

Exodus

Several decades ago, while the struggle for freedom for Africans was raging in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, came to Cincinnati. Some people here may have heard him speak. He is a small very black man, with more energy than his body seems able to hold. He said that when one people suppress another, the worst mistake they can make is to give them the Bible. The Dutch colonists had given the Africans the Bible, hoping it would make them turn the other cheek, carry their burdens an extra mile, and accept without protest everything the Dutch did to them. Instead, Archbishop Tutu said, the Africans read their Bibles and discovered the second book in the Bible is called Exodus, the story of a slave revolt instigated by God.

In our own country Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached and spoke about Exodus again and again during our struggle for civil rights in the 1960s. Because Dr. King based that struggle on the Bible, many white Americans, who would otherwise have opposed him, listened and changed their minds about our oppression of African Americans.

Thomas Breidenthal, the Episcopal Bishop of Southern Ohio, has asked all Episcopal clergy to preach on Exodus today at the beginning of a period of study and reflection on that long ago slave revolt in Egypt and the trek through the desert to the Promised Land in Israel. When we look at Exodus as the story of the enslavement and the liberation of a whole people, we will see that it is as alive and troubling today as it was during the Civil Rights movement and in South Africa.

The Exodus story began when a new pharaoh came to the throne who did not remember Joseph, who saved Egypt and his own family from a terrible famine by interpreting another pharaoh's dreams 400 years earlier. The dreams warned pharaoh and Joseph to store food during seven fat years of prosperity to prepare for the coming seven lean years of famine. During the famine, Joseph brought his father Jacob and his eleven brothers and their families to live with him in Egypt. At the beginning of Exodus the Egyptians have forgotten who saved them and are terrified that the Hebrews are about to overwhelm them.

Now we all know and love the story of baby Moses in the bulrushes, but I want to concentrate on what these first paragraphs in

Exodus tell us about oppression, race, and sex. Got your attention there, didn't I? The first thing they tell us is that oppressors are almost always a different race from the oppressed. The Egyptians are a different race from the Hebrews. Next Exodus tells us that the slave holders, the oppressors, are afraid of their slaves. Just listen to the new pharaoh "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Centuries earlier, God had promised Abraham that he would make him the father of many nations, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in heaven and the sands of the desert. Now that was coming to pass in Egypt. When we first meet this new pharaoh, the king of Egypt and one of the most powerful men in the world, he is afraid. Like so many slaveholders, he was afraid that his slaves were about to outnumber the Egyptians. No oppressor ever rests easy. Fear goes hand in hand with power.

Fear is a great motivator. First pharaoh tried to work the Hebrews so hard they wouldn't have time for sex. It wasn't just Pharaoh; all the Egyptians "became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor . . . But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites." All Egypt was afraid, and all Egypt joined in oppressing the Hebrews.

So Pharaoh decided to up the ante and deal with his too prolific slaves by killing their babies. He told the midwives, the women who would help other women give birth, to kill all the baby boys. The midwives, however, feared God and spared them. When pharaoh discovered that they hadn't been killing them, they made up a wonderful story: the Hebrew women were so strong they all had their children before the midwives could get to them. For Jewish readers and for us, this is a funny story; for pharaoh, it increased his anxiety and fear. Egypt was going to be overwhelmed by the superior sexuality of its slaves.

This fear of being swamped by slaves and immigrants is very real in our history and today, and it can produce the same fear that drove the Egyptians to murder babies. Slaveholders in the American South were afraid their African slaves would overwhelm them because they reproduced faster, so they mistreated and abused them even more. Ironically today's Israelis are afraid that the Palestinians may overwhelm them, because the Palestinians have a higher birth rate.

And what about immigrants in our country? Aren't some of us afraid that they will reproduce so fast we will be outnumbered? Instead of talking about how to incorporate them into our society, some people talk about driving them out and building a wall to keep them out. When we give in to fear, we become oppressors.

Exodus comes very close to naming the worst aspect of slavery, sexual exploitation, when pharaoh orders the boys to be killed and the girls spared. This would leave tens of thousands of Hebrew girls who would never be able to find a Hebrew husband. If we look at the family trees and DNA samples of some of those fine old southern families that lived in those beautiful mansions, we will find black and white

intermingled. The male owners of those mansions often had two families, one white and one black. Today's sex trafficking is often driven as much by race as by economic exploitation.

So pharaoh ordered all the Egyptians, not just the midwives, to take all the Hebrew baby boys and throw them into the Nile. Remember this when we get to the first Passover, when God killed the firstborn sons of all the Egyptians. He is doing to them what they did to his people's children.

Now we come to the story of the baby Moses, who pharaoh's daughter found in the bulrushes and saved. This tells us something else very important about slaveholders: they are not all killers. Pharaoh's daughter risked her father's anger or worse by disobeying his order and giving the baby to his mother to nurse. For Jewish readers and for us, it is funny or ironic that instead of losing her son, Moses' mother ended up being paid to nurse and care for him. As a result, the man whom God would use to free the Hebrews is brought up in pharaoh's own household. So Pharaoh's homicidal rage was thwarted - - in this one

case. But think about all the other cases, where the babies were thrown into the river and drowned.

Although we all loved this story as children, it may come a little too close to home now we are adults. If we are honest with ourselves, we can see in the behavior of pharaoh and the other Egyptians' the terrible things we can do when we, too, are afraid. Lurking behind our fears, perhaps even driving them is the God of the Exodus, who enters into Egyptian politics through Moses and even into our politics to force the liberation of his people. It can be very hard to discern where God is acting. We only have to be aware that he may be the one who is stirring everything up.

A last thought about Exodus. In Exodus and the Old Testament, salvation is almost always group salvation. Either all the Hebrews break out of Egypt and cross the Red Sea, or none of them do. Either all the people are saved or all are lost.

In our Christian faith and in our country, this sense that we are bound together as one people, where everyone must be saved, is often lost. The last time we were all together was during the Second World

War and for a short while after 9/11, when all of us were going to win or we were all going to lose. Some people today may think salvation is their personal possession, and it doesn't much matter whether anyone else is a part of God's kingdom. Once they have it, the rest of the world can go by. This is not the faith of the God of Exodus or the faith of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Christ died for everyone, the saved and the unsaved. He died for the slaves and for the slaveholders; he died for the oppressors and the oppressed. It is toward this faith and this God that the ancient Israelis struggled in Egypt and in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. God was not just freeing them so they could immigrate to Israel; he was freeing them so they could lead all people to him. This is what Christ did for us. So in our study of Exodus, let's keep in mind that we are all in this together. We can't afford to lose anyone. We can't give in to fear. We must all belong to Christ.

AMEN.