

Today we continue our series on Exodus and we come to a long series of passages which raise lots of questions that I am not sure we have very good and satisfying answers for. I started this series on Exodus because Exodus is included in the common lectionary. The common lectionary includes passages of Scripture which are chosen and assigned to each Sunday of the year. The hope for pastors and congregations is that the lectionary challenges us to explore a wide range of passages and not always settle on favorites.

Some passages in Exodus are chosen for this time of the year but the stories we are going to read this morning did not make it into the lectionary. The lectionary skips from the story of Moses receiving instruction through a burning bush to leading the Israelites out of slavery to the story of the Israelites being given instruction to celebrate the Passover. Nothing is included about the plagues that happen in between. And I wonder if the reason the lectionary leaves out Exodus 5-11 is because this passage raises lots of questions which we may not like to ask. This passage portrays an image of God which may not fit with the way we want God to be.

This passage is long. But it is a story. If you think you are familiar with this story, I hope you will listen in a way that will allow God's Spirit to speak fresh to you. If you are not familiar with this story, I hope it will challenge and raise questions for you that you will continue to struggle over.

Exodus 5: 1- 6:13

6:14-25 -summary of the leaders of the tribes of Israelites

Exodus 6: 26 – 7:7

There are a couple of observations I have about this text. The first observation is that this text highlights a power struggle between Pharaoh and God. On the one hand, we have the earthly power of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the king of Egypt and had all of the power to direct what happened around him. And Pharaoh makes it quite clear that he does not want his slaves giving allegiance to anything that can trump him.

All that the Israelite slaves ask for is some time off from their work to go and worship Yahweh God. They don't ask to be emancipated. All they ask for is the ability to worship Yahweh God. But Pharaoh sees this as a threat. Pharaoh believes that if they submit to the will of God, then these people are denying his authority.

He wants the Israelites and everyone around him to be clear that he is the most powerful thing around and everyone should look to him for their authority. Because if they turn to Yahweh God and worship God first, then they just might look at their human condition and want to change it. And Pharaoh does not want them to challenge their human condition. Pharaoh wants the Israelites to remain submissive to him. Worship of God can be a dangerous thing.

But in so many of our churches we have tamed worship. How many times have you been in a worship service and felt like you were challenged to change something about yourself? How many times have you been in a worship service and felt like you were challenged to change something in the culture around you?

Sheila and I were in a wonderful conversation on Friday with Thelma Gordon, the pastor at Liberty Hill AMEZ Church. As most of us know, our congregation, and her congregation and New Home AMEZ Church gathered to worship and fellowship together in early August. The three of us met to talk about what God is calling us to do next. And what was very clear in our conversation is that we believe that God is calling our congregations to make a difference in our community by coming together and doing ministry together.

That our diverse congregations can give witness to this community that Christians of different races and denominational affiliations have an important message to give to the community. That together we are better than when we are separate.

And that witness of coming together with other Christian communities is a calling that some have fully embraced while others of us are not so sure. But when diverse Christians come together and do ministry together, we give witness to a Christian unity that is contrary to what the pharaohs of our culture are working toward. Because I hear a lot in the political arena and in the school environment and in our workplaces that seem to try to push us apart. But whenever God's people work together to accomplish ministry together then we too are truly experiencing the freedom that only Christ gives. That is what it means to stand up to pharaoh and say, "let my people go."

But if this story from the Bible has anything to teach us and I believe it does, then we should be prepared for push back from pharaoh. Push back that attempts to keep us separated. I am always concerned whenever I hear about a church that splits apart. I know that our church has our own history in that regard. And many of us know that our own denomination is facing some fractions right now.

But it seems to me that whenever Christians find ways to overcome our differences and work together to accomplish God's will and spread God's good news in the world together that we are fighting against the pharaohs of the world. When we push back against the pharaohs then we are following the faithful footsteps of Moses.

There is a second part of this story that has always bothered me and I don't have a good answer for. The part of this story about how God is the one who harden's pharaoh's heart. Why would the text say that? Why does the narrator tell us that God is the one who leads pharaoh to deny God's people their freedom? Why does the narrator tell us that God hardens pharaoh's heart which leads to God bringing all of these plagues upon the Egyptian people?

And why in the end of this story is God the one who causes death to the first born of the Egyptian people? Many of these same people are innocent bystanders to the greed and self-centeredness of their ruler.

I don't have an answer to that second point. I don't like the way God is presented here. I don't like that God is the one who initiates someone to oppose God's will and I don't like that God is the one who kills innocent babies.

I am not going to defend God nor can I offer a reasonable answer. But I will say this. It is clear that God is in the business of liberating people who are trapped and oppressed. So what does that mean today? Some of us are trapped by our own sins and our own life situations. Maybe you are struggling with some temptation and you cannot seem to defeat it. And you feel weak and embarrassed and broken. God is in the business of liberation. God's desire is for us to break free from those temptations and burdens.

But God is also on the side of liberating people who are held down by oppressive rulers. This week in Georgia a man named Troy Davis is scheduled to be executed even though almost all of the witnesses have recanted their stories and believe that he is not the one murderer. God is on the side of the innocent and calls us to be on the side of the innocent and beaten down.

It's a good thing to be in worship today. I hope that you and I will be inspired from this story to challenge those that seek to divide. I hope that you and are tap into the same strength of God and work to overcome pharaoh and overcome our own temptations.

And I hope that you and I will do whatever we can to stand with those who are held down for whatever reason.

God's love yearns for us to share our faith and lead one another to freedom.

AMEN.

---

-Text: Exodus 5-11

-Given: Sept. 18, 2011 in Allison Creek Pres (York, SC)