

Wednesday, February 26, 2020 – Ash Wednesday
“Big Things with Small Stuff”

Exodus 1:1-2:10

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Adapted from R. Reed Lessing’s “Let My People Go!”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Howard Rutledge was an American fighter pilot. He was shot down and captured by the North Vietnamese in 1965. The North Vietnamese threw him into a prison in Hanoi, North Vietnam. What was the prison called? Heartbreak Hotel.

Howard Rutledge writes, “When the door slammed shut a feeling of utter loneliness swept over me. I was locked in a six by six cell. It’s hard to describe what solitary confinement can do to defeat a person. There are no books, no magazines and no newspapers. The only colors you see are drab gray and dirt brown. You’re locked in your filthy cell, trying to keep your sanity.”

We all know what it feels like to be locked up in Heartbreak Hotel. The problem for us, though, is that at first it didn’t look like Heartbreak Hotel. It looked like the Promised Land! It even was the Promised Land—at least for a while. That moral indiscretion? “No big deal!” That financial dishonesty? “No big deal!” That small, little lie? “No big deal!”

Sooner or later, though, “no big deal” becomes a really big deal! What we thought was the Promised Land becomes the death of a job, the death of a marriage, the death of our hope, the death of our joy. Satan slams the door shut and says, “Welcome to Heartbreak Hotel! You can check out anytime you like. But you will never leave!”

Today we begin a new sermon series on Moses’s book called Exodus. We’re calling this series, “Let my people go!” God sees his people Israel in the Egyptian Heartbreak Hotel and tells Pharaoh—seven times—“Let my people go!” You remember the story. Because of a famine in 1847 BC Jacob and his family (seventy people in all) traveled from Canaan to Egypt. That’s Exodus 1:1–7.

Fast forward 300 years and we come to Exodus 1:8: “Then a new king, who did not know Joseph, came to power in Egypt.” This king, or Pharaoh, saw that Israelites were becoming too numerous and too powerful. So what did the Pharaoh do? He created his own version of Heartbreak Hotel!

Stage One: State Slavery. Exodus 1:11 says: “So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.” Every Israelite slave was required to produce 3,000 bricks a day—3,000 bricks a day! And you think you have a tough job! Try this. Get water from a canal. Pour the water into a mud pit. Step up and down in the mud pit. Add straw to some mud. Let it dry in the sun – and by the way, basically the same summer weather as here, if only a bit more humid. And presto! You’ve got a brick! Now make 3,000 of those a day—every day—with no time off. Ever!

Stage Two: Private Infanticide. Exodus 1:15–16 describes it this way. “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ‘When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.’” God sees two women—Shiphrah and Puah—who obey him and disobey the Pharaoh’s command, and so God puts their names in the Bible. But this Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the earth, his name isn’t in the Bible! Why is that? God does big things with small stuff!

Stage Three: Open Genocide. Exodus 1:22 describes Pharaoh’s decree: “Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.” It’s against this backdrop of Pharaoh’s Heartbreak Hotel that Moses is born: “Now a man of the house of Levi [Amram] married a Levite woman [Jochebed], and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son” (Ex 2:1–2). This son is Moses. Moses is the couple’s third child. There is an older sister, whose name is Miriam, and an older brother, whose name is Aaron: “When she [Jochebed] saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch” (Ex 2:2–3). This word, translated “basket,” is the same word that is translated “ark”—as in Noah’s Ark—

in Genesis. This ark in Exodus, just like Noah's in Genesis, is coated with tar and pitch. But you say, "Noah's ark was so much bigger!" Why is that? Because in the book of Exodus God does big things with small stuff!

This baby boy is placed in the Nile River and Miriam runs along the river's edge. She watches as Pharaoh's daughter bathes with her servants in the Nile River: "She [Pharaoh's daughter's servant] opened it and saw the baby. He was crying and she felt sorry for him" (Ex 2:6). Moses is crying. This changes everything! In the book of Exodus a baby's cry changes everything? Of course! God does big things with small stuff!

The text continues: "When the child grew older, she [Jochebed] took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, 'I brought him out of the water'" (Ex 2:10). Moses! Moses is an Egyptian word that means "bring out of water!" Finally! Someone who will bring Israel out of Pharaoh's Heartbreak Hotel! And Moses will do that through what? Water! Moses will part the water of the Red Sea with a wooden staff. A wooden staff? God does big things with small stuff! God sees us in our prison, our self-made Heartbreak Hotel. God sees us trying to get out. He sees us putting on our Superman or Superwoman cape, thinking that we are superheroes who can save ourselves.

Bad news: You are not a super hero. And neither am I. We can't fight our way out of our prison of sin. We can't think our way out, buy our way out, educate our way out, vacation our way out, or blast our way out. We're all stuck in sin—Heartbreak Hotel!

Now, here's some really, really good news for you! God does big things with small stuff! Jesus brings us out of our prison of sin and death. And, just like the book of Exodus, Jesus does it all with small stuff. The tokens of Christ's Passion. Chalice, torch, lantern, sword, whip, whipping post, clothing, 30 pieces of silver, dice, spear, hand which struck Christ, torch, pitcher of gall and vinegar. Jesus doesn't

recoil, run, or retreat at the sight of our ugly prison. Jesus comes to us right where we are. To do what? Really big things (set us free), with really small stuff.

Stuff like a sip of wine and little piece of bread. Stuff like the Word spoken through the ashes on your forehead – “Dust you are and to dust you shall return.” It sounds like a curse – and it is – but look at the shape of those ashes. The curse was taken to the cross with Jesus, who sets us free with really small stuff.

Howard Rutledge has more to say about Heartbreak Hotel. He writes, “I prayed for strength to make it through the ongoing night. Then, one day, a glimmer of light dawned through the bottom of my prison door. I knew that God would set me free. And he did!”

Life gets dark. Sometimes life gets really dark. What we thought was the Promised Land is really Heartbreak Hotel. “You can check out anytime you like. But you will never leave!” But there is a glimmer of light dawning. Can you see it? It’s Easter light. It’s Easter deliverance! And it is here, for us, right now! How can we be so sure? God still does really big things—set us free—with really small stuff! In the name of Jesus, that’s God gift to you. Amen.