

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10
Matthew 16: 13-20

Psalm 124

Proper 16
August 27, 2017

Introduction to the Reading from Exodus

A new king arose who did not know Joseph ... This is where the story of freedom and formation begins. Though Joseph, through forethought and wise administration, saved Pharaoh and the Egyptian and many in the Near East and his own family from a devastating famine, a new pharaoh comes to power and is not aware or does not care about the descendants of Joseph who are in his land. This will not be the first time we listen to the story of Exodus and can easily move our reflection from that ancient time to our present time.

The descendants of Joseph are immigrants to Egypt. Foreigners. The exact name for them is Hapiru. For us the translation may be best rendered as “gypsies.” Thomas Cahill suggests that the name means “the dusty ones,” referring to their previous nomadic existence. They are also sheep herders which led them to live in a part of Egypt that fit their lifestyle, a lifestyle different from the majority of Egyptians.

Notice how in the reading difference leads to fear on the part of this new pharaoh and the Egyptian people. That fear leads to oppression and oppression leads to one of the first recorded instances of state sponsored genocide. In terms of the cruelty of ethnic cleansing and race hostilities is nothing new under the sun. What is new is how God acts the Hebrews respond, beginning with the midwives.

You will notice that the Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, lie straight to Pharaoh’s face about why they cannot implement his genocidal orders. As John Goldingay notes: The oppressed are under no obligation to tell the truth to their oppressors. In this story their obligation is first to God and the midwives set the stage for Moses to do the same.

History from below

Are the words I used in the introduction too inflammatory to be used in relation to a text from scripture? Words like gypsies, foreigners, genocide, ethnic cleansing and racial hatred. Am I making the text too contemporary? Or, when heard in this way,

does it highlight the contours of present day oppression in a way that is uncomfortable?

Howard Zinn, who has written *A People's History of the United States*, speaks of writing history *from below*. Rather than what we have come to expect, history as the actions and thoughts of great men, this is history from the point of view of those outside of power who experience mass movements and are often victims of fear the events caused by the decisions of the great and powerful.

Exodus is a religious account with many historical pieces that anchor the story. It is entirely written from the point of view of the oppressed, the outsiders. The great and powerful do not even get names in this story but the heroes of the oppressed do - Shiprah, Puah, Miriam, Moses, Aaron, Joshua.

Imagine

If this were 1857, the year of the Dred Scott decision, and we were slaves on a Southern plantation or a free black person in the North, I guarantee that we would hear the stories of Exodus much differently than we do now. That decision, rendered by the Supreme Court, ruled that Negroes could never be citizens of this country regardless of whether they were slaves or free. Politically the point was stop all the debate on abolition and move on. Instead it ratcheted up the debate and galvanized the opposition. But can you imagine how slaves on a southern plantation heard the verdict? Never? Freedom to be a citizen - never! What sustained them to wait in hope?

It is ironic that southern slave owners felt that their slaves were being domesticated to be better laborers by worshiping God and listening to the stories of the Bible while in fact what the slaves were hearing were stories of freedom and a God who acted in history to free the enslaved. Their hope was that the God that heard the cries of the Hebrews would hear their cries.

Can you imagine how the slaves hearing the deception of Shiprah and Puah, lying to Pharaoh straight-faced, would have chuckled to themselves at how easily the powerful are deceived? The powerful cannot imagine that their power will end. So IN CHURCH, the slaves are listening to a freedom that they strain to imagine and hope

for while their owners IN CHURCH bask in a power over the lives of other human beings that they do not think will ever be diminished.

The continuing song of the oppressed

Can you and I step into the story and hear it as a song of the oppressed? To hear it this way is to hear it resonate with Mary's song: *"God has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty. He has come to the help of his servant Israel ..."*

To hear this way is to remember how much an outsider Jesus was. When Peter proclaims what he does not fully understand: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" he is speaking about a very under-educated Jew from Galilee who is not a Pharisee, scribe or rabbi. He is from a part of Israel that was considered uncouth and polluted with too many Gentiles. As Nathaniel puts it in the Gospel of John: What good could come out of Nazareth? The family of Jesus is poor and of no account. Though we think of him as a carpenter he is probably not that kind of skilled worker. He is a "tekton" - a hand worker, a day laborer, more like the folks hanging around Lowe's or Home Depot than like a skilled carpenter. He was the kind of laborer that might have worked to build the colossal Roman cities like Sepphoris. He is not much different than his ancestors building the store cities of Egypt for the powerful Pharaoh.

The recent events in Charlottesville deserve our reflection because the kind of racial prejudice and violence on display that day speaks to an undercurrent in our country that is both un-American and un-Christian. I will not go into an exposition of outrage, though I am outraged. I am not going to parse or preach about the words of President Trump since. I am going to state what I think an exploration of Exodus says clearly: God is unwilling to tolerate this kind of racial hate. As we will hear as we read Exodus, God hears the cries of the oppressed and acts. God continues to hear the cries of the oppressed and continues to act.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa has showed us a modern incarnation of the Christian stance when it comes to this kind of hate and oppression. With provocative actions to dismantle apartheid and wise words about a God who can be counted on to overturn it, he preached peaceful resistance and instilled hope in the midst of a country on fire. When the fire was over and the people free, he presided over a Truth

Commission to publicize the atrocities and hold those who committed them accountable - though most were pardoned. This was so that a new society could be formed. Freedom followed by formation.

Freedom and formation is how our bishop summarizes the arc of the story told in Exodus. This does not have anything to do with political correctness. It has nothing to do with Republican or Democrat. It has nothing to do with liberal or conservative. It has to do with what God has shown himself to be - on the side of the oppressed.

Our call

Our collect summarizes our call: May the Church, gathered in unity, show the presence of God's power among all people. We show that power to the people of our world by being on the side of the oppressed, the outsiders, the ones our world ignores, the ones to whom Jesus focused his ministry - the least, the last and the lost. *This is what it means to glorify God, to show forth God's presence.*

Our problem is that if we are listening to Exodus and looking at world, it seems like such an enormous undertaking. It is impossible not to feel it like a burden and understand why Moses resisted this very call. Yet God told Moses: I am who I am and I will be with you. And God will be with us ... that was enough for the Hebrews, for the African American slaves, for the black people of South Africa and countless others.

God wins ... which means love wins over hate. There is nothing to fear ... for God is, and always has been, with us.

The Rev. Dr. George Glazier