

Pentecost Proper 16A
Peace, Seattle
August 27, 2017
Exodus 1:8-2:10, Romans 12:1-8

THE WAY FORWARD

As far as Sunday school stories go, it's a favorite. Who can resist the tale of baby Moses who, at the tender age of 3 months, is swaddled and packed into a waterproof basket by his mother, and set afloat in the Nile?

Somehow, the basket manages to steer clear of the Nile's infamous crocodiles, and ends up getting the attention of Pharaoh's daughter—who takes the baby into her home and raises him as her own.

Chances are, if you only know a handful of stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, this is one of them.

But there's a lot more here than meets the eye. As Exodus begins, a new chapter—a dangerous chapter—in the saga of God's people has begun; and much hangs in the balance.

The book of Genesis traced God's promise to Abraham from one generation to the next, telling us the story of how, through Joseph's exile and subsequent rise to power in Egypt, Jacob's entire clan found its way to Egypt when famine threatened. As Genesis ended, Joseph's brothers reconcile with the one they'd sold into slavery, and find themselves under Joseph's protection and Pharaoh's benevolent wings.

But as Exodus begins, something shifts, and everything changes for God's people.

How many of you watched the eclipse last week? Wasn't it awesome!

Our family hung out at the Museum of Flight for the morning, using those special glasses and Ritz crackers to follow the progress of the eclipse throughout the morning.

In the museum theater they were livestreaming the eclipse from totality zones in Salem and Madras, and I found myself running between the screen on the inside and the patio outside throughout the morning.

I'll never forget stepping outside when the eclipse reached about 25%, and experiencing for the first time that the air was noticeably cooler, the shadows were more distinct, and the color and quality of the light itself had changed.

There was no denying it—something fundamental had shifted last Monday.

**We feel a similar kind of existential shift taking place in chapter 1 of Exodus when we read:
THERE AROSE A NEW KING WHO KNEW NOT JOSEPH.**

Something fundamental has changed.

Overnight, the Hebrew people, who once had favored status in Egyptian society, are no longer seen as allies or assets; they are now enemies. They've become, in the eyes of the Empire, ALIEN OTHERS; objects of fear and suspicion; subjects of racial profiling.

This new Pharaoh is determined to grind them down through forced labor, through dehumanization and oppression of every imaginable kind, until—in his eyes—they are no longer a threat.

The problem is, once you define a particular class of people as a threat, it's nearly impossible to see them in any other way—unless or until they are totally eradicated.

One of the things our family truly relished during our long road trip this summer was listening to a recorded version of THE BOYS IN THE BOAT.¹ If you haven't read or heard that book yet, you're in for a treat.

As author Daniel James Brown narrates the story of the UW crew team that won the US National title and then went on to compete with the world in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, he does a masterful job sharing the backstory of team members, orienting the reader to both the technical and philosophical aspects of rowing, and taking you inside Nazi Germany in the years leading up to the Berlin Olympics.

The NAZI rise to power in 1930's Germany was attended by the development of a state sponsored propaganda machine the likes of which the world had never seen.

Two central features of that propagandist strategy under Joseph Goebbels was the MYTH OF ARYAN SUPREMACY, at one end of the spectrum; and the CREATION OF A COMMON ENEMY at the other. An enemy was needed, one near at hand, who could be used to feed popular resentment and mobilize the masses; a TARGET on which Germany's frustration over past failures could be projected.

That target, that enemy, was “the Jews.”

In reading today's story from Exodus 1, I can't but wonder if Joseph Goebbels didn't borrow a page from Pharaoh's propagandist playbook.

Pharaoh employs every means at his disposal to systematically target and oppress the Israelite people and reduce their numbers, but nothing he does seems to work.

Two of the heroes that emerge from this story are the midwives—Shiphrah and Puah—who counter Pharaoh's genocidal plans with their own clever acts of civil disobedience. It's their courage under fire that enables the survival of one particular boy child who will become the central character in this new drama—a boy named MOSES.

Where is God in all this, the story asks? God is on the side of the oppressed, the targeted, the alien, the scapegoat. And God is able, like those midwives, to work behind the scenes, under dire circumstances, so that the Divine story of blessing and—ultimately—liberation is not denied.

Interwoven throughout the covenant which God will make with the Hebrew children after their liberation from Egyptian slavery is specific language designed to help Israel forever remember what it was like to live in a foreign land as unwanted aliens and second class non-citizens. One example from Leviticus 19 gets to the heart of the matter:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 19:33-34)

¹ Daniel James Brown. *The Boys in the Boat*. (New York: Viking Penguin, 2013)

- So, this morning, we watch as the mother sets the child afloat among the Nile's reeds, while his older sister keeps watch.
- And we see how Pharaoh's daughter—despite her father's decree—has compassion for the baby,
- And we revel in the irony when the child's own mother becomes his nursemaid—with salary and benefits to boot!

We marvel at the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who makes a way when there is no way.

Yes, this opening chapter of Exodus has much more going for it than a happy ending.

It's an argument for social resistance in the face of any propaganda, ancient or contemporary, which suggests that one nation, one race, one ethnicity, one people, one religion, has the right to denigrate, dehumanize, or enslave another.

When we move from Exodus to Romans, we find St. Paul picking up on the theme.

Planting the seed of the gospel while under the thumb of Rome's Empire is no job for the timid. In the face of overwhelming odds and fierce opposition from cultural institutions of every kind, Paul tells the Christians of Rome to resist being dragged down to the culture's level of immaturity and to embrace instead the call to mature living which comes from following in the footsteps of Christ Jesus.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Just how are we to do that? Eugene Peterson's translation here puts it in terms we can understand. Chapter 12, verse 1:

Here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering...Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out...²

Living as we do at a hinge point in the history of democracy, at a time when fear of the other is on the rise and many of the institutions and values we take for granted are being called into question, we are called to focus our attention, our decisions, our conduct on our interactions with the people we encounter each day. To take our everyday, ordinary lives and place them before God as offerings.

It's not that we don't engage in the issues on a larger scale—we can't afford not to—but we begin each day with a personal, internal commitment to treat other human beings with forbearance, dignity and respect; to do what's within our power to restore sanity and civility.

Practicing our faith isn't about being "holier than thou"—the truth is we often fail to live up to our commitments. But we keep on seeking to pattern our lives after the life of him who said, WHOEVER WOULD BE GREAT AMONG YOU MUST BE YOUR SERVANT, AND WHOEVER WOULD BE FIRST AMONG YOU MUST BE SLAVE OF ALL...

When the world seems to be devolving into a series of armed camps, Jesus calls us to be the kind of people, the kind of families, and the kind of congregation, which stands up to the world's immaturity—not by fighting fire with fire, not through belligerence and incivility, but with tenacious and purposeful acts of kindness and demonstrations of compassion that conform our methods to those of our Lord.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 1993) p. 236-387.

Coming to the Table offers us a fresh beginning on that mission for this coming week. For Christ, as host and meal, meets us here with his own self, and we become the body of Christ for the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.