

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16, Year A
St. Luke's Church
August 27, 2017 (Exodus kickoff)
Stephen H. Applegate

+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Exodus 2:5-6

Today, here at St. Luke's and throughout the Diocese of Southern Ohio, we start what our bishop, Tom Breidenthal, has called "The Big Read." We will be reading the book of Exodus – the story of how the God's people were freed from slavery in Egypt and began the long journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The stories and themes of Exodus have shaped the self-understanding of many different communities.

Think with me about some of these communities and what the Exodus story has meant to them. First, of course, are the people of Israel whose story this is. Every year, in the spring, Jews all over the world remember their deliverance from slavery when they sit down to the Passover meal. In the foods they eat – and don't eat – in the words they say, and in the stories they tell as they eat the meal – a liturgy called the Haggadah – they recall the bitterness of their enslavement, their deliverance from the seven plagues, and their escape from destruction through the waters of the Red Sea, an escape that had Pharaoh's chariots and armies following right on their heels, in full pursuit.

Then there are the early Christian communities, who saw Christ's death and resurrection as Jesus' own Exodus – St. Luke actually uses the word, "Exodus" in his Gospel to describe the passion and crucifixion of Jesus – and who saw their own deliverance from sin and death through the waters of baptism as foreshadowed in the escape of God's people through the Red Sea waters. We inheritors of those early Christian communities remember this connection to Exodus every Sunday when we gather around this table to remember the Last Supper – a supper that originally took place during a Passover meal in Jerusalem where Jesus and his disciples gathered in the Upper Room to recall the deliverance of their ancestors with all the others who had gathered in the Holy City.

We recall this connection most fully when the priest takes a piece of Unleavened Bread, breaks it, and proclaims, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us," to which we all respond, "Therefore, let us keep the feast."

From these powerful stories and symbols, our self-understanding as Americans has been shaped. Scott Langston of the Society of Biblical Literature, in a piece he wrote to help teachers teach the Bible in public school, writes, "Americans have used the exodus story for a variety of causes, but three in particular – the American Revolution (1776-83), the Civil War (1861-65), and the modern Civil Rights Movement (1940s-1970s) – illustrate common ways they have interacted with it.

“A couple of months after American colonists declared their independence from Great Britain, a committee composed of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams proposed a design for a national seal. It portrayed the Egyptian pharaoh leading his troops through a divided Red Sea in pursuit of the fleeing Israelites. Surrounding this scene were the words, “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.” Although the Continental Congress ultimately did not embrace their suggestion, it illustrates a common use of the exodus: to validate and rally groups that are confronting a stronger foe.”

Langston continues, “While slaves sang their spirituals in opposition to southern slavery, southerners heralded the South in songs such as “The Happy Land of Canaan” and poems like Henry Timrod’s, “Ethnogenesis,” expressing confidence that God would raise up a Moses to deliver them from northern tyranny. Other southerners, like the Presbyterian minister Benjamin Morgan Palmer, asserted that “the heart of our modern Pharaoh is hardened,” referring to Abraham Lincoln’s efforts to prevent southern states from leaving the Union. Northerners countered with songs like “Our Lincoln’s Act Immortal,” casting Lincoln as a modern Moses.

“After the Civil War, Americans continued using the exodus. It, for instance, appeared prominently during the modern Civil Rights movement, especially in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speeches. In 1954, he compared the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision to desegregate public schools to the Red Sea’s parting. Expressing sentiments similar to those found on the proposed national seal, King said, ‘Evil in the form of injustice and exploitation cannot survive.’ [And, in his last speech – his ‘I’ve been to the mountaintop’ speech – King ended it with words that explicitly recalled the Exodus, ‘Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!’]

“Less well known,” Langston goes on to say, “is Malcolm X’s 1971 declaration that white America was a “modern American House of Bondage” destined to experience the same fate as the Egyptians. He identified the Nation of Islam’s leader, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, with Moses, something many white Americans found unthinkable.”

I recount all this history to remind us what an important story this is for Americans – even those who are not religious, and why this story is one we Christians especially should know well. So, let’s begin with the story we have today from the opening chapters of Exodus. Because it is the beginning of the story. But before we do, let’s remind ourselves of what had happened at the end of the Book of Genesis. Let’s take a look at what movie producers like to call “the prequel.”

When the curtain falls on the Book of Genesis, the Israelites were prospering in Egypt through the exalted position of Joseph, Abraham’s great-grandchild, and Jacob’s favored son. All was well. But the Israelites are about to learn a very important lesson: nothing is forever.

Here is the way our passage opens this morning: “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” Opening lines in Hebrew stories are frequently loaded with meaning, but like opening lines of all stories, they can easily be overlooked. Because Hebrew is an economical language – it says things in about half the words we use to say the same things in

English. So, in just three words, the author of today's story lets his audience know that the fortunes of the people of Israel are about to take an ominous turn.

The question an active listener ought to be asking is, "What does this mean for the Hebrews? How will this new king treat Jacob's descendants – people who are immigrants, and who have contributed to Egyptian society in significant ways?"

