

“Something to Think About”
Rev. Bill Gause ♦ Overbrook Presbyterian Church
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time ♦ September 6, 2020

Scripture: Exodus 12:1-14, NRSV

¹The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. ¹²For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.



Sermon: “Something to Think About”

It is fortuitous, or perhaps divine intervention, that the lectionary has brought us to this Moses/Exodus cycle of stories at this time in our nation’s history. If you read the papers or follow the news online, then you know there is a movement happening in this country right now. People of color are crying out that prejudice and racism are too common in our communities and in our systems of law and enforcement. They are calling out for us to come together as a nation to change the way things are; to bring equity and justice for all people, especially black and brown people who have for so long been discriminated against in this country.

In this cycle of stories, God uses ordinary people as instruments of justice, calling them to stand against power and privilege to change the way things were; to bring justice for the Israelites, a people who had been discriminated against for generations. Calling these ordinary people, in the words of Isaiah, “...to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹

Now I know this can be a volatile subject. So many people have such deep feelings all across the spectrum, and many of you are disappointed right now because you’d rather here me talk about something, anything else. It would be nice to preach a happy little sermon that reminds us Jesus loves us (he does) or that God goes with us when we are afraid (that’s true, too) but God tends to give us the Word we need, more than one we would like to hear. And that Word comes to us in the world in which we live, not the one we would like to have. As one of my colleagues reminded me this week, as your pastor, it is not my place to tell you what to think. But it is my responsibility to tell you what to think about. And we need to be thinking and praying about the turmoil over racial injustice in this country right now.

I was reading an article this week that, in the interest of humor, pointed out a series of stories from the Old Testament the author says suggest God was a bit of a troublemaker before Jesus came along and “softened him up.” Never mind the problematic view of Jesus as a person apart from God, the point of the article was to raise some questions about some of the more violent aspects of the Old Testament story. Included on the author’s list is the event the Israelites are preparing for in our scripture reading this week: Passover.

The Israelites are instructed to kill a lamb and paint its blood on their doorposts, then cook the animal and eat it standing up, shoes on their feet, ready to leave at a moment’s notice. The Angel of the Lord is about to pass through Egypt with the stated intent of killing every first-born child in Egypt, both humans and animals. The author of the article points out that this likely would have included many children from families who had nothing to do with Pharaoh’s decision to not let the Israelites go and who didn’t participate in the oppression of Israelite slaves. It would have included some children too young to have been guilty of anything. Further, since first-born animals are included, that means God also killed puppies and kittens.² Never really thought about it that way, did you?

Now, the author is being a little bit facetious there, but he makes an interesting point. Why aren’t we troubled, more than we are, about the death and destruction that is such a prominent feature of this Exodus story? Because the Passover is not the only time that God strikes at the heart of the Egyptians. In the chapters immediately prior to this one, God has sent plagues upon Egypt: the Nile turns to blood which makes the water unsuitable for drinking or farming, frogs, gnats, and flies invade the homes of the Egyptians, hail falls and destroys crops and trees and what is spared by the hail is then attacked by swarms of locusts. All their livestock get sick and die, and the people are afflicted with painful boils. Yikes!

And after this story, when the Israelites reach the Red Sea, the Egyptian army pursues them and the sea parts, and the Israelites walk across, and when the parted sea closes again, those soldiers are drowned and washed away. Egyptian sons, fathers, brothers, hundreds of them, gone. Moses and Miriam actually sing songs celebrating that The Lord has “triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea!” I think we *are* disturbed by that and rightfully so. But here’s the thing: that death and destruction, troubling though they are, do not negate the righteousness of what God is doing in the world.

I’ve been thinking about these Old Testament stories this week as I read in the news about protests all across this country and the ways some of them have turned violent. Most of these marches have been peaceful, the voices have been compelling, the issues convicting. But in some places, people showing poor judgement have fought with each other and some have even damaged property and started fires. And twice last week people were killed when things turned violent. Our public discourse is divided with some blaming protesters and others pointing the finger at law enforcement or armed vigilantes who come under the guise of offering protection. At a time when cooler heads should prevail, we have leaders deepening the divide and metaphorically throwing gasoline on an ever-growing fire. And there are those who would have us believe that because some people show poor judgement, the entire movement is corrupt; that because there have been a few well-publicized instances of criminal behavior, the entire movement for justice and equity should be resisted or ignored. But unfortunate though they are, the ugly incidents do not negate the righteousness of the cause of justice that the protests represent.

It *is* fortuitous that the lectionary has brought us this cycle of stories at this time in our nation’s history. Moses comes to the fore at a time when God is trying to establish justice in the land of Egypt. God is doing a new thing that will reverse generations of oppression and slavery against the descendants of Abraham. And as we’ve said over the last couple of weeks, God chose to use ordinary people to accomplish that good work. The women who got into good trouble, necessary trouble to oppose the unjust policies of Pharaoh: Shiphrah and Puah, Pharaoh’s daughter, Miriam and Moses’ mother. And last week we talked about how Moses, a man with a criminal past who was reluctant to be God’s instrument, who resisted in every way he could think of, was sent to speak truth to one of the most powerful rulers in the world.

And I believe God is calling us to be agents of liberation today. Just as God liberated the Israelites those many years ago, God is moving to liberate the oppressed in our world here and now. Yes, legal slavery has ended, but inequality has not ended. Systemic racism has not ended. Prejudice against immigrants fleeing oppression has not ended.

That’s what all these protests are about. People keep getting offended by the words “Black Lives Matter” saying that actually all lives matter. Well it’s true that all lives matter. But right now, we need to be reminded that many black lives are at risk. The phrase “Black Lives Matter” doesn’t mean “*Only* black lives matter,” it means “Black lives matter, *too*.” And in this country, there is a very strong historical case for the need for us to say that. I believe the Black Lives Matter movement is a righteous one. I believe that if we are to be on the right side of what God is doing in the world than we need to stand with the poor and the oppressed and that means marching and advocating and voting for change for people of color.

But I also understand that when violence happens; when property is destroyed, when songs of protest turns to shouts of anger; when the noble cause of peaceful protest gives way to hateful rhetoric and violent responses, even though it is limited and more the exception than the rule, even then it can seem like something wrong is happening; it can seem like the righteous thing would be to stand *against* it. In those moments it is important to remember that the misbehavior of a few does not negate the righteousness of what the many are standing for.

If we are willing to affirm that racism and brutality among a small number of police does not nullify the righteous calling of the many good officers to protect and serve, then we must also be willing to affirm that violence and misbehavior of a few protestors, does not negate the righteous stand of the many.

As your pastor, I won’t tell you what you should think, but I will tell you what you should be thinking about. The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice. If we are to be on the side of God and to be instruments of God’s Kingdom building work in the world, then we must be willing to walk with God on that long march toward justice. If we are offended, or troubled, that’s not necessarily a bad thing. As Moses learned, calls to serve God are frequently more challenging than not. But our being offended, or troubled, does not negate the righteousness of what God is doing in the world. Think about that.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Luke 4:18-19, NRSV

² Bricken, Rob. "God's 12 Biggest [Bad] Moves in the Old Testament." io9, 16 Dec. 2015, io9.gizmodo.com