

We all know what a prison looks like. We live in a town with a good sized prison, after all. I think we've all at least driven by it at one time or another. It's not even a very high security prison. But it has all the features you expect to see.

Thick brick walls. High fences topped with razor wire. Uniformed guards patrolling the grounds. And, of course, prisoners kept under lock and key. All the usual sights.

But that's not the only appearance that a prison can take. Prisons come in all shapes and sizes. And sometimes they don't look like prisons at all. The Bible is proof of that.

The Old Testament, in particular, is a story of prisons for God's people. Prisons that often look nothing like what we're used to seeing. Prisons that the inmates don't even realize they're incarcerated in.

Adam and Eve probably didn't realized that they were thrown into a prison after they fell into sin. After all, they were just thrown out of the Garden of Eden. But that was exactly their prison. To be anywhere except the one place they most wanted to be.

A similar thing happens to the Israelites during the Babylonian exile. They had relative freedom in Babylon. They could go where they wanted. Live how they wanted. They just couldn't go back to Jerusalem. And so that made Babylon a prison for them.

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning, and throughout this season of Lent, we'll be studying another prison in the history of God's people. The prison of Egypt. And this prison was something that we would normally think of as more prison-like. They were slaves in Egypt, after all.

But we have to remember, they didn't start out that way. They didn't originally go to Egypt thinking it would be a place of captivity. They went to Egypt thinking it would be a place of salvation.

Joseph's father and brothers went to Egypt at God's direction to escape a famine in Canaan. We heard just a couple weeks ago about how Joseph's entire life of hardship and suffering was all part of God's plan to one day save his family. And Egypt was indeed a wonderful refuge from starvation.

But here's the thing. That famine they were escaping? It was only 7 years long. And that land of Goshen in Egypt where they had settled? It was only ever supposed to be a temporary home. The last thing that Joseph says to his brothers before he dies is that God will yet bring them back to the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Egypt was not their permanent home. It was never supposed to be their permanent home. Their permanent home, their promised land, was in Canaan.

But they forgot all about it. Egypt was good. It had food and water and wealth. And the Israelites were treated like royalty. They were the family of Joseph. The king's right-hand man. They had everything they would ever need.

Until they didn't. Until a Pharaoh who did not know of Joseph rose up. And saw not a respected royal family. But a group of foreigners living on his land that he could use as slaves to build his cities.

And suddenly, this land of food and water and wealth and respect became a land of suffering and slavery and death. Egypt became their prison. A prison they had walked into willingly and made their home.

And why? Because it was just easier to stay where they were than to go back to where God wanted them. It was easier to sacrifice the God of their fathers for the gods of Egypt. It was easier to abandon the covenant that God had made with them than to trust that God would remember his promises. It was just easier to sin.

And it always is. We don't sin because it's hard to do. We sin because it's easy. Because it feels good. Because it feels natural and normal and like the very best decision we could make.

And often, like those Israelites in Egypt, sin isn't about doing anything. It's about doing nothing. It's about inertia. Just staying exactly where we are. Enjoying what we have. We are born in sin. We live in sin. We will die in sin. That is our natural condition.

And just like Egypt for the Israelites, it doesn't feel like a prison until it's too late. It doesn't feel like slavery because it's what we were born into it. It doesn't feel like we've sacrificed anything until we're shown that we've actually sacrificed everything.

Which is exactly what the story of Moses is all about. The birth of Moses comes at one of the darkest moments in Israel's history. Because it wasn't bad enough that they were unjustly enslaved by a cruel pharaoh. It wasn't bad enough that they were set to work in mud pits making thousands upon thousands of bricks every day.

No, this pharaoh had to add even more injuries to God's people. And when he saw that even the hardest forced labor still didn't slow down their birth rate, he simply started killing their infant sons. Drowning them in the Nile within moments after they were born. Killing off an entire generation of Israelite men simply to calm his own fears of rebellion.

And yet, God had a plan for his people. God had a savior for his people. He didn't look like much. Just a crying infant in his mother's arms. The son of an ordinary Israelite man and woman. She didn't know who he would become. She didn't even give him a name. Probably because it would have been that much more heartbreaking if the Egyptians had found him.

And when she could hide him no longer, she made for him a basket. An ark, actually. It's the same word in Hebrew. And just as a great ark kept Noah and his family safe during the flood, this tiny ark kept a single child safe in the river.

Until finally Pharaoh's daughter found him. Found him and had pity on him. And so she claimed him as her own and gave him a name. And said, "This is Moses," which means, "I drew him out of the water."

And with that one little child, God's plan of salvation had begun. God had sent the Israelites a savior. Someone who, yes, would free them from their prison. But first, he would tell them that they were in a prison. He would deliver God's Word to them and remind them that this land of Egypt was not their home. But if they followed him, he would lead them to the promised land.

1,500 years later, another child who didn't look like much would be born to an ordinary Israelite woman. A child whom the king would once again try to kill out of fear. And who would, ironically, be saved by escaping to Egypt.

And when this man was drawn out of the water by John the Baptist, the very heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit came down like a dove. And the voice of God the Father proclaimed, "This is my Son, whom I love. With Him, I am well pleased." And from that moment on, all of God's people knew that God had a plan for them. God had sent a savior to them.

Someone who, yes, would free them from their prison. But first, he would tell them that they were in a prison. He would deliver God's Word to them and remind them that this life of sin and death was not their home. But if they followed him, he would lead them to the promised land.

He would lead them through his own death on a cross. A show us in the most vivid way just how harsh the penalties of sin are. The wages of sin is death. Our mortal death, yes. But more importantly, the death of our Lord on a cross. So that we might receive the free gift of God.

Which is exactly why we gather here this evening and receive these ashes. They are a reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. They are a reminder that we are in a prison of sin and death. A prison that we cannot escape by our own reason or strength.

But God in his mercy has sent us a second Moses, drawn from the water, to lead us out of captivity. He has sent us a Savior, Jesus Christ, baptized in water and anointed by the Spirit, to lead us out of sin and death. By his cross, he has freed us from our prison. By baptism in his name, he has drawn us out of the water. And claimed us as his sons and daughters.

So that on the last day, we will no longer be frail children of dust. We will be children of water and the Spirit. We will be royalty in the kingdom of our God. And He will bring us home to our promised land forever. Amen.