If we're listening carefully to the storyteller, we can hear the foreshadowing or, maybe better the foreboding, that's the line about how this particular king "did not know Joseph." The author doesn't mean "know" literally because Joseph has already been dead for a long time, and several generations have passed since his death. What the author is saying is that the new king didn't remember Joseph's role in keeping the Egyptians alive during a time of famine – didn't remember that there would be no Egyptians if it hadn't been for a Jew. Or perhaps the new king simply chose to ignore this important piece of history. People do that all the time, it seems to me, and they are still "forgetting" history. In the case of this king, we don't have to wait long to find out what his "forgetting" history means for the Israelite immigrant population. It means trouble.

Here's what Pharaoh says: "There are way too many of these Israelites for us to handle. We've got to do something: Let's devise a plan to contain them, lest if there's a war they should join our enemies, or just walk off and leave us." What Pharaoh says is not true, of course, but facts are not necessary when one is trying to rouse people against those one wants to categorize as enemies. The Jews have not become more numerous than the Egyptians, but Pharaoh is trying to create an "enemy within" – a strategy that he hopes will stir up his own people's fear against the foreign or immigrant "other."

And once he's got that idea planted in people's minds, he wastes no time in putting a plan together to deal with the identified "danger" in their midst. The plan has three parts. The first part is to organize the Hebrews into work-gangs and put them to hard labor under gang-foremen. But working the Israelite people into the ground is not enough. As Martin Luther King said about Bull Connor, "He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about." In other words, God had a plan to thwart Pharaoh's plan to work the Jews to death.

So, Pharaoh went back to the plan and to part two. He takes a step to ensure the ultimate destruction of the Israelites. He asks the Hebrew midwives to kill every baby boy that they deliver to Hebrew mothers. But Pharaoh hasn't counted on something. He hasn't counted on the fact that the midwives might say "no." He hasn't foreseen the beginnings of resistance to him. When he finds out that the midwives are not killing the boy babies, he calls them on the carpet to explain themselves, whereupon the two women respond by playing to Pharaoh's own stereotypes about immigrants and their breeding habits. Their explanation is so convincing that Pharaoh accepts it.

So, he went back to the plan one last time. This time, he won't rely on taskmasters, or midwives. Instead he tries to co-opt all the Egyptians in his nefarious genocidal scheme. Up against it, the author of Exodus focuses our attention on one Hebrew family affected by all this – a husband and wife of the tribe of Levi – the tribe set apart from all the other tribes to perform the priestly function in the community. The wife gives birth to a baby boy. She hides him for as long as she can. And then, unable to hide her son any longer, puts him in a basket – the Hebrew

word is the same word as the word “ark” in the story of Noah’s ark – and sets him afloat on the waters of chaos in hopes that God will somehow deliver him. The boy’s older sister – who is not in danger because girls are often spared in genocides for reasons we can all imagine – follows the ark as it floats gently down the Nile River right into the spot where another woman – this time the daughter of Pharaoh himself has come to bathe.

The rest, as they say, is history. Three women who are at the heart of the resistance – the boy’s mother, the boy’s sister, and Pharaoh’s daughter, save Moses from certain death, and Moses, as we will see in the coming weeks, leads his people from slavery in Egypt to freedom and new life.

What might we do in response to what we have heard today? Well, first and foremost, I hope you will read Exodus with me and with the rest of the parish, and the rest of the Diocese of Southern Ohio. The value of a “Big Read” where a community tackles a single piece of literature together can be extraordinarily powerful in the life of that community. Wayne Piper has collected resources and put them in the Narthex to help you do that. We have or will posted this same information on the parish website. And, even without the resources we’ve been provided, there’s absolutely nothing to prevent any of us from picking up a Bible, blowing the dust off of it, and reading Exodus for ourselves. It’s the second book of the Bible, so it won’t take much effort to find it. You know that I have been talking about our becoming more biblically literate ever since I arrived 14 years ago, and I am not about to stop encouraging you to read it just because I am leaving in four weeks.

Second, as I wrote in the August newsletter (you all read it, didn’t you?): there’s a reason to read Exodus that’s particular to St. Luke’s now in the life of the parish. St. Luke’s – as we all know – is in transition. One of the stories of organizations – and leaders of organizations – who have successfully managed transitions is the Book of Exodus. William Bridges, Ph.D., who literally “wrote the book” on transitions – a book called *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes* – says that there is “one management classic that provides an excellent account of a leader’s successful transition-management project. It is the Old Testament book of Exodus, and the leader is Moses. It should be studied by anyone interested in how to lead a group of people from an old way of doing things to a new way.” That’s what will happen here. Sometime after I leave, a transition priest will come who will help lead St. Luke’s through the transition. But that person’s leadership will not be enough. Members of the Vestry, those who will be selected to serve on the Search Committee, committee and organization chairs – anyone who leads here will want to know the story of Exodus. And since even those of us who simply show up Sunday by Sunday are leaders, too, we should all read it.

Here’s the final reason: Exodus is just a great story. Moses and the bulrushes. The Burning Bush, the plagues of toad and flies and rivers turning to blood, the first Passover, the deliverance at the sea, manna and quails, the Ten Commandments. I could go on and on.

So, as you are reading the latest Sandra Brown or James Patterson novel, or *The Woman in Cabin 10*, or, *The Game of Thrones*, plan on including a story about the battle between two of the greatest kings of the Ancient Near East – the king we know as Pharaoh, who represents all the rulers who oppress and subjugate and enslave, and the King we know as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – the God who is forever setting people free.

Amen.