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Mayflower 2/12/11  
Exodus 6:10-13

### **LET MY PEOPLE GO!**

I woke up again unable to preach the sermon I had planned to preach, because I have been unable to get the people of Egypt out of my mind. On Friday when an ashen-faced Omar Suleiman stepped to the microphone at 6:05 pm and said this: “Hosni Mubarak has resigned as president of the republic and assigned the governance of the country to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces” I thought to myself, 30 years of dictatorship, and centuries more of oppression, lifted in less than 30 seconds.

Suleiman, whose name is the Arabic pronunciation of Solomon, did what no one thought possible. He opened the door on a new chapter in the life of one of the oldest and most important societies on earth. The hour had come, and could not be denied. Suleiman was not wise, like Solomon. But when your army so identifies with the revolution that they are threatening to take off their uniforms and join the protestors, you have little choice. What we have all just witnessed is one of the most important moments in human history.

After three weeks of protests that got larger and larger, more and more diverse, and would have been from start to finish non-violent had Mubarak not made several efforts to drive his own people from Tahrir Square, the most influential Arab nation on earth did something no one would have thought possible. By the force of their sheer determination to start over and build a true democracy in their own country, they drove a dictator from power who commanded a million man army and receives 1.3 billion dollars in U.S. aid (second only to Israel).

I don't know about you, but few events in my lifetime have filled me with such amazement and joy. I have been absolutely glued to the news reports, and amazed by the faces and the voices of a young generation of Egyptians who

used the power of the internet to organize and sustain a revolution against all the entrenched power of Pharaoh. If someone were to write the story of this exodus, somewhere in the story would be this line: “Then the Lord spoke to Moses and said, A million people have texted the Pharaoh and said, “We’re not leaving. You are.”

It was 2/11/11 — Liberation Day in Egypt. The symbolism of that date, 2/11, not 9/11 did not escape the commentators. Our understanding of the Arab world was fatally fixed by 9/11, and our foreign policy has been driven by the fear unleashed that day. But our response was to try to right the wrong by the sheer power of our might, thinking we could remake the Middle East with boots on the ground. That’s not how we got our democracy. That’s not how any successful democracy has been established. The people must demand it, and regimes must know when to step aside and let them have it.

Are there risks? Of course. No change of this magnitude comes without risk. Will there be forces that try to co-opt the revolution to gain power instead of giving it to the people? — without a doubt. Was this just a military coup in the end disguised as a people’s movement? I don’t think so. Will it succeed? Something tells me it will – despite the fear mongering and the hyperbolic apocalyptic rhetoric on Fox News (Glenn Beck maintains that this is the beginning of the end of the world). And in one way he’s right. The world as we have known it is coming to an end. And few things have made me as joyful, or as hopeful, or as inspired as what has just happened in the ancient land of the pyramids. It’s what makes me believe in God.

One thing that has not been widely reported is that this movement was not only diverse, but intentionally interfaith. The sign of the crescent and the cross together in peaceful protest became a symbol for many young Egyptians. It was not us against them. It was all of us determined to make our our future through the force of non-violent resistance to oppression. “Let your own people go!” they cried, echoing the ancient story of the Israelites, who left Egypt rather than to remain in slavery there. 90% of young Egyptians age 16–29 do not have jobs.

In the early days of the protest, it looked like an impossible goal. On January 25, the first day of major protests, riot officers huddled in trucks and plain-clothed police snatched protestors off the sidewalks. Mubarak believed he could wait them out, wear them down, even run them over with camels and cars. 300 protestors died, and many more were wounded. But there was no wearing them down, and no turning their moment back. On Friday the city erupted in a celebration that you had to watch and listen to to believe. A roar began in one part of Tahrir Square and spread across the land, to Heliopolis,

from the banks of the Nile to the Pyramids — because no single leader had driven Mubarak from power. It was a leaderless movement, which means of course, that it was a people's movement.

What did they demand? To speak freely. To have a role in determining their future. To hold free and fair and regular elections. Most of them have known only one president for their whole life. To be protected by the rule of law. Things we take for granted, but are denied to most people in the world. Things we assume other people don't really want because they are not like us. But if anyone still believes this, they are not paying attention. When the history of this moment is written, as significant as the fall of the Berlin Wall, it will be about the power of real-time flat Web-savvy organizations to bring down a dictator who has been called The Great Non Communicator. He did not "get it" right up the end. A woman carried a sign that read, "Facebook 2, Arab Leaders 0 (referring to the protest that had toppled the president of Tunisia and then energized Mubarak's opponents. Another young man's sign gave instructions for entering Liberation Square: "Mubarak: Enter + Shift + Delete."

And let's face it. Mubarak's life itself had become an obscene insult to his own people, most of whom live on \$2 a day. He lived in opulent palaces, owned luxurious apartments around the world, flew everyone within his family on a fleet of private jets, and stashed somewhere between one and five billion dollars in Swiss bank accounts. Meanwhile, back home, pictures of those palaces could be downloaded for everyone with a cell phone.

The difference in this revolution from the one that was attempted in Teheran, or in Tiananmen Square was the role of the military. In Egypt the army signaled their sympathy with the protestors from the beginning, issuing a communiqué to Mubarak that said it was "committed to sponsor the legitimate demands of the people" in pursuit of "a free and democratic society." It spoke of the "honest people who refused corruption." And that is an army that knows something about corruption, since they have operated as a kind of underground economy for decades.

All through Friday afternoon, I wandered around in a state of exhilaration and disbelief and wondered if we ever really understand what is happening while it is happening. We are so concerned with protecting what is ours that we have very little empathy it seems for what other people desire. There is no future without a peaceful and stable Middle East, and what happens in Egypt sets the standard for what happened throughout the Arab world, much as it is said that California sets the trends for our country.

If that is true, then this enormous population, long trampled upon, long subjected to the humiliation of non-citizenry in a state without laws, has awakened from a long, conspiracy-filled slumber induced by aging despots determined to keep their people from modernity.

In the West we constantly scratch our heads and wonder why a Middle East peace is so elusive. Perhaps, wrote Roger Cohen of the NYT's, "we should have conceded that the building blocks we were trying to use were rotten to the core and we had been complicit in that rot. Almost a decade after 9/11, the event that signaled the devastating gulf that had grown up between the West and Islam, this is a day of hope for millions of young Arabs and for the world. Egypt's revolution comes hard on the heels of Tunisia's and inevitably poses the question: which wizened specimen from the Arab Jurassic Park is next?"

If I were an Arab dictator this morning, I'd be dressing a little more casually these days, staying home, and meeting more often with my constituency. The power of what has just happened in Egypt will not stay in Egypt. And let us hope it will not be lost on Americans, whose passion for Dancing with the Stars ought to take a backseat, just once, to what really matters. If we are a people who just mouth platitudes about freedom and the common aspirations of our sisters and brothers, but sleep walk through a moment as momentous and hopeful as this one, then we are lost.

A dam has broken, and what will flow down that storied river, the Nile, will flood the world I believe. And when I say that, when I say "I believe" I mean it not in the way we talk about what is probable or expedient or even in our national interest. I mean I believe in people. I believe in human beings who can by the sheer force of their will bend the long arch of history toward justice, as Dr. King put it. I believe that the spirit of God moves through the dreams of ordinary people who want dignity and who show us the simple but profound truth that we so easily forget: everyone wants to be free.

Just think what has happened in three weeks? Egypt may get a completely new constitution, and they could one day be led by Nobel prize-winner Mohamed Elbaradei. No longer can the clueless and the entitled claim that there is something in the Arab genome that is anti-democratic. We cannot live together by making the enemy into a cartoon and then complaining that indeed he is a caricature.

This is Egypt's moment, but if we have an empathic imagination then this is our moment. We are a nation built on a people's revolution. We were willing to die for that idea. But so are other people. And they don't just want our military aid, especially when those guns are so often turned against them. They

want our ideas. They want to taste for the first time what we have grown dangerously accustomed to. Instead of sleeping with dictators, let's send our brightest Constitutional scholars to help Egypt write its new founding document.

Let's pray for the Egyptian people who deserve this moment and deserve to be free. Let's rejoice at what has happened and pledge our support not only in time and talent, but in a conspiracy of the heart, a willingness to imagine that God is not finished with us yet, but that we are not the only ones that God cares about. People cried and kissed the ground on Friday. Nearly everyone, said one reporter, hugged a stranger.

Ah, "the stranger," now there's a word for us to reconsider. Out of Egypt I will call my son. Let my people go. And when faced with the powers of the empire, Pilate wanted to know, "Are you the king of the Jews? . . . What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Most people stop reading right there, assuming that Jesus meant that he was only concerned for the heavenly realm. But what he said next makes his meaning unmistakable: "If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being arrested and handed over . . ."

"This world" to Jesus means the normalcy of empire, the way things get done, might makes right and daddy dictator knows best. But this is not the way God gets things done. My kingdom is not of this world because my kingdom is non-violent, and that is the force, the soul-force, that will ultimately bring heaven down to earth.

We sing about how proud we are to be Americans. But this morning I'm proud to be Egyptian. I'm proud to be Tunisian. And one day I hope to sing with my Iranian sisters and brothers, and with my North Korean sisters and brothers, and with my Chinese sisters and brothers, and with my Tibetan sisters and brothers — and will all of humanity, who will one day live in God's reign, running things themselves, instead of being run over by others.

There is a time to celebrate and a time to speculate on all that can go wrong with a revolution. Now is the time to celebrate.

Innaharda, ehna kullina Misryeen. Today we are all Egyptians!

Amean