

Exodus 1:8-15
Romans 12:1-8
21 August 2011

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“Enslaved, Imprisoned, Empowered?”

My 30-year high school class reunion was last night. Lots of hard work and tracking down people brought almost half of our class together in one place. All in all it was a good time. There were some people there that I had not seen in 30 years. Talking with so many of them, some of whom were not always the nicest people, I realized how time and life's struggle brings all of us to a common level.

Life struggles are what our lessons encompass this morning. We get to face slavery and oppression with the Hebrews. We sit in prison with Paul. Both echo problems still facing so many places in our world today. How do we not get discouraged? Especially when there is loss, and sadness, and anxiety and fear right here at home?

That question is actually answered by our readings as well. At the opening of Exodus, you find a short genealogy as well as evidence that God has kept the promises made to Abraham. The people have grown and prospered. Indeed, they've become a great multitude, right down through the good works of Joseph in Egypt. The problem comes with the “king who arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.”

This Pharaoh is fearful of what he sees as a rapidly expanding minority that could become a threat. As we all know, fear of others – especially unknown quantities - can be a strong unifying call to power. “What Genesis describes as God's faithfulness in blessing the Israelites through many descendants (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6; 28:1-4; Exodus 1:7), Pharaoh describes as a terroristic threat that may endanger Egypt's security and way of life.” (D.Olson)

There is always more than one side to a story. And as I said in last weeks' sermon, it is all in the perspective we take. This is a timeless tale sadly, for, in countless nations, for countless generations, fear of the loss of power has driven leaders to oppress. What would have happened if this new leader got to know the people he was leading? This question is a critique of an ancient leadership style as well as a very timely point to ponder in our day.

There is an irony in this story as well. The more Pharaoh comes down on the Hebrews, the more crafty – and more widespread – they become. Oppression has a unifying effect instead of decimating and weakening the population. What we can see from this distance is that there is another power at work here. Though it is not obvious in our lesson today, we know that God will have the final word. “Pharaoh may think that he is in control. But as the story of exodus unfolds, [there is a constant reminder] that God alone is ultimately Judge, Lord and Savior.” (D. Olson)

In this day and age, we get news quickly about what is happening in other parts of the world. I know I find myself asking, “when will it ever end?” How about you? The apostle Paul has something to say about that. When did Paul ever pass up an opportunity to preach? His situation has become dire, as he is in prison. Instead of languishing and saying “woe is me,” Paul uses his experience as a “living sacrifice” to teach all of us.

Since the opening of the letter to the Romans, Paul has been encouraging people of faith to be authentic followers of the gospel. Some things on his list are that we seek to live holy lives and put God first. To be authentic is to face whatever hardships we have with hope in the love that God has for us. What this means, in essence, is to “not be conformed to the world” - to not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. Paul wants Christians to be counter-cultural...or as Martin Luther King says, to be “maladjusted believers.”

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (NIV) ‘In his sermon from the book, *Strength to Love*, King captured this powerful text in just two unforgettable words...: transformed nonconformity.

“King observes how the pressures for cultural conformity, to “condition our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo,” are immense . . . We should never abandon the world, nor should we embrace it. We must make history, says King, and not be shaped by history.”

“King says something very similar: ‘There are some things in our world to which men [sic] of goodwill must be maladjusted. I confess that I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination, to the moral degeneracy of religious bigotry and the corroding effects of narrow sectarianism, to economic conditions that deprive men [sic] of work and food, and to the insanities of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence.’ Christian non-conformity, in other words, has a specific direction.” That direction is justice.

“‘Hope for our world’ King says, ‘rests in creatively and positively maladjusted believers. (D. Clendenin) Like the Hebrews, and like Paul, we can be empowered in the midst of struggle to work for justice, even in the smallest ways. In order to face whatever challenge life brings, strength and that hope that King refers to, grows when we come together, pray together, and share our burdens. It is not easy to be able to step back and get a wider perspective of what each of us go through. That is where our community comes in. If we are fortunate, there is another who has borne the same pain, walked the same path, who can help us see through the eyes of experience – though it may not be evident at the time - that there is divine power at work here.

The story of the Israelites, the preaching of Paul, they are here to remind us of what has gone on before. They are also here to remind us that indeed the Spirit of God is working, however quietly or behind the scenes. The Spirit of God is working, speaking, and calling us – to heal, to

be courageous, to love, and to live, so that all – including ourselves - might have life abundantly. Amen.

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Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself by Dan Clendenin, posted 18 August 2008