

Dear sisters and brothers,

I just came back from a holiday on the beautiful isle of Crete. I had never been to Greece before and I didn't know what to expect, especially since the only news that reached us was concerned with the financial crisis of this country. Once I was there, I met a proud and upright folk, who treated the tourists occupying their island ever so politely and friendly, but never lost their dignity. One evening I had a long conversation with our waitress about the history of Crete and how it formed the mentality of its inhabitants. She told me that the island had been ruled by Romans and Byzantines, by Venetians and Turks for nearly 3000 years, all of whom conquered and enslaved the island, enriched it with their traditions by trampling down much of the ancient Greek history and pride. Maria, our waitress, advised me to visit the cloister of Arcadi, the national monument of Greece, to understand how great the desire of the Cretans was to be free and to live as upright people.

When I got to the cloister, I expected a peaceful place, but actually it has become a symbol for freedom, for sacrifice and pain. 1866 Crete was under Turkish rule. Many battles had weakened the Turks and the Cretans. Men, women and children had come to the cloister in need of shelter. One day it was clear that the Turks were coming closer, trying to retrieve their strength, conquering this piece of holy ground. The monks and the people hiding in the cloister made a desperate decision. All of them got together in a room with a load of gunpowder and blew the whole place up. Death was a better option than being oppressed by the enemy again.

When I got home from the cloister I had to think about this incident over and over again and asked our waitress whether it was really necessary to sacrifice all those lives for so-called freedom.

She answered in one short sentence, with this proud, upright look on her face that I will never forget. She said: After 3000 years of oppression, no desire was greater than the desire to be free. We never wanted to be slaves and we never wish to be enslaved again. The cloister of Arcadi will always remind us that God wants us to be free.

When I read the text for today's sermon, her words immediately came back to my mind and the story of Moses and the burning bush made me understand the striving for freedom even better.

Moses had seen his people being oppressed by the Egyptians his whole life. He himself was safe in the palace of the pharaoh, but he had heard about the stories of pain and exhaustion, of breaking bodies and souls, of hunger and thirst. He himself had seen an Egyptian guard beating an Israelite with a stick. Since nobody else came to help, Moses killed this guard and had to flee to the Sinai desert. There he settled down and married. He could have had a peaceful life there, if he hadn't heard the cries of his people, as the Egyptians worked them into the ground and beat them to death. Moses couldn't forget and God was no longer willing to watch his people suffering. This is where our story for today begins.

It's all about God's interference.

... about God's dream of freedom for his people.

... about God's vision of upright human beings, of justice and the end of oppression.

... about God's promise to walk with us on our path towards freedom.

God appears to Moses in the most powerful way I could imagine. Moses sees a bush that is on fire. The fire flickers and dances in all the colors of the rainbow. No smoke and ash is to be seen and strangely enough the flames are not destroying the bush, not even singeing it. The bush is alive, shining and glistening through the flames that are around it. It must have been the most beautiful thing that Moses had ever seen. Beautiful and yet terrifying. Moses is startled in the beginning but he loses his fear when he hears the peaceful, friendly voice of God telling him to come closer. "Take off your sandals!", the voice says. "For you are treading on holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. "

Moses must have been utterly amazed. But God continues to speak: "I have seen my people in Egypt, and heard their cries. I have seen their bent backs and the marks where they have been beaten. I have heard them crying out in anguish and moaning in the dark hours of the night. I have come to rescue them and take them to the Land I have promised them, a land flowing with milk and honey. I need your help. I am sending you to Egypt, to the pharaoh, to bring my people out of Egypt.

Let us pause here for a moment and see before us the dream that God has for his people. For all of his people. In all places and all times. For Moses and for us. For the Israelites and every people who is fighting for freedom and justice today.

God sees our pain and our suffering. He hears the cries, every prayer and every shout of anger. And he has a dream for us. He dreams that we may walk towards freedom hand in hand. He dreams that we may find the land where milk and honey are flowing. He dreams that our bent backs may be replaced by an upright posture. He dreams that we may shout for joy instead of crying out of anguish. The dream that God has for us consists of all the colors of the rainbow. Of sparkling flames that revitalize instead of destroying. Just like the burning bush, God's dream for us is a powerful sight, a symbol of hope and guidance in times of fear and despair. God makes his dream clear not only in his encounter with Moses in the desert. We can find it also in the New Testament, in the "Sermon on the mount" where Jesus puts God's vision and promise for his people in following words:

***"Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

***<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.***

***<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.***

***<sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.***

***<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.***

***<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.***

***<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.***

This is God's gift and God's promise for you. Take a moment to take it in. Let him speak to you through the burning bush and through Jesus's words of beatitude.

It's a dream that God has for you. No matter whether you come from a country where a free life is possible or not. In every life there comes a situation where we feel oppressed by bureaucracy, by bosses and officials, by partners, parents or children. By financial burdens or by a lot that we haven't chosen. Just the other day I had a very important telephone conversation with a stubborn, so-called powerful official who treated me like the stupidest person on earth... I felt like a worm, even on the phone. I would have found it easier to just hang up the phone and hide somewhere but at some point I just thought: "What gives you the right to treat me like this? Who are you, to misuse your power in such a horrible way... and all of the sudden I stood upright and my voice got stronger and more determined. In the end that guy had to admit that he had made a mistake... and I felt I had fought my dignity back.

God has a dream for you and for me. And his dream is not that we hide because we are not as strong, as rich, as powerful or as eloquent as we think we should be... in his eyes we are worth a whole lot and he loves us. That's why we can stand upright and hope for his support when we fight for our personal freedom and justice in the communities we live in. Because the good news is: The gift and the dream that God gives us is for us to hold, to cherish and to keep in mind. But we can also pass it on, like Moses did.

Just as Moses was called to make God's dream come true, we are called, too. Just as Moses thought he was too small, too weak, not meaningful or powerful enough, we might think the same.

But the truth is, that God's vision is for all of his people. And all of us can help to establish God's kingdom, God's vision of peace, freedom and justice in this world. Moses had a long way to go after his encounter with God in the desert and I'm sure he asked himself often why he had loaded this burden on his shoulders. But he kept on walking... step by step... with God's vision in his mind.

And many others have followed. Heroes in the Bible and great leaders like Martin Luther King in today's world... men and women who got set on fire by God's vision. Great men and women... but also people like you and me.

Have you been set on fire as well?  
What are your dreams of freedom and justice?  
How many steps have you walked on that path?  
Do you feel God's presence?

I can see part of God's vision becoming real when we stand around the altar for communion. A crowd from so many nations, with so many different life-stories and so many various dreams united by the bread and wine that we share. And in our midst is God's promise:  
Those who are weak will be strengthened.  
Those who are mourning are comforted.

Those who are hungry and thirsty are fed.

We are not alone. We stand hand in hand in line with those who have gone before us. In line with those who are celebrating communion in our home countries. In line with those who have passed away. And in line with those who are fighting for freedom and justice in so many places of the world today.

May God bless us through bread and wine. And may we experience that God is with us on our individual paths into freedom and our common fight for justice and peace.

I still am not sure whether God would want us to fight for freedom like the people in the cloister of Crete did. But I know that it is part of his dream to see us upright and proud, like the people I met in Rethymnon. May we think of them when we go into the next week. And may God's power enable us to keep our dignity, no matter what comes our way.

God is with us.

God strengthens us.

And God rescues us. Never forget that.

Amen.