I have to admit today’s readings especially Exodus is hard to reconcile with the reading from Romans. While it does look like God tried to warn the Egyptians by sending ten plagues; it still begs the question of whether a loving God would kill the first born humans and animals of all Egyptians or any of them for that matter? This is the same God who has a commandment for all of us of thou shall not kill. It is problematic and I can’t reconcile it for you today. This passage is also about liberation. The freedom of the Israelites from oppression by the Egyptians. Now some might argue that anyone who oppresses others deserves to be killed but there are other ways to fight oppression without accepting it…Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us that "To accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system; thereby the oppressed become as evil as the oppressor," In the case of the Israelites God provides protection from a plague by instructing them to put a smear of blood on their doorways from an unblemished lamb so that God will Passover their houses. As people living in the midst of a plague or pandemic I think we are all concerned about whether it will strike our homes and families and friends. But what is it that we need to seek freedom from? This time of staying apart from one another and having to wear masks surely has something to say about freedom. Some people claim that having personal freedom means they don’t have to wear a mask and yet that means that other peoples’ lives may be endangered. Both Paul and Jesus talk about attaining freedom by following a God who wants us to love one another. A God who values loving more than the strict laws that were in place. A God who values forgiveness and the ability for us to work through areas of disagreement if at all possible with one another. Of course, love and forgiveness if given freely will likely keep us from hurting one another and ourselves and therefore will allow us to follow the laws fully. There are a few people that I look up to for their ability to forgive and to turn a personal hurt into a way to connect with others and to live their lives more fully. In my book of Holy Troublemakers I found a woman named Ani Zonneveld who was raised by a Malaysian ambassador and her mom and attended a British school in Germany. During prayer at school when the children prayed for Jesus daily Ani got upset because she is Muslim. Her mom told her to just replace Jesus with Allah in your mind and it’s fine. She said, we all worship the same God. Because of this Ani developed a respect for all other faiths and people. Ani became an Imam and is an international spokesperson for religious tolerance and human rights. She writes music and was the first Malaysian women to be nominated for a Grammy. After September 11 Ani was appalled by the violence and that a group of extremists with power and money had defiled the Muslim faith in such a way. She knew Islam to be a religion of peace. The Quran speaks a message that is much different than the message tauted by extremists. Because of this difference Ani wanted people to understand the true meaning of Islam and started a group called Muslims for Progressive Values and a Human rights group called Alliance of Inclusive Muslims. She wanted Muslims to know the message of the Quran was about justice, compassion, and love for all of humanity. She reminds us that a local tribe with lots of political power has misinterpreted this message to justify attacks like 9/11. She also wants it remembered that women were in the first group of disciples to follow Muhammad which included his first wife Khadijah. She asked Muhammad to marry her. Ani’s mission is to reclaim the message of peace, love, equality and justice. I think this can be our mission to. We too have strayed as a nation that claims to be Christian based; we sure don’t look Christ like in our structures of power and wealth. We don’t exemplify Christian values in the racism that is so prevalent and deadly to our black brothers and sisters. Or by claiming that our national history of enslavement and denial of basic civil rights to blacks has not occurred. There is little love for the transgender people who are murdered and excluded for not conforming to an outdated idea of sexuality and gender. Christianity if pared down as Paul seems to be doing in Romans is about loving one another and it is about trying to live together in peace and with justice for all.

The gospel today tells us for the second time in three weeks that Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” This is a complex statement in some ways. But as I write this anticipating a time away in nature I think of it this way. There are many many things we carry us on a daily basis that are not helpful in our desire to love one another. There are resentments about past wrongs, there are very real hurts we have received from people we love and people we dislike. We are living in the midst of a time of pandemic and physical separation. We have a choice to either carry all this around on our shoulders or to choose to forgive ourselves and each other and seek ways to draw closer instead of further apart from one another. By choosing forgiveness and love we are showing visible signs of God’s presence in this world. We are doing like Ani does in trying to bring out the goodness and love that are the tenets, the very foundation of our religion and the one God we all follow. As John O Donohue writes in this poem entitled Love in a time of conflict:

“When the gentleness between you hardens

And you fall out of your belonging with each other,

May the depths you have reached hold you still.

When no true word can be said, or heard,

And you mirror each other in the script of hurt,

When even the silence has become raw and torn,

May you hear again an echo of your music.

When the weave of affection starts to unravel

And anger begins to sear the ground between you,

Before this weather of grief invites

The black seed of bitterness to find root,

May your souls come to kiss.

Now is the time for one of you to be gracious,

To allow a kindness beyond thought and hurt,

Reach out with sure hands

To carry it carefully through this echoless waste

Until this winter pilgrimage leads you toward the gateway to spring.”

(From Benedictus A Book of Blessings, John O’Donohue)

When the gentleness between you hardens
And you fall out of your belonging with each other,
May the depths you have reached hold you still.

When no true word can be said, or heard,
And you mirror each other in the script of hurt,
When even the silence has become raw and torn,
May you hear again an echo of your first music.

When the weave of affection starts to unravel
And anger begins to sear the ground between you,
Before this weather of grief invites
The black seed of bitterness to find root,
May your souls come to kiss.

Now is the time for one of you to be gracious,
To allow a kindness beyond thought and hurt,
Reach out with sure hands
To take the chalice of your love,
And carry it carefully through this echoless waste
Until this winter pilgrimage leads you
Towards the gateway to spring.