugees because they haven’t crossed borders). So, in addition to more than half a million deaths, the conflict has displaced 12 million people since the initial uprising against Bashar al-Assad in 2011. That’s half of Syria’s population—millions streaming into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and into Europe. See UNHCR, The U.N. Refugee Agency, Figures at a Glance (<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>). Refugees make up about a third of the 65 million forcibly displaced persons in the world today. Refugees have protected status in international law, even if their status is uncertain in the U.S.

^{xviii} Please visit the website of this superb local resettlement agency and consider supporting: <https://kyrm.org/>

^{xix} We learned to suspect any claim that refugees are not adequately vetted before coming to the U.S. It is false. The family was vetted by the UN (with hearings, biometrics, and countless interviews), and by the U.S. State Department, Homeland Security, the FBI, the Department of Defense, the National Security Agency, and the National Counterterrorism Center. Vetting is already extreme.

^{xx} The families’ stories are told here with permission. As of this writing, jobs and school are going very well.

^{xxi} At the Centre Honors Convocation on May 2, Eh Nay was the Centre student judged by the International Studies faculty as having “the most promise to advance peace and justice in international affairs” and by the Student Life Office as a “student who has demonstrated a robust and consistent commitment to student activities, campus life and leadership.”

^{xxii} Attributed to former Vice Chairman of the inaptly named State Peace and Development Council, General Maung Aye.

^{xxiii} See the PBS Frontline Documentary on the Rohingya crisis, “*Myanmar’s Killing Fields*.” (5/8/18). This graphic piece about the 800,000 refugees who have fled to Bangladesh is hard to watch, but it’s crucial that the international community understand these realities. On December 1, Pope Francis travelled to Bangladesh after a trip to Myanmar. After meeting Rohingya refugees, he said, “The presence of God today is also called Rohingya.” The term is not a recognized ethnic group in Myanmar. For a look at the less well-known Karen crisis, the world’s longest ongoing civil conflict, see the documentary, *The Road: A Journey into Burma’s War-Torn Karen State* available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iholvICIPM>

^{xxiv} Eh Nay became aware of the IDP camp during a Centre Internship with the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network. To put the amount raised in context, a rural rice farmer in Myanmar earns about \$30 a month and a full-time factory worker earns \$67 a month (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-economy-wages/myanmar-sets-2-80-daily-minimum-wage-in-bid-to-boost-investment-idUSKCN0QY0A620150829>).

Centre’s Dr. Kyle Anderson delivered the funds. See his reflections in *Verge Magazine* here:

<https://www.vergemagazine.com/study-abroad/blogs/2174-offering-aid-in-myanmar.html>.

For Centre website articles about the emphasis, see: <https://www.centre.edu/centre-raises-3100-for-internally-displaced-persons-in-myanmar/> and <https://www.centre.edu/internally-displaced-persons-dinner-to-bring-awareness-to-centre-community/>. Here is Eh Nay’s story in his own words: <http://www.bpfna.org/about-us/news/2015/01/19/here-i-am-my-vocation-as-a-peacemaker.1317429>

^{xxv} Amos 9: 7

^{xxvi} Like many campuses around the country that saw protests this spring, Centre saw both of these challenges play out in 2018.

^{xxvii} One can read the sacred stories imperially: Moses on the mountaintop; Jesus on a heavenly throne; Muhammad as imperial conqueror. One can also read them prophetically, from the perspective of the margins: Moses the exile who

stands against an imperial system based on enslavement; Jesus the refugee from Herod's massacre of children (Mt. 2) who is tortured by the Empire as a political prisoner; Muhammad exiled by the elite pre-Islamic Meccan nobility who saw him as a threat. If higher education has prepared us only to identify with power, we will read the stories from the perspective of that privilege, but may lack (or forget) the dangerous memory that can move history beyond its worst horrors. See Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

^{xxviii} I am indebted to Ken Sehested, Co-Pastor of Circle of Mercy church in Asheville, NC, for this insight.

^{xxix} <https://www.centre.edu/amaryst-parks-18-a-community-ethic-honors-convo-address/>

^{xxx} From King's famous, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. And this is "dangerous" to us precisely because it places us within a narrative that challenges both privilege and power. Dangerous memory is openness to an alternative future.