

February 14, 2016

Exodus 2.1-10

Exodus 2.11-25

We have entered our Lenten journey again for another year. We enter into this time of reflection, journeying towards Holy Week, towards the joy of our promised hope on Easter morning. But between then and now lies forty days of self-examination, forty days of reflection, and forty days of wandering. But we do not wander alone, we wander with our God as He leads on ahead of us. He leads ahead of us as we journey through the desert season of Lent. This Lent, we will follow Moses and the Israelites through oppressive and dehumanizing slavery, through barren deserts, through uncertainty and doubt. Allowing God's Word to call us away from our fleshpots and see where God's Word is leading us, as individuals, and as a Church which is created, nourished, sustained and led by the work of Jesus Christ.

Chapter one of the book of Exodus, paints a scene for us of the life that the Israelites were living. A new king who did not know Joseph, rose to power over Egypt. And this king said to his people, the Israelites, who do not look like us, who do not act like us, who do not worship like us at all, who worship an alien God, they are numerous, and more powerful than we are. They are so different that if our enemies invade, they will surely join our enemies and fight against us. And we learn here that this really is the oldest political maneuver in the book, this new king, this unestablished king who needs to sure up his authority creates a common enemy within his new kingdom. An enemy which everyone can easily identify, an enemy who is outwardly different and is a threat to our way of life. And this is the oldest political maneuver because it works, especially when you have solutions at the ready. Even if the Israelites do not

rise up against the Egyptians, their numbers are a threat to the Egyptian culture and religion. But the new king has a plan to make Egypt great again.

The first plan the new king had for the Israelites was to enslave them, to oppress them with hard labor and harsh taskmasters. Out of fear, the Egyptians approved of plans which were unjust, even by ancient standards. In their slavery the Israelites built supply cities for the Pharaoh, but the more they were oppressed the more they multiplied and spread across the lands. Pharaoh did not get the outcome he wanted and the more the Egyptians saw how those they oppressed multiplied, the more they dreaded them. Even though they toil in bitterness, they continue to grow. Even while placed in brutal service they continue to defy their ruthless taskmasters by continuing, their very act of survival is a rebellion against those who enslaved them. They continue to survive, continue to proclaim their hope by just continuing to bring life into the world, even as their lives become increasingly hopeless. In response to the people and their hope which just wouldn't die the Egyptians became ruthless, and made the lives of those they had enslaved bitter with hard service. The common enemy that the new king rallied his people around, was dehumanized, no longer treated as people. In trying to devoid the Israelites of their humanity, the Egyptians are the ones who become more and more inhuman. They continue to be transformed from merciless taskmasters to monstrous oppressors.

But not to worry the Pharaoh has another plan up his sleeve, or maybe in his funny hat. He decides that enslaving and attempting to squeeze the life out of, and crush the hope out of this people under hard labor is not having the results he wants. He is not exactly looking as effective as he was hoping in rallying the Egyptians against the Hebrews. So he decides it's time for a more direct approach. So he summoned the Hebrew midwives and told to kill all of the male children born. But the midwives did not do as Pharaoh commanded, instead they let the boys

live. As much as Pharaoh is worried about the boys threatening Egypt, it is the women who have the most active role in undermining him, making sure his plans come to nothing. Pharaoh took notice of their rebellion against his commands, and he summoned them again, demanding they answer for all of these living Hebrew boys. And I love their answer to him, they tell him that the Hebrew women are just more vigorous than the Egyptian women and they give birth before the midwives get there. Pharaoh seems to accept this as an answer and the Hebrews continued to multiply and grow strong. Pharaoh has one final plan, he tells his people that every time a Hebrew boy is born, they will be thrown into Nile.

And that is when we find the first act of obedience to the Pharaoh's command. We enter our reading upon nameless, faceless Israelites, who married and conceived a child. When the wife bore a son she placed him in the river, Moses the Hebrew boy is put into the river, as Pharaoh commanded. Moses, born to a people who Pharaoh hoped to crush under oppression and destroy through infanticide, is thrown into the river, but not how Pharaoh expected. Pharaoh who is so concerned about the Hebrew men, is undermined by a pair of midwives, a Levite woman, her daughter, and Pharaoh's daughter. Those actively rebelling against Pharaoh were those he was least expecting, those taking a stand against him, are women, a few poor and belittled Hebrew women, and his own relative. It is their acts of rebellion, which Pharaoh was least expecting, these overlooked and unassuming women, that is about to have results beyond what they could imagine.

What makes this text so interesting is that God is barely mentioned within these first two chapters, aside from giving the midwives families. And likewise, God seems to have absent from this sermon, what kind of sermon is this? God is seemingly absent from the suffering of His people. God seems to have turned a blind eye, allowing them to wallow in servitude for

generations, allowing them to be crushed under the whip of their ruthless taskmasters. There have been a number of attempts to explain these opening chapters, to explain where God is in the suffering of his people, as they are beaten and their children are taken from them to be thrown into Nile. I had a professor in college who was a rabbi, named Rabbi Ostrich, a Louisiana rabbi who always wore a white suit. He explained this text can be seen as God waiting for His people to get to a point of hopelessness, when they would be drawn back to God. Only then would God listen to their cries, which the end of the chapter seems to support. That's terrible! That's not good news!

But if we believe that, then God is merely waiting on the side, letting His people be tortured and broken until there is nothing left. And as much as we may be able to look at this text and find that convincing, or look to our own lives and think that God is waiting until we are worn out. I don't think that is what the text is trying to tell us. The Hebrews were a people oppressed but they continued to get married, they continued to have children, they continued to have hope, looking towards a future out from under the plans of the Pharaoh. They continued to act against Pharaoh by just surviving, just living one more day. Even when we could look on their situation and wonder why they did not just give up. The people we find in the text are people struggling under their slavery but they are also people who are waiting, hoping for God to act. They are not people who are wandering through the bitter desert of their enslavement, believing that they have been abandoned. While we may not see God moving, while the author may not tell us the actions of God within these first two chapters, as we look ahead, with the Hebrews, we see God's plan coming to shape, a plan which is laid out even in these first two chapters. A plan which is creating something big out of the small acts of a few women. A plan which honors their

suffering, even as it seems that God has gone silent, even as it seems that these characters are acting independently, blindly trying to find their way.

The text jumps ahead and we next encounter Moses grown. Moses, grew up among the people who ruthlessly oppressed his people. Moses grew up witnessing atrocities and injustices. Plans which tainted both those who were oppressed and the oppressors. Sins which affected both the oppressed and the oppressors. Moses was raised within a system of injustice against foreigners and aliens, a culture of fear. And this is the man who God is going to use. After Moses had grown he went out among his people. Moses saw their forced labor, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses looked this way and that to see that it was clear, and he killed the Egyptian, burying him in the sand. Moses, knowing what it could cost him to act, enacted just judgment between someone who was kin and someone who was alien to him. The next day Moses went out again and saw two Hebrews fighting. When he intervened, the Hebrews responded by asking who made him ruler and judge over them, and if he would kill them as he killed the Egyptian. Moses could have simply left these Hebrews continue fighting, but he acted as gracious judge between his people.

God's plan for Moses, was going to throw him into leadership, leadership which we can already tell is going to look very different from the leadership he had seen in Egypt. Justice which is going to look very different from the injustice he knew. When Pharaoh heard about what had happened, he wanted to kill Moses, but Moses fled into the land of Midian. And while at a well, Moses encountered shepherd taking advantage of seven shepherdesses, taking the water they had drawn for their flock. Moses went to the defense of the shepherdesses and watered their flocks, replacing what had been lost. And with that Moses acted justly with those who were alien to him in an alien land. God's plan for Moses was for him to be a source of

justice, not only for those like him but also those who were not like him. God's plan for His people, was to have them led, not by a continuing cycle of injustice but by God's own reconciling justice. Led by someone not still bound to that same system. God's plan for Moses, for His people, was to lead them through the desert, not blindly, but led by God's justice, God's grace.

When we close the chapter, we are told the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites cried out under their slavery. God heard their groaning, and God took notice of them, but God had never stopped taking notice of his people. God heard all of the cries of His people, He heard all of the cries of those beaten and broken, He heard all of the cries of the mother's mourning their children. God was always leading them out of their oppression, out of their injustice God was always leading them towards His justice. God was always leading them towards a world unlike the one they knew, but it is only now that we can see it. God is always hearing your cries, even the ones you have not made aloud. As we enter Lent, wandering with the Israelites, we go out knowing that God hears our cries, knowing that even in small acts, God is working towards something incredible. We reflect upon ourselves as those who are oppressed and the oppressors, shaped and changed by the sin of these relationships. We examine our own lives and ask that God come into our world, and grant us justice not only for those like us, but those who are alien to us, living in a foreign land. We pray that God will grant us His peace, which can heal the wounds we have inflicted on one another, old wounds, wounds which continue to reopen. Wounds which are healed through the wounds of Christ